

*A Collection of Homilies  
for the Liturgical Year of  
the Orthodox Catholic  
Church*

**By**

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<b>FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY.</b>	Romans 12, verses 1-10	St. Matthew 2, verses 13-18.
<b>SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY</b>	Colossians 3, verses 20-25	St. Luke 2, verses 41-52
<b>THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY</b>	Romans 12, verses 16-21	St. Matthew 3, verses 13-17
<b>FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY</b>	1 Corinthians. 12, verses 27-31.	St. John 1, verses 35-51
<b>FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY</b>	Revelation 19, verses 5 - 9	St. John 2, verses 1 - 11
<b>FESTIVAL OF DIVINE LOVE.</b>	Proverbs 3, verses 13-20.	St. John 3, verses 16-21
<b>SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY</b>	1 Corinthians, 9, verses 24-27 (Douay)	St. Matthew 20, verse s 1 - 16
<b>SEXAGESIMA SUNDAY</b>	2 Corinthians, 11, verse 30 - chapter 12, verse 9	St. Luke 8, verses 4-15.
<b>QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY</b>	1 Corinthians 13, verses 1-13	St. Luke 18, verses 31-43
<b>FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT</b>	Acts 3, verses 19 - 21.	St. Matthew 4, verses 1-11
<b>SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT</b>	Malachi 4, verses 5 and 6.	St. Matthew 17, verses 1-13.
<b>THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT.</b>	Ezekiel 34, verses 11-16	St. John 10, verses 1-16
<b>THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT</b>	1 Kings 17, verses 10-16	St. John 6, verses 1-15
<b>THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT</b>	Genesis 18, verses 1-14	St. John 6, verses 47-58.
<b>PALM SUNDAY</b>	Isaiah 53, verses 1-12	St. Matthew 21, verse 1-11
	Psalms 22	St. Matthew 26, verses 1-16
<b>EASTER DAY.</b>	Romans 6, verses 9-11:	St. John 20 verses 1-18
	1 Corinthians 15 verses 1-8:	St. Mark 16, verses 1-7:
	Acts 10 verses 34-42.	St. Luke 24, verses 13-35,
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<b>FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EASTER</b>	1 Peter 3, verses 18-22	St. John, 20 verses 19-31
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<b>FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER</b>	Philippians 3, verses 8-16 ( <i>Douay version</i> ).	St. Mark 16, verses 14-16 ( <i>Douay version</i> )
<b>SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION</b>	Ephesians 4, verses 7-13	Acts 1, verses 1-12.
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<b>SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST</b>	1 John 4, verses 7-15	St. John 15, verses 9-16
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<b>FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST</b>	1 Peter 3, verses 8-15	St. Matthew 5, verses 43-48
		St. Matthew 6, verses 19-24
<b>FESTIVAL OF THE DIVINE FATHER</b>	Exodus 3, verses 1-6	St. John 14, verses 6-11
		St. Luke 1, verses 59-70
<b>FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF THE DIVINE FATHER</b>	Exodus 3, verses 13-15	St. John 8, verses 54-58
<b>SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF THE DIVINE FATHER</b>	Genesis 1, verses 1-3	St. John 16, verses 25-28

<b>THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF THE DIVINE FATHER</b>	Roman 8, verses 14-18	St. John 17, verses 1-11
<b>FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF THE DIVINE FATHER</b>	Acts 5, verses 17-32	St. Matthew 6, verses 5-13 <i>(Douay version).</i>
<b>THE FESTIVAL OF PEACE.</b>	Revelations 3, verses 7-13	St. John 14, verses 27-31
<b>FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF PEACE</b>	Acts 10, verses 1-8	St. John 9, verses 1-38
<b>SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF PEACE</b>	Acts 10: verses 25-35	St. Mark 12, verses 1-12
<b>FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY</b>	Ecclesiasticus 24, verses 12-16	St. John 19, verses 25-27
<b>THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF PEACE</b>	1 Kings 19, verses 2-8	St. Matthew 13, verses 24-30, and verses 36-43
<b>FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF PEACE</b>	Genesis 28, verses 10–19	St Matthew 14 verses 22-33
<b>FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF PEACE</b>	Acts 8, verses 26-40	St. John 11, verses 1-45
<b>SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF PEACE</b>	11 Timothy 4, verses 1-8	Revelation 6, verses 1-6
<b>FESTIVAL OF ALL SOULS</b>	1 Peter 3, verses 18-20 & 1 Corinthians 15, verses 35-44	St. John 5, verses 24-29 <i>(Douay version)</i>
		11 Machabees 12, verses 39-46 <i>(Douay version).</i>
<b>FESTIVAL OF ALL SAINTS.</b>	Revelations 7, verses 9-17	St. Matthew 5, verses 1-12
<b>ST. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS.</b>	Hebrews 1, verses 1-10, chapter 2, verse 5	Revelation 12, verses 7-12.
<b>FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF ST. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS.</b>	Revelation 8, verses 2-5	St. Luke 2, verses 8-14
<b>SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF ST. MICHAEL &amp; ALL ANGELS.</b>	Jeremiah 1, verses 4-10	St. Luke 1, verses 11-17
<b>THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF ST. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS</b>	11 Timothy 3, verses 1-5	Acts 1, verses 9-11
<b>THE FESTIVAL OF CHRIST THE KING</b>	Revelation 19, verses 6-16	St. John 18, verses 33-37
<b>FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF CHRIST THE KING</b>	Psalm 71, verses 7-14 <i>(Douay version)</i>	St. Matthew 25, verses 31-40.
	Psalm 72, verses 7-14 <i>(Authorised version)</i>	
<b>SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF CHRIST THE KING</b>	Daniel 7, verses 13 and 14.	St. Matthew 25, verses 1-13
<b>THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE FESTIVAL OF CHRIST THE KING</b>	Zechariah 14, verses 6-9	St. Luke 18, verses 26-30
<b>ADVENT SUNDAY</b>	Isaiah 40, verses 3-5	St. Luke 1, verses 13-20
<b>SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT</b>	Isaiah 7, verses 13-15	St. Luke 1, verses 26-38
<b>THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT</b>	Isaiah 11, verses 1-5	St. Luke 1, verses 39-45
<b>FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT</b>	Micah 5, verses 2 and 3.	St. Matthew 1, verses 18-21

## First Sunday after Christmas

After the events of the Nativity of Jesus, his parents made sure that their newborn Son was made to comply with all of the rules and regulations that would make him a good Jew. And in keeping with what the apostle Paul writes to us in today's epistle reading, this was very important to the work of salvation that Jesus achieved for the human race. In order for the Savior to redeem mankind, it was not only necessary for him to suffer on our behalf but just as importantly to live a perfect life following the law of God in a comprehensive way. For the Jews of Jesus' day, this meant observing the Law of Moses in a flawless manner. No one had ever done it before, and in theory, before its power over the mortals who lived under it could be broken, it was imperative that someone live up to its standards to the fullest extent possible.

At least in a symbolic way this was true, for the Law of Moses did not just embody the moral law of God, the Ten Commandments which apply to all people but it also included other civil and ceremonial laws that were binding on the children of Israel as a national entity. Protocol for celebrating feast days and offering sacrifices was a special part of the Jewish system as well as rules for fasting and paying a share of one's harvest to God. But underlying the whole Mosaic Law was a constant thread of ritual purity and cleanliness. Extensive laws regarding what was considered clean and unclean permeated the entire fabric of the life of the ancient Israelites, and while there are clearly symbolic meanings to many of them, ultimately they originated with a concern about hygiene and preventing the spread of disease in a primitive nomadic society.

Any emission of bodily fluids was considered unclean as undoubtedly the ancients realized that disease could spread through such means, and cleansing with water became a near obsession in maintaining physical purity. For similar reasons, certain animals were regarded as clean or unclean depending on what threat of illness they posed. All carrion birds were off-limits for ingesting as they fed on rotting carcasses as was also the pig which if improperly cooked could communicate a nasty tapeworm that wreaks havoc in the digestive system. Not surprisingly the concept of sin became attached to violations of any of these regulations, for it came to be believed that physical compliance with such hygienic and dietary standards was tantamount to spiritual cleanliness. One would therefore not attempt to approach God without being clean according to the standard that Moses laid out for the people.

It was into a society such as this that the Savior was born and obliged to comply with the religious legal system of his ancestors. And while little of it has practical utility in the modern world and in the Christian era, the spiritual meaning behind a number of the observances has value for us who study these things. Focusing on the gospel story that is presented to us in today's reading, we are made aware that Mary and Joseph were busy about carrying out some essential rituals for their Son, the first of which was the all important rite of circumcision.

An important religious procedure tracing back to the most ancient societies, the removal of the male foreskin has its roots in the matriarchal religion of primitive cultures which

were very preoccupied with fertility. When a girl entered puberty and began to menstruate it was seen as a sign that she had entered adulthood and now could represent the fertility goddess in the act of procreation and enlarging the size of the tribe. Her monthly issue of blood became regarded as a sort of sacrifice to the deity doing her part to ensure the vitality of the clan she lived in. But males had no such opportunity to shed blood in the same way a female could and were therefore unable to make an offering up to the deity as a pledge of their devotion. As a result, a solution to this dilemma was found by making a boy to bleed in the genital region like his female counterparts. This act of bloodletting that we know as circumcision would become his sacrifice to the goddess and would also initiate him into manhood just as menstruation initiated a girl into womanhood.

Though the original reason for this ritual was more or less lost by the time the descendants of Abraham became a full fledged nation, its practical implications tied in very well with the concept of clean and unclean in the Jewish way of thought. Many of the ancients realized that the foreskin was very prone to infection and inflammation as we now understand it to easily harbor bacteria. For this reason, circumcision had an intrinsic hygienic value to it, and ultimately a man was not pure before God unless the dirty foreskin was removed from his body. Along these lines, Moses seems to be the first among the Jewish people to regard the spiritual significance of circumcision when after the Israelite's chronic rebellion he chided them to "circumcise their hearts." In this way, New Testament writers have also come to see the practice of removing disease prone tissue from around the sexual organ as representing the removal of impurity and sin from around the heart.

Concerning the circumcision of Jesus, Luke tells us that it was on the eighth day after his birth according to the Mosaic Law. What was significant about this rule to the ancient Israelites is not clear, but there have been spiritual interpretations among Christian writers since the time of the Early Church. Many associated the timing with the seven days of creation as if to say that the original week representing the old order, the Law of Moses was now completed. Consequently, the eighth day meant that a new week of creation had begun signifying a new dispensation under the Law of Christ. For this reason the Early Fathers referred to Sunday, the day of the Resurrection as the eighth day of the week to indicate that a new order had dawned for mankind. If we regard this eighth day as the symbolic transition from the law of sin to the law of life, then circumcision representing the cutting away of impurity from around the heart of man has much significance.

For the Jews, circumcision was just the first of a number of requirements in the life of someone attempting to follow the Law of Moses. As in very early societies it marked one's initiation into manhood, so for the children of Abraham it represented initiation into the covenant and membership in the community of Israel. But once having become a part of God's Chosen People, more was expected, and in the gospel reading we find the Holy Family at the temple fulfilling a couple more religious obligations.

According to the Mosaic Law, all bodily discharges caused one to be unclean even the routine monthly period of a woman, and for seven days after her issue of blood she remained that way and more or less had to quarantine herself to avoid making others unclean who came in contact with her or anything she touched. Because the Jewish Law often equated physical uncleanness with sin, it was many times required that an expiation be made to pay for that sin. An offering was prescribed in which the one with bodily discharge would bring an animal to the priest to offer sacrifice to atone for the impurity. And for this reason Mary was at the temple to atone for the blood that is associated with childbirth. For seven days after a child was born, a woman would be unclean, and then after forty days, she was required to appear in the temple and bring a sacrifice to pay her debt to God. Generally a woman would bring a turtledove or young pigeon for this purpose which the priest would sacrifice for her, and according to the gospel this is what Mary did.

But she didn't bring just one bird, but two because another offering was simultaneously required for her Son as well. Moses taught that the first fruits of everything in the land of Israel were to be given to the Lord. At Pentecost, the Jewish people were required to bring the initial grain and fruit harvested at their farms to present before the Lord. But not only of their agricultural produce, the Law stipulated that the firstborn of all animals born among the Israelites as well as the firstborn children belonged to the Lord and were to be consecrated to him. Of course spiritually this practice illustrated the basic principle that God comes first and we should recognize him up front whenever we come into good fortune or a bounteous harvest.

Though apart from the idea that God comes first, there was a more historic reason why Moses required the Jewish people to give the first of everything to God. A tradition firmly rooted in the Exodus, the consecration of the firstborn comes directly from the events of the night of the Passover. As many would remember, on that night the angel of the Lord put to death the firstborn of all people and animals in the land of Egypt as the final plague upon those who held the children of God in slavery. But miraculously all of the firstborn Jewish children were spared this punishment as long as they applied the blood of the Passover Lamb to their doorframe. In commemoration of this mighty act of God and in thanksgiving for his deliverance out of the bonds of slavery, the book of Exodus tells us that the firstborn of every animal was to be sacrificed to the Lord as a memorial while the firstborn child of every mother was to be redeemed through an offering.

And while this is an obvious explanation for the practice among the Jews even until the time of Jesus, there is an allegorical or spiritual meaning that can be derived from the event of Passover night. In the Old Testament there is a continuous theme illustrating the dichotomy between the firstborn and second-born children within a family. Whether it be Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, or any other pair we often see a struggle for pre-eminence between the children. In all such narratives we see the younger or the second-born taking the upper hand over the older firstborn which illustrates an important principle. In the Old Testament it was said that the older should serve the

younger and in the New Testament Jesus described it as the first becoming last and the last becoming first.

Considering any of these pairs of children we can understand the rationale behind the principle, and perhaps taking a look at the twins Esau and Jacob we can understand the significance of the first and second born. Through many details of the story we discern that the older boy was much more inclined toward physical concerns than spiritual ones. Esau was a hunter, a man of the field which along with his hairy body depicts for us a closeness to the animal world or animal nature of man. Rather than show an interest in the coveted birthright which held much spiritual value, the elder son was only happy to sacrifice any higher ideals for immediate sensual gratification, the filling of his stomach with a pot of stew. Jacob on the other hand is described for us in a very different way as a more refined man dwelling among tents and away from the animal world which the author wants to drive home to us as well by indicating that he had smooth skin in contrast to his brother. The younger son we come to see as having very high spiritual aspirations and an interest in God rather than physical appetites.

What this pair of boys communicates to us very clearly is that the older son represents physical or natural man which is the first to come into mortal existence. By contrast only after the passage of time does the spiritual man evolve when a person begins to take an interest in the things of God, and this spiritual man is symbolized by the younger son who is born later. The story of the Passover illustrates how this firstborn son, the natural or physical man needs to die in order for the spiritual man to emerge. The man of the flesh needs to be sacrificed in order for the man of the spirit to take his place, and so the Israelites would routinely offer up to God the first born animal in sacrifice to commemorate this great event in history.

Of course it wasn't appropriate to sacrifice the first born human children, and so the Law of Moses made provision to redeem them through the offering of something else. According to the ancient code, a year old lamb was prescribed and if the family was too poor a turtledove or pigeon could be sacrificed. For this purpose had Mary come to the temple, not only to make a propitiation for her own uncleanness but to redeem her Divine Son who was born under the law. Ultimately, because the Holy Family closely followed what was required of them, the whole human family has been redeemed from the power of the law and in the words of St. Paul has been given the right to become sons of God

## Epiphany

What we read today from the Book of Isaiah is yet another example of a prophecy finding its fulfillment in stages. As we've just had an in depth review of the Second Coming, much of what the prophet says fits in with the glory of Christ the King when he sets up his throne in Jerusalem to reign over the whole earth. At that time, Gentiles will stream to the land of Israel to pay homage to the heavenly Sovereign. The whole world will be converted to the faith of Jesus and recognize him as their rightful king. But while we may have to wait until the Savior returns again to see the prediction come to pass in its fullest sense, there are elements of it that could be said to have found their fulfillment in the First Coming. When the Babe of Bethlehem appeared in a lowly manger over 2000 years ago, it was indeed like a light dawning on a dark nation, and the conversion of the Gentiles was set in motion.

In a sense, Isaiah's prophecy came to pass with the birth of the Savior in the events of what we celebrate today as the Epiphany of the Lord. While foreign nationals were hardly making a pilgrimage en masse to the humble home at Bethlehem, a small contingency of Gentiles found their way to the infant child to pay homage and give their worship. Bearing expensive gifts with them, the travelers from the East functioned as a sort of down-payment on things to come, a prelude to the time when the multitudes would bring gold and frankincense to the king in Jerusalem.

While in the tradition of Isaiah's words we have called these men kings, it must be acknowledged that these visitors from another country were never described as such whether in the gospels or any other early church writings. Rather, they are properly regarded as Magi or Wise Men from the East. Such men were in the priestly caste of the Zoroastrian faith that was the national religion of the Persians who lived east of the land of Israel. With an international reputation for astrology, these priests studied the stars assiduously looking for patterns and signs that would help them predict the future. According to one First Century book describing the Nativity of Jesus, these eastern priests had been tipped off to the expectation that a king would be born by a prophecy from the founder of their religion, Zoroaster himself, and so when they saw the star in the sky they knew what it signified.

Many legends have evolved in the Church as to the identity of these sages of the East, and while it is fairly clear that they all came from Persia, popular belief since the Middle Ages has seen them coming from all different locations, perhaps in an expectation that they fulfilled the universal tone of Isaiah's prophecy. Tradition has it that one was a black man from Ethiopia and another was a white man from Persia who were both joined by a yellow man from China. While these notions are not accurate, they nonetheless convey the truth of today's epistle reading, that men from all around the globe will come to worship the King and embrace the universal faith he sets up for the inhabitants of the Earth.

Not only has conventional thinking assigned a country of origin for each of the Wise Men, but it has also determined their names. In Latin based Christianity that we have

here in the West, the men are known as Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. But Aramaic speaking Christians and Ethiopian speaking Christians and many other traditions have developed their own names for the Magi who came to visit the Christ child. Interestingly the folklore of just about all Christians has also assumed that there were only three men who made the journey to Bethlehem which also has no substantiation in the writings of the First Century. Most likely because it is recorded in Matthew's gospel that there were three gifts the tradition has evolved to assume there were three men, but in reality we don't know how many there were. In fact some legends say there were as many as twelve.

Though it is not important what their names were or how many of these Wise Men came to the Christ child, what is significant is that this group of sages were paying attention to the sky looking for the sign that would herald the birth of the one who is known as the King of the Jews. While it is called a star in the ancient writings, for all we know it could have been any number of celestial lights including a planetary conjunction, a supernova, or a comet among others. According to the First Century story of the Holy Family that we know as the Protevangelion, the manifestation in the sky was an extraordinarily large star that outshined all of the other stars making them invisible, and if this were the case, the magnitude of the sign in the sky was probably much brighter than an ordinary planet like Jupiter if not as bright as the full moon itself.

Professionals and amateurs alike have tried to piece together what the night sky might have been like at that time 2000 years ago when Jesus was born, and a number of impressive explanations have been given to account for the Star of Bethlehem. Some have described what is known as the Star of David, a special planetary configuration that appears once every 40 million years and happened to occur briefly in March of 5 B.C. Others have cited the Chinese records which also mention another phenomenon in the heavens in 5 B.C. which appears to have been a comet or a supernova that lasted around 70 days. And some have considered that Halley's Comet might have been making its periodic swing near to the earth as it does every 76 or so years.

We may never know exactly what it was that caught the eye of the Magi, but one thing seems to be certain and that is whatever the star really was it had to be moving across the sky so as to guide the Wise Men from their home in Persia to the land of Israel, and on top of that it needed to be visible for at least as long as it would take these men from the East to make their journey to Jerusalem. Considering that such a trip might take three months, it seems unlikely that a supernova or special planetary configuration would explain the star for neither of those manifestations last longer than a few days or weeks. The best explanation may be that a comet or asteroid passing very near to the earth was enough to illumine the night sky for the Magi as they made their trip westward into Canaan.

As to the timing of the arrival of the Wise Men, that too is a matter of debate, but again against our popular conception it was a number of months after the actual birth of the Christ child. We all have in our minds the image of the Nativity scene with Mary and Joseph kneeling alongside the shepherds and Magi while cattle eat from through feed

troughs and angels sing overhead. But it is certain that all of these familiar characters were not present simultaneously at the Lord's birth. A number of indications from the ancient writings suggest that the men from the East came to pay their visit quite a long time after the angels went back into heaven and the shepherds returned to their flocks. It seems likely that many months passed if not more than a year before the Wise Men arrived in Bethlehem to worship the King of the Jews, and when they arrived no one save Mary and the Child were there to welcome them. Joseph is conspicuously absent in all accounts biblical and non-biblical and so we can probably assume that he was out at work when they came knocking on the door.

Though we celebrate the Epiphany twelve days after Christmas by tradition, it would perhaps be rightly commemorated many months after that date according to the early church sources that we have. One such fairly reliable reference states that the Magi entered Bethlehem after Jesus' first birthday which may in fact be somewhat realistic. According to the gospel writer who wrote in Greek, there is an indication that Christ was a young child when the Wise Men came rather than a baby for like in ours there are separate words in that ancient language to differentiate between toddler and newborn. And in fact a potentially crawling or walking Jesus fits best with the decree of Herod who sought to kill all children two years old and under, presumably because the Divine Child was already a toddler at the time.

Following along the narrative as it appears in Matthew, we learn that when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem they began asking where they could find the new born king, and they must have been very surprised that the locals weren't as aware of this great event as they were. Apparently the people in the region didn't study the stars nearly as well as the Persians, but when the Wise Men began to probe the residents of the city, it began to create a stir that eventually reached the ears of Herod. The paranoid king that he was, Herod was immediately alarmed that someone else could be attempting to usurp his throne. In chronic pain and dying, the ruler of Judea had not failed to kill off his own family members including a wife and sons convinced that they were conspiring to take over, and now he quickly took measures to deal with what he was sure was a new threat to his kingdom.

It is somewhat ironic that a worldly man like Herod would even believe the prophecy of Micah that the priests relayed to him about where the Messiah would be born. Even if he thought there was a remote chance that it were true, he wasn't going to let it go without following up, and instructing the visitors from the East to go to Bethlehem in accordance with the prophecy, he cleverly feigned a desire to come and worship the child as well requesting that they report back to him as soon as possible with the infant's whereabouts. And so the Magi left the presence of Herod and entering Bethlehem found the child and his mother at home.

Bowing down in humble adoration of the King of Kings, they presented him with three very familiar gifts. Not that these were particularly special tokens to be given at the time, royalty often received offerings such as gold, frankincense, and myrrh from admirers. Gold of course was a valuable, frankincense was used as a perfume, and myrrh was

employed as an anointing oil. But beyond the superficial utility of all of these gifts many have seen a greater spiritual and prophetic meaning to them. While the wealth associated with gold could be linked with the kingship of Jesus, the incense as we have discussed on another occasion could simply signify Christ's divinity but also just as importantly his priesthood whereby he makes intercession for humanity. Myrrh which has been known as a bitter perfume and a substance used for embalming the dead clearly refers to the sacrificial death that the Messiah would endure on our behalf.

According to one of the non-canonical infancy gospels that tells the story of Christ's early years, apparently Mary sought to give the Wise Men something in return for their generosity, something that they could count among their greatest treasure. The narrative suggests that Mary gave the men one of the swaddling clothes that had wrapped the Savior, an article of clothing that had made contact with the body of the Lord. After they returned home again, the story suggests that they held a feast and worshipped the cloth after which they cast it into the fire. However to everyone's amazement it did not burn and was totally unharmed by the flames, so they laid it up among their most prized possessions.

Once the visit to Mary and her Divine Son was over, the Magi seemingly spent the night in the town, for we are told that they had a dream not to return to Herod again. Not surprisingly, God was making sure that his Son did not become the victim of one of Herod's jealous rages, and to avoid seeing the tyrant again, the Wise Men returned to their country by another route. As Bethlehem is due south of Jerusalem, it seems that on their journey to the land of Palestine, the Persian priests travelled along the northern highway through the Fertile Crescent before turning south into Israel where eventually they came to Jerusalem and then on to Mary and Joseph's home. But unable to retrace their steps, it seems likely that they left Bethlehem and continued south toward the Dead Sea at which point they made their journey across the desert. While this incidental note in the gospels may not mean much to us on a superficial level, many have seen it to have a significant allegorical meaning. That is to say, when any of us encounters the Savior, we become transformed and begin to embrace a new way of life. The inner change we experience means that we can no longer continue on the same road that we've been on our whole lives but instead we become compelled to take a new path as did Three Wise Kings so many centuries ago.

## First Sunday after Epiphany

Continuing the story of the Nativity of the Lord where we left off last week, the Magi had just departed from the home of Mary and Joseph and were making their way back east again by another route to avoid running into Herod. Undoubtedly when just a day or two passed and the Wise Men had not reported back to the king, he realized that he had been eluded by the clever visitors from across the desert. Indignant, he acted immediately to stamp out the threat to his throne, but before his soldiers could rifle through their home in Bethlehem, the Holy Family had taken off. We are told that Joseph was instructed to flee in a dream, and perhaps he did so the very same night that the Magi left not wasting any time. At the point Herod's henchmen stormed into Bethlehem the next day, Mary, Joseph, and the Divine Child were well on their way down to Egypt and safe from the tyrant's clutches.

It seems that the gifts of the Magi came at a very appropriate moment, for little did the Holy Family expect that they would have to skip town in a hurry to a foreign country. Perhaps before the Wise Men came they hadn't had too much in reserve to afford such a journey, but in God's provision there was seemingly enough value in the gold, frankincense, and myrrh to live on for the few years they spent in the land of the Nile. Whether Joseph succeeded in finding work while in Egypt is not clear, but God's 11<sup>th</sup> hour assistance surely got them through their extended stay out of the country.

While the Christ child miraculously escaped the wrath of Herod, unfortunately many other young children in the region perished as victims of the king's jealous rage. We remember today that massacre which has come to be known in the church as the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents. As we have discussed on an earlier occasion, Matthew interpreted the event as a progressive fulfillment of a prophecy from Jeremiah that originally had to do with the deportation of the exiles and the overwhelming sorrow in the area at the time. Now again we see Rachel the beloved wife of Jacob whom he buried in the vicinity of Bethlehem weeping for her children. Though this time around they haven't merely been carted off to exile, the children of Bethlehem are no more because they have been brutally cut down with the sword not just exiting the country but mortal life as well.

The term Holy Innocents is not just a pious title given to this group of infants; the church has considered them collectively as a band of martyrs. Though they didn't consciously lay down their lives as far as we know, nonetheless the Holy Innocents gave themselves up to spare the Savior who lived because of their sacrifice. Long before St. Stephen the traditional first martyr met his death at the hands of Saul of Tarsus, these young children shed their blood for Christ at a very tender age. Therefore, they are regarded as the first flowers of all the martyrs that have colored the pages of Christian history.

How many were slaughtered on that fateful day is unclear, but the number was probably relatively small, perhaps twenty or less. Bethlehem was a small town, so there probably weren't too many male toddlers living in it or the surrounding area. Any larger massacre probably would have made it into the secular history books, but ancient secular historians

didn't comment on it. Undoubtedly this is because Herod committed much worse atrocities in his life that made this one seem small by comparison. According to one Roman chronicler, Herod's notorious behavior was well known even to Caesar Augustus who knew how the king killed his own son when he feared that he was being conspired against. The witty emperor quipped in response, "It is better to be Herod's hog, than his son" as he reasoned that Jewish kosher law could keep pigs a lot safer than family members.

While we do not know exactly who got massacred in Herod's jealous rage, we do know that tragedy struck another important family as a result of the king's paranoia. The First Century book known as the Protevangelion written by James the Lord's brother gives more detail to the events of the story suggesting that Mary's Cousin Elizabeth was also affected by the event. Living in the hill country of Judea, she heard about the mischief of Herod and quickly fled to the mountains with her son John the Baptist, and it seems that she found refuge among the Essenes who we have seen raised and trained John in their communities until the time he was ready to begin his ministry.

While Elizabeth and John escaped the clutches of the king, things apparently did not fare well for Zechariah. Herod's soldiers approached the priest while he was serving in the temple and asked him about the whereabouts of his son. Claiming not to know, it was reported back to Herod who sent his men to threaten Zechariah with his life unless he reveal the location of the boy. Apparently Herod was no fool and considered John to be more than a good candidate for the Messiah and a challenger to his throne. When Zechariah gave them no answer when pressed to give away his child, he was martyred between the temple and the altar as Jesus also recounted in the gospel of Matthew.

Meanwhile, as all of this sad carnage was happening back in Judea, the Holy Family was embarked upon a long stay in the land of Egypt. Though the canonical scriptures only refer to this trip incidentally without much further information, a number of other contemporary documents give a lot of detail regarding the adventures of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in their temporary home down south. While many of the accounts given in these works are likely pious fables, several of the first century works that chronicle their time in Egypt have the same stories in common, so there is probably some element of truth to all of them.

Depicted in these narratives are many signs and wonders involving the Christ child which probably shouldn't surprise us. In one particular work we are told particularly about nature miracles as the Holy Family made their way into Egypt. As the three were following along the road to the land of the Nile, we are told that ordinarily ferocious animals such as lions and panthers came up to them and began to show in their own way signs of adoration toward Jesus. Showing submission to Christ and happily wagging their tails, they were said to accompany the trio to their destination even leading the way. And though Joseph and Mary had their livestock with them, sheep and rams, none were harmed by these beasts of the field who were rendered completely docile by the presence of the Child. According to the author, the event was a preliminary fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that a lion and a lamb will lie down together in peace.

The same document talks about a time along the journey when the Holy Family was hungry and running out of water. Coming to a palm tree, they eyed its fruit hanging high above them in the branches, but being unable to access it, Joseph could only long to eat it. Miraculously we are told that the Christ child caused the tree to bend down all the way to the ground so that Joseph and Mary could pick dates from it. And to satisfy their thirst, a stream of crystal clear water welled up from the roots of the palm enabling the family to fill their water skins again.

But when Jesus, Mary, and Joseph finally reached Egypt, these early Christian works begin to tell of many supernatural events, some actually reminiscent of stories from the Old Testament. They indicate that at one point Mary and the child Jesus entered into a pagan temple where there were no less than 355 idols on display for the worshippers. But as soon as the boy stepped foot in that locale, all of these images fell flat on the floor and their faces were shattered before the One who was truly Divine. Whether true or not, those who are familiar with the Book of Samuel will recall that a similar event happened centuries earlier when the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines. Taking the holy object into their temple, they left it overnight, and coming back the next morning found the god Dagon fallen prostrate with both his head and hands broken off before the Ark.

The extra-biblical infancy gospels also recount no shortage of healing miracles while young Jesus was far away from home, and most of them were procured either by handling something touched by the Christ child or handling the infant directly. One account speaks of a boy possessed with a devil touching Jesus' laundry. Having washed his swaddling clothes and hung them out on a post to dry, the young man simply laid his hand on them and was immediately released from the demon. A similar story recalls an event in which a woman had washed little Jesus in a basin of perfumed water. Rather than discarding the precious fluid that bathed the Savior, she took some and poured it on a leprous girl making her completely whole again. On another occasion we are told that a victim of black magic actually handled the Christ child directly for release from a spell that was cast. A young bride had been made mute on the day of her wedding and so would be unable to give verbal consent to her husband. Taking Jesus in her arms, we are informed that the woman's tongue was instantly loosed and enabled to proceed with her wedding.

But of all of the episodes that are narrated in these documents concerning the years in Egypt, there is perhaps one that is most intriguing and may set the stage for a biblical scene we are all very familiar with. While passing through the countryside at night, the accounts say that the Holy Family came upon a road that was infested with robbers. All of them save two were asleep lying in wait to ambush an unsuspecting victim who would come by. But when the scoundrel who was named Titus saw Joseph, Mary, and the Child, he felt compassion toward them and tried to dissuade Dumachus his partner from accosting them. Unwilling to wake the others and pounce upon the unsuspecting family, Titus offered Dumachus a bribe to stay quiet and let them pass by unharmed. Giving the unmerciful thief 40 drachmas as well as the belt around his waist, we are told that Titus

succeeded in sparing the Holy Family from being ravaged. The narrative goes on to say that thirty years later we would find both Titus and Dumachus hanging on either side of the Savior having been executed for a lifetime of thievery. But perhaps tracing back to his one act of compassion on a quiet Egyptian road many years earlier, he would find pardon by the Master who was dying there beside him. The other robber, just as hardened and entrenched in his life of crime as at the beginning of his wretched career would remain impenitent and unfortunately suffer damnation for his heinous crimes.

So much for the Holy Family's adventures in Egypt! One account tells us that they were away from home as long as 3 years before Joseph was informed in a dream to come home sometime after the death of Herod. And commenting on the return journey, Matthew quotes the words of Hosea who said, "Out of Egypt I have called my Son." Another one of those multidimensional prophecies, the words of Hosea have application on many levels, and perhaps his statement alone sums up the whole purpose of the descent of Christ into the land of Egypt.

Long before Jesus spent a few years in this southern country, the people of Israel had spent over four centuries in slavery to the people of Egypt, and when the time of their suffering was completed, God called Israel, his son out of the land of affliction. Perhaps as a result of their harsh experience in that foreign country, Jewish thought has long associated Egypt with slavery and more specifically enslavement to the material world. Among Jewish spiritual writers, the land of the Nile River has since that time become synonymous with the physical or material life of man as opposed to his spiritual nature. In that way Egypt embodies the idea of slavery to the flesh and its appetites as well as the sin that is attached to life devoid of the spirit. The Book of Exodus tells us that even after their miraculous deliverance from bondage in that nation, the children of Israel still had an appetite for the things that Egypt had to offer, and so they desired to return to the flesh-pots of that country where there was plenty of meat to consume.

Over and over again in the bible we see a common theme of people descending to Egypt and then working their way out again back to the Promised Land. Jesus spent time in that dark land and before him the children of Israel for many hundreds of years, but they were not alone in that excursion out of Canaan. The likes of the prophet Jeremiah and the patriarch Abraham also made trips into Egypt as did Jacob's favorite son Joseph in a popular story we know. In that narrative the one who would become the Prince of Egypt was kidnapped by his brothers, thrown into a pit, and then sold into slavery to the Ishmaelites who would take him down to the bitterness of life in the Nile River valley. For Joseph's difficult years began when he found himself at the bottom of a hole in the darkness, and in fact that is the message of human life. All of us begin our time in this world dominated by physical and material concerns, oblivious to knowledge of God or the spirit. We begin life metaphorically in Egypt and it is there that we remain for many years until we begin to take an interest in things of the spirit and leave that dark country.

So many bible characters have illustrated for us that it is the destiny of man to enter Egypt and then work his way out to the Promised Land, the place of spiritual awareness and faith. Like so many of his predecessors, Jesus wanted to tell us the same story by

spending his earliest years in that other country only to come back to Israel again. This is the message of the Holy Family's time in that faraway place, not just another interesting biblical tale but one communicating the truth of life itself.

## Second Sunday after Epiphany

In our last look at the travels of the Holy Family, they had just received word from an angel that it was time to return again to the land of Israel after perhaps a few years stay in Egypt. From the testimony of the Infancy gospels that we have considered as a further commentary on the early years of Christ, it seems possible that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph returned to Bethlehem for a short while. However knowing that Herod's son Archelaus was on the throne and being unsure if he would continue his father's agenda, Joseph was uneasy about staying in his ancestral hometown. Withdrawing into Galilee, the Holy Family apparently made Mary's village their regular home for many years, all the way up until the point that Jesus would begin his ministry.

For the apostle Matthew, it was very significant that Jesus should come to live in Nazareth spending all of his formative years in that place, and though we do not know from which source he quotes, he asserts that this was to fulfill a prophecy that says of the Messiah, "He shall be called a Nazarene." Whether an authentic Old Testament prediction or not, there are a number of interesting ideas associated with the word Nazareth that Matthew seemingly wants to convey to us. Probably the first one is that the Messiah would be "despised and rejected of men" which is the terminology that Isaiah used to describe the Suffering Servant of God in his writings. In similar language the prophet spoke of the Anointed One as "someone from whom men hide their faces." While there is no translation of the Hebrew word Nazareth that would allow us to make that connection, in the context of First Century Palestine, this town in Galilee was more or less synonymous with "second class citizen." For many of the residents of Judea, those who lived in the north were thought of no better than the "red headed stepchild" of fairy tales.

This aversion to the people of Galilee probably stemmed back to the time about a hundred years earlier when the independent Jewish kingdom ruled by the Hasmonean kings conquered what was a predominantly Gentile region. Forcibly circumcising the people of that area, they converted them to the Jewish faith, but it seems that since they were never real ethnic Jews, they were looked down upon much like the half-breed Samaritans. The testimony of the gospels illustrates the hostility of those in the south for the Jews of Galilee, for the Pharisees were quick to say that no prophet ever comes from that region. Even the apostle Nathaniel at the time of his calling to be Jesus' follower was incredulous about Christ coming from Nazareth questioning if "anything good could come from there."

Clearly the derogatory regard that the Jews had for Nazareth meant that it could very well have played into Isaiah's prophecies about the Messiah being rejected. And perhaps this is Matthew's main intention in writing it, but some astute students of the bible have drawn other connections from wordplay on Nazareth itself. The name of the town sounds like the Hebrew word "netser" which means branch or a green shoot sprouting off a tree limb. In this way, Nazareth may be associated with the words of Isaiah who predicted that a "shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear

fruit” signifying that the Messiah would be the son of David, a lineal descendant of the royal house of Judah.

But even beyond these two concepts, others have suggested that Nazareth may have a connection with the word Nazirite. In the Old Testament, such people took a vow before God to abstain from alcohol and completely avoid any fruit of the vine. Additionally they were not allowed to put a razor to their head so that their hair would grow long for the entire duration of their vow, but more than these two characteristics the life of a Nazirite was marked essentially by the idea of consecration and holiness which is implied by the Hebrew word “nazir.” He lived a life separated from the rank and file in his devotion to God, and so while Jesus clearly didn’t outwardly look like a Nazirite, his inner disposition toward God might allow us to classify him as one. And so possibly we have yet another significant meaning to Jesus’ boyhood town.

But whatever meaning we can draw from the village of Nazareth, it is there that the Infancy gospels continue their story of Jesus’ early years, information that is all but absent in the biblical record. Like in Egypt, the various sources that tell the tale of the young Jesus record many miracles while he was still a small child. The use of the Christ child’s bathwater was employed in several healings as it was in the region of the Nile to make both children and adults whole again. These childhood records indicate that through the sprinkling of a little of this holy water, a boy in agonizing pain and near death instantly recovered. Another whose eyes had become shut through some strange disease received his sight back immediately after getting a douse of the bathwater, and a woman who was white with leprosy had her skin return to normal after the water was poured on her body.

All of these miracles were apparently accomplished through the efforts of Mary as Jesus was still a small child and unable to do them himself, but as he grew, the apocryphal records suggest he began to work his own miracles directly. There are a couple interesting tales of healing those who had been bitten by snakes, and in one Jesus seemingly desired to cure it by reversing the way it was inflicted. Instructing a few men to carry the boy to where the snake was, Christ was said to have commanded the serpent to suck out all the poison it had injected into its victim, and thereafter it burst asunder. Though in a less spectacular way, the stories suggest that he healed James his stepbrother of a viper’s bite simply through blowing on the wound.

Not limiting himself to miracles of healing, the collected First century narratives imply that the Christ child was also interested in helping people in a supernatural way especially when individuals made mistakes of various sorts. Along these lines are a number of accounts which speak about Jesus helping Joseph with his carpentry when it went awry. After cutting a board too short or too narrow, Christ was said to respectively lengthen or widen Joseph’s lumber accordingly to compensate for the carpenter’s errors. In a narrative that is found in several of the books that cover the Savior’s child, there is a story of how Joseph had been hired to build a throne for the king of Jerusalem and had labored on it for about two years when it became clear that he had fashioned it too narrow and incurred the king’s displeasure. While Joseph was distraught over the mistake, Jesus

sought to rectify the situation and instructing Joseph to grab one end of the throne as he laid hold of the other, they pulled the royal seat until it stretched out to the proper size.

Whether or not these particular little anecdotes of Jesus' youth are true or not does little to affect our image or understanding of the One we know as God in the flesh. Yet perhaps somewhat surprisingly other vignettes from the life of the boy that we find in these ancient accounts paint a picture of the child of Nazareth a little different than we might expect. Often times it is the case that we are so preoccupied with the identity of Jesus as God that we forget that he was also human just like the rest of us. And it is frequently true that we dwell on his divine nature even to the point of perceiving him as super-human or even non-human. But the Infancy Gospels present Jesus in a way that might actually shock us into the reality of how very human Christ was, so much very like us in all ways but sin.

Of course this was absolutely necessary, for in order for Jesus to be the representative and sin bearer of the human race he had to live an authentic human experience. Had he simply come down from heaven for a brief visit as an adult and died on the cross, it would not have sufficed to pay the debt of human sin, for he would in that case not have been fully human enduring all of the trials and hardships that men are acquainted with. For the Son of God, the condescension involved in becoming incarnate is perhaps somewhat beyond what many of us may believe or are prepared to believe. And while the various stories from the childhood narratives of Jesus are far from authoritative, they do present Christ as maybe a little weaker and more vulnerable than we may be comfortable with.

Part of the difficulty we may have with such stories is that it challenges our concept of what it meant for Jesus to be a perfect man. We all agree that his perfection definitely implied that he lived a sinless life, but did it mean that he was faultless in every other way? Is it possible that Jesus ever made a mistake on something he was working on or stubbed his toe when he bumped into something unexpected?

Questions like this emerge after reading the Infancy Gospels which at least on one occasion describe the Son of God making a mistake which he later rectified. In one narrative he happened to be in the shop of a man who dyed clothes for customers, and for some unknown reason Jesus threw all of the articles of clothing into the same furnace so that they all came out the same color. Deeply annoyed at this action, the dyer complained that each customer wanted his fabric dyed a different color and now most of the clothing was ruined. But Jesus always desiring to fix other's errors, including perhaps his own worked a miracle to make each customer's garment come out the proper way much to the relief of the store owner.

While Jesus' perfection may or may not have entailed making the mistakes and errors that are common to all humanity, his all too human limitations are depicted in other ways in the First Century narratives. The childhood stories all seem to imply that Christ was like us in that he needed to learn like any child would and was in need of education as any person who desires to increase in knowledge. Today's gospel reading tells us clearly

that when he was in the temple with the teachers that he listened to them and asked them questions as apparently he was eager to learn. And in the apocryphal childhood accounts of Jesus, we are told that Mary and Joseph sent him to school to learn his alphabet. While all of the narratives suggest that the Savior was possessed of a knowledge beyond his years, none deny that he still had to work at acquiring his knowledge which is what we would expect of the God-man. Though God in heaven is possessed of infinite knowledge, when he condescends to take on the finite nature of the body with all of its physical and mental limitations he operates in a restricted way not unlike the rest of us. Though the Almighty in the lofty heights above can number all of the hairs on our head and count the stars in the sky, God incarnate does not have access to such information which a finite being cannot compute. For this reason, Jesus said that only the Father knew the timing of the Second Coming, for while in the flesh Jesus could not predict it.

But even more than the idea that God made flesh needed to go to school as any normal student, we see the very human nature of Jesus depicted in another aspect of his being that is captured in the Infancy Gospels. Perhaps because we all expect God to be very serious and fatherly, we do not usually associate him with frivolous behavior and fooling around. Though this is a reasonable view of God in the celestial courts above, according to our ancient records it is not true of the God-man who liked to play and frolic like any other child would. We may imagine him as a pious little boy always with folded hands in prayer in his mother's house, but the apocryphal stories suggest he liked to laugh and play as any other child would. But because of his supernatural power, his play apparently had a dimension to it that other children did not have. It has been shared at an earlier time that on one occasion Jesus was said to have made birds out of the mud after it had rained, and entertaining himself and others made them to fly and also to eat. We are told that he also liked to play king with his playfellows which entailed him donning a crown of flowers on his head. He would sit on the garments placed on the ground by the other children while two of the others would flank him on either side as guards.

In one narrative we have the tale of Christ playing hide and seek with the other children of Nazareth in a way that reveals quite a sense of humor. We are informed that three boys hid themselves in a furnace on a nearby property and in searching for his playmates, he came across a group of women standing near it. Inquiring if they had seen the boys, the women denied it, and Jesus subsequently asked what was moving in the furnace. When the women said that there were only lambs in it, Christ is said to have called them out at which point the boys pranced around him as sheep around a shepherd. After perhaps getting a good laugh out of it, the Son of God apparently set the women at ease turning the sheep back into his playmates once again.

To what extent all of these stories are true is hard to say, but nonetheless they illustrate that the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords was while in the flesh much closer to us than we would imagine. Though free from sin, we may rightly see him sharing our limitations and weaknesses as well as our emotions and penchant for fun. More could yet be said about the human Jesus that might unsettle us and make us think more about the mystery of the God-man, but suffice it to say, the little boy from Nazareth wasn't as other worldly as we might believe. Sharing deeply in our humanity, the Savior

was without question one of us in the very core of his being, true man in every sense of the word.

### Third Sunday after Epiphany

From ancient times water has played a major role in the religious rituals of the world's religions. Ever before it was regarded with sacramental status in the Christian church, thousands of years earlier it had a part in other faiths, particularly the root of our own tradition in Judaism. Water has many properties to it that would make it important to primitive people, but among others its ability to wash and cleanse was foremost in the minds of the Hebrews several millennia ago. As we have seen, the Jewish people were fixated on ritual purity, and their religion revolved around defining what was considered clean and unclean. Among other protocols including sacrifices and offerings, water was a methodology for restoring purity and hence making one in good standing before God again.

In the Law of Moses there are quite a few ordinances requiring a man or woman to bathe after an event that might render him or her unclean. Coming in contact with a dead body was one such situation that could only be remedied through ceremonial washing to rid oneself of the guilt associated with that action. Additionally, anyone who had a bodily discharge could only become pure again through the cleansing action of water. While a more stringent rule was attached to someone who had an abnormal issue from their body like perhaps an oozing sore or an unusual fluid from the mouth or nose, even routine discharges needed to be cleansed. Every time a couple had sex it was necessary that they bathe with water for cleansing, and naturally a woman's menstrual cycle also demanded washing her whole body in addition to a number of other rules before she could be clean again.

With a strong foundation in the original Jewish Law, the use of water as a means of purification from uncleanness and by implication sin or guilt began to find its way into the tradition of the people of Israel. Not only after becoming ritually unclean according to what Moses wrote, the Jewish religious leaders began to use water for other ceremonial applications. Probably as a result of the Jewish contempt for Gentiles, they would also ceremonially wash any pots or utensils made by a non-Israelite to purify them for Jewish use. And more importantly, on the day before Yom Kippur, the highest holy day in the Jewish calendar, it was prescribed that one immerse himself in water as a sign of purity and repentance before the special day. The Israelites also seem to have reserved the rite of immersion for their candidates for conversion. Though the Law of Moses prescribed circumcision as the main initiation ritual for those seeking to convert to Judaism, the evolving religious tradition also demanded that one be baptized and then offer an animal sacrifice to complete his induction to the faith of Israel.

In the advent of Christ's birth, ceremonial immersion in water was a significant part of Jewish tradition particularly among the Essenes who we regard as the forerunners of the Christian faith. This very pious community of the desert had a large number of tanks for ceremonial bathing. In fact it was a regular part of their religious life, and we understand that every day at dawn they would immerse themselves for this ritual cleansing. John the Baptist who came from this community not surprisingly emphasized baptism as a major part of his ministry. Like with the Essenes, it was a baptism of repentance, a pledge of a

right attitude toward God, and as we see in today's gospel, Jesus himself took part in this religious ritual right at the beginning of his three year ministry. Many of John's disciples and undoubtedly many of the followers of Jesus had received this Jewish baptism that entailed a symbolic cleansing from sin and fresh start in a holy life, but what was a secondary ritual among the Jews would soon become a major component of the emerging faith that was just dawning.

In crafting the sacramental system for the salvation of humanity, Jesus elevated the baptismal tradition of his ancestors into an extremely powerful ritual of grace. The writings of the early Christians make clear that the new form of ceremonial cleansing not only symbolized purification and cleansing from sin, it actually took away sins through the merits of Christ's sacrifice. Among many such writings we have the words of Luke in the Acts of the Apostles describing the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Ananias who baptized the former persecutor of Christians encouraged his new convert to be cleansed by the regenerating waters saying, "What are you waiting for. Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away." These sentiments about the cleansing power of this sacrament were pervasive throughout the first few centuries of the Church, so much so that this very important teaching found a home in the Nicene Creed where it is expressed, "We believe in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins."

Not failing to write volumes on this the initiation sacrament into the Christian faith, the early fathers of the Church expounded on the meaning of Baptism even tying in the Old Testament tradition and the imagery of major events in the history of the nation of Israel. Keying off of Peter's words, the early church recognized that Baptism was foreshadowed throughout history long before it was revealed as a sacrament of saving power. The water of the Flood that bore the family of Noah safely aloft on the waves came to symbolize the power of the cleansing tide of Baptism to save from the destruction of sin. Later on the famous Crossing of the Red Sea in which the Israelites passed from bondage to freedom through the water also became interpreted as a precursor of the liberating effect of this sacrament. The Church has also recognized the healing effects of Baptism in the life of the Old Testament character Naaman the Syrian who after dipping himself seven times in the Jordan River was restored from his leprosy. In the writings of the early Church it was common to link this important sacrament with salvation itself as Peter did in his epistle. He declared, "This baptism now saves you" and while that language sounds extreme, it was appropriately used to underscore the radical forgiveness of sins that comes through this sacrament in addition to confession which the Savior gave us. In actuality, whereas in Old Testament times it was very hard to achieve salvation unassisted, Baptism suddenly made it a whole lot easier to become a saint.

But besides identifying Old Testament foreshadowings of baptism, the early fathers were savvy enough to come up with their own symbolic significance for the sacrament. St. Cyril of Jerusalem who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century had described the whole ritual with beautiful imagery which though very meaningful was perhaps a bit more relevant for him and his contemporaries than it may be for us as we now practice baptism. He began his teaching saying, "When you took off your tunic, it was an image of putting off the old man and his deeds. Stripping yourselves naked, you imitated Christ who was naked on

the cross. But you were naked and not ashamed like the first Adam.” As we can infer, it was the normal custom in the early church to strip naked before entering the waters of baptism which because of modesty we no longer do since the Middle Ages. Cyril appropriately saw this gesture as a sign of putting off the old man, the lower self and its sinfulness. Getting rid of one’s garments signified that the candidate was ready to discard the lower nature in exchange for something better. The one to receive baptism was effectively prepared to identify with the naked Christ who hung on the cross symbolically putting to death the old man of sin. But as this early father also imagined, the nakedness in preparation for baptism was also a parallel to the nakedness of Adam and Eve in the garden, and so it was an image of a return to innocence and purity.

Following these initial thoughts on baptism, Cyril continued, “After being stripped you were led down to the water and descending three time and rising again you typified Christ’s three days in the tomb and his resurrection. At the self-same moment you were both dying and being reborn.” Adapting the sentiments of St. Paul, this early church father aptly envisioned baptism as the burial of the old man and the rising of the new. The apostle’s words in Romans explain, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Whenever full body immersion was practiced this imagery was perhaps best typified, though it should be said that the normal method of baptism from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onward constituted one standing in the river and having the water poured over his head three times. But however baptism was performed, when it was completed, the candidate would emerge from the water and be clothed with new white robes to symbolize the birth of the new man, the spiritual self with its purity taking the place of the old nature. Here again, the rebirth that Cyril saw in the sacrament tied in with the nakedness of the candidate, for he was naked when he entered the world from his mother’s womb and was again in this rite of baptism. For this reason the Church has always thought of the sacrament in terms of Jesus’ words. In John 3, the Savior said that one must be born again of water and the spirit to enter the kingdom of heaven and indeed this is realized in this the initiation rite into the Christian faith.

But there is yet more imagery that we can attach to the first sacrament of the Church that has a long standing biblical tradition as well. We have spoken before about how in the ancient Middle East where desert life made water a hot commodity, it came to be regarded as the life-giving substance capable of revitalizing the parched earth overnight after the infrequent rains fell. Consequently, in the scriptures water came to be used as a symbol of God’s life that he showers upon all creation to sustain it and keep it going. Not just physical life, the water came to signify spiritual life that proceeds from God himself.

Often portrayed as a river or a spring, the divine life-force is always illustrated as moving water as indeed we would expect. Contrasted with a stagnant pool, a running stream is alive and animated just like God himself. Always flowing, this life-force carries with it the sustaining power to keep the creation fueled for spiritual progress and growth. Like electrical current that flows from the power station to our homes to supply us with energy, the spiritual life-force of God flows from his throne in heaven to the physical

world to revitalize and fortify those who live upon the earth. When man immerses himself in this divine stream he receives the assistance necessary to draw near to God making strides toward holiness. But when he withdraws himself from that life-giving stream he inevitably enters an arid land in which he is led astray to take the downward path.

The concept of this life-giving stream played a definite role in the Jewish faith as we see from the Law of Moses. Several rituals utilized it including one from the Book of Leviticus in which there is an instruction for a priest to kill a bird in an earthen vessel over running water. Similarly in the Book of Numbers, in the account of the sacrifice of the red heifer, it was commanded to take the ashes of the cow and mix it with running water in a vessel for a purification of sin. Not surprisingly the Church also embraced the importance of moving water in the rite of baptism, and in one of the earliest church documents known as the Didache we see such an emphasis. In that brief instruction, it was commanded to baptize in living water if it were at all possible, and so it was not uncommon for candidates to enter a river or stream for this regenerating sacrament.

The point of Baptism as can be inferred from this imagery is to immerse an individual in this life-giving stream, and in a special way the candidate who receives this sacrament acquires a great dose of God's mighty life-force. Like a shot in the arm, those who enter the holy waters gain a tremendous outpouring of spiritual life which has been referred to by many in the church under the title of what we call grace. As we have seen, baptism involves the death of the old man and the birth of the new as the candidate is buried in the water and then emerges to new life. But expressed another way, this holy sacrament is about plunging the physical man into the divine stream to make him spiritual. Saturated in the life-giving river of God, the formerly worldly man dominated by the flesh and material pursuits makes a transition to the spiritual. Entering the waters of baptism, the individual becomes connected directly to God through the River of Life and if he is careful to keep this channel to the throne of God open, an abundant amount of grace will flow to him for the rest of his life. Indeed as Jesus tells us in the gospels, streams of living water will break forth from within him, a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

## Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Having considered Jesus' baptism last week, our gospel journey takes us to the narrative about the calling of the first disciples. After Christ was baptized, he immediately withdrew into the wilderness to fast for forty days and be tempted of the devil, and after successfully enduring that time of trial, he made his way back to the Jordan where his cousin John the Baptist was still busy about his work. When John spotted him nearby, he pointed Jesus out to a couple of his disciples who were with him. The Baptist uttered those familiar words, "Behold the Lamb of God" which was apparently enough to get their attention. Both John the son of Zebedee and Andrew bar Jonah had been following John the Baptist for some time and were well aware of his prediction that one greater than himself would come on the scene. Having gotten a glimpse of the Son of God, the two men did not hesitate but quickly introduced themselves to the Savior if for no other reason than a pious curiosity.

We are told that Jesus invited the two fishermen to spend the day with him and presumably because of the late hour that is mentioned in the text, we may infer that they even spent the night where he was staying. Convinced after their initial meeting that he was indeed the Messiah, it seems likely that both men sought out their brothers who seemingly also were in the area. We know that Andrew found Simon, and probably John found James to tell them the good news and in turn introduce them to Christ. It might be reasonable to say that both Simon and James were also disciples of John the Baptist having been with their siblings near the Jordan. At the very least, it seems that they had come to him for baptism, and now they had the good fortune to become acquainted with One yet greater than John. Accompanying Jesus, they all made their way back up north to Galilee which was home for all of them and along the way, the narrative tells us that they picked up a couple more disciples including Philip and his friend Nathaniel.

To the latter, the Savior had very kind words to say, but it is what Christ cryptically spoke to Simon that gets our attention the most in the dialogue we find in the story. When Jesus first met Andrew's brother, he did something a little unexpected on a first acquaintance. The Son of God immediately gave Simon the new name by which we all know him best. Speaking in Aramaic, the Savior called him Cephas which is translated as rock. And it was a name that he didn't fail to use on many occasions including one special exchange with his disciples. The gospels recount how after Peter made his confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior had strong words for the fisherman. He proclaimed to this apostle, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

As an important announcement from the Son of God, if we hadn't known it before, we come to realize that Peter was special to the Lord with a unique status among his followers. Indeed it is hard to miss this fact from our reading of the gospels where more than any other disciple there is dialogue between Christ and Peter. Often speaking up on behalf of the others, he would express the sentiments of the group such as when he reminded the Lord that they had left everything to follow him and were concerned about it all being worthwhile. And at certain critical junctures he was the voice of the apostles

pledging to continue following Jesus when his words were difficult. It was at such a time that Peter said, “To whom should we go; you have the words of everlasting life” after Jesus announced to the crowds that they must eat his body and drink his blood and many disciples were walking away.

But more than just being the most vocal of the twelve, Peter’s special position is also revealed in the privilege of being one of the inner circle. Along with John and James, the sons of Zebedee, he was a part of intimate moments with the Lord that the others were excluded from. None but these chosen three were permitted to see the glory of the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor. Additionally, it was only this select band that was made privy to certain miracles that Jesus performed, for when Jesus entered the house of Jairus after his daughter’s sudden death, only James, John, and Peter were permitted to follow him into the home and watch the miracle that would ensue. The prerogative of the inner circle was apparent on a number of occasions, not the least of which was the time of the Lord’s Passion when only these three men accompanied Jesus deep into the Garden of Gethsemane to witness his bitter anguish of soul.

However that event reminds us that many times Peter behaved as anything but a rock. Impulsive and impetuous on quite a few occasions, the most prominent apostle in the gospels rashly cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant when Jesus was being arrested in the garden. And just a little earlier than that, this disciple fell asleep while the Savior was in great distress, failing to support the King of Kings when he really needed it. Of course we all know how the rest of the story goes. The man who confidently claimed that he would rather die than deny his Lord regrettably disowned him on not just one but three occasions on that fateful night. Hardly conducting himself as strong and reliable person, the apostle had a track record of weakness over the three years of Christ’s ministry. Stepping out on the water to walk toward the Lord on the stormy sea, brazen Peter lost faith and began to sink into the waves only to be rescued by the Savior before drowning. On another occasion, the preeminent apostle was harshly rebuked by the Messiah with a sharp “Get thee behind me Satan” when he opposed the Master’s plan to go up to Jerusalem.

Though he had failed on a number of occasions, such setbacks did not ultimately nullify the words of Christ, for after the Resurrection the prominent disciple would continue to function as the leader of the apostles and the spokesman for the twelve throughout the pages of the Book of Acts. With the power of Pentecost having descended upon him, the fear that had laid hold of Peter in earlier years was replaced by a supernatural boldness and courage. And in fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy, a personality more like a rock emerged from this unstable “fly off the handle” fisherman from Galilee. Addressing the crowds of people who were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, Peter spoke with great conviction about the Savior to the masses and effected many conversions to the faith. With bravery he stood up to the Sanhedrin who tried to intimidate him and forbid him to preach the faith that had been entrusted to him. With unquestioned authority he initiated important decisions within the church such as the choosing of Matthias, Judas’ replacement. And acting as the voice of apostolic jurisdiction he proclaimed judgment in

God's name upon the deceitful, bringing about the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira who had lied to the Holy Spirit.

Overflowing with apostolic power, Peter the rock would feature most notably as the main worker of miracles in the early years of the church starting first with the healing of the crippled beggar in the temple just a short time after Pentecost. So filled with the Spirit was he that the afflicted only had to fall under the darkness of his shadow to receive a healing as the Book of Acts reports.

Clearly as the bold leader of the apostles Peter lived up to the name that Christ gave him, but we might ask how specifically he fulfilled and potentially continues to fulfill the prophecy that Jesus made about him as the rock upon which the church would be built. From the gospel of Matthew we learn that the church was built upon Peter and that he was given the keys of the kingdom to bind things in earth and in heaven in the name of God. Not that this should surprise us, for according to Paul's words to the Ephesians, "the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." As Catholics we understand that the Twelve were possessed of the authority that Christ imparted to them to grant or withhold the sacraments which we know to be the means of salvation and the door into the kingdom of heaven. The original apostles who were vested with this power in turn passed it on to others so that now their successors throughout the earth retain the same authority as bishops, priests, and deacons.

But Christ's words seem to imply that it would be through Peter that this authority would be transmitted to the expanding church, and as the course of history would run, it is indeed through Peter that most of the Christian world has its apostolic power. During the First Century, the Twelve spread out through the known world to bring the gospel and as they went they ordained men as bishops in the cities and towns they visited to ultimately function as their successors. Many of the lesser known apostles went eastward from Jerusalem and were responsible for propagating the faith in Asia in the early years. Men such as Thomas are credited with the foundation of the once powerful Nestorian Church which spread from modern day Iraq all the way to China during the First Millennium. So large was the Asian Church that its numbers far exceeded those in the West that we associate with the Christianity in the Roman Empire. But unfortunately, this once vibrant Eastern Church all but fell to the rise of Islam, and now exists as but a mere shell of its original glory.

While the Church in Asia was almost entirely wiped out, its sister branch in the Mediterranean and Europe survived the threats that assailed it at different times throughout the past couple millennia. This the Church of the West which we call Greco-Roman Christianity is the Church of Peter, for this apostle was the main conduit for passing on apostolic authority throughout the Empire. Credited with ordaining either directly or indirectly the original bishops of many of the major cities of the Empire, Peter's legacy has made a lasting imprint on the Church. Three of the great Sees of Early Christianity are credited to his foundation including Antioch, Alexandria, and the great city of Rome. As Greco-Roman Christianity is basically the sole surviving branch of the Early Church, it is undoubtedly Peter that is responsible for the overwhelming majority of

apostolic lines that exist in the world today, and for this reason, practically speaking the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by and large owes its existence to Peter more than all of the other apostles whose legacies have unfortunately passed away with the sands of time.

Certainly Peter has been very important to the Church as the source of its authority and apostolic succession, but our understanding of the apostle's special role within Christianity is perhaps not as strong as others who share the Catholic faith as we do. Though Peter had ultimately lived up to the notion of a rock especially in the period after Pentecost, we do not see him or any particular one of his successors as being the chief shepherd of the Church or the infallible pillar of faith and morals, the final arbiter on all issues of doctrine and teaching. While many Catholics would envision Peter in this kind of role, there is both New Testament and Early Church evidence that wouldn't elevate the apostle quite that high on the totem pole.

The apostle Paul spoke about a confrontation with Peter in his epistle to the Galatians which casts a shadow on the ministry of Peter at one point in his work. Paul tells us that Peter was clearly in the wrong about a situation that developed between Jewish and Gentile Christians early on in the expansion of the faith. It should have been abundantly clear that the wall of separation was torn down between Jews and non-Jews in the new religion that Christ had established. What had been unclean was now declared clean, and there was no longer any reason for the two groups to remain separated. But Peter fell prey to a certain level of hypocrisy whereby he began to separate himself from the Gentiles being unwilling to eat with them as an unclean and uncircumcised people. For this practice Paul rebuked him, and at least in this instance, the one whom we have aptly called the rock for so many reasons failed to tow the highest line of faith and morals.

Not only for this failure to enforce the truth do we regard Peter not quite in the same way as other Catholics, but additional historical evidence suggests that the one who was clearly the leader of the apostles was perhaps surprisingly not considered the leader of the whole church. Reading through the book of Acts carefully, we see that another man functioned as chief shepherd of the early church in the day that it was still dominated by Jewish Christians. As a much older man than any of the apostles, perhaps even 15 years older than Christ, it was James the stepbrother of the Lord who received deference from the apostles in all the major decision making. This was very evident in Council of Jerusalem which met around 50 A.D. to decide the question of the Gentiles and which regulations they would be obliged to keep. When all of the delegates at the council had spoken, James rose up at last and gave his final ruling. Rendering judgment, he dictated the four principles that he felt should be enjoined on the Gentiles and the Council followed suit communicating his wishes to the Gentile believers.

According to a number of sources, the apostles endeavored to defer to James more than likely because he was not only older but also because he was the brother of the Lord which in the eyes of the Jews made him to be highly regarded. One Early Church Father writing in the second century commented on this reality saying, "Peter, James and John after the ascension of our Savior, as if also preferred by our Lord, strove not after honor, but chose James the Just bishop of Jerusalem." A major early church work alleging to

transmit the words of Peter's protégé' Clement of Rome has a number of references to the apostle's subservient role to James the brother of Jesus who served as bishop of Jerusalem until his death around 62 A.D. In that large volume we are told that as if working for James, Peter was instructed to send the bishop of Jerusalem an annual report of all his work, an account of all his sayings and doings in the work of evangelization. Two letters to James are preserved in this document including one from Clement and one from Peter employing language of the highest respect for the Lord's brother. If anyone was thought of as the Chief Shepherd of the Church, it was James for Peter addresses him as the "lord and bishop of the holy church." And in similar language Clement salutes James as "Bishop of bishops, who rules Jerusalem, the holy Church of the Hebrews, and the Churches everywhere"

On balance, we in the Orthodox Catholic Church clearly believe that Christ knew what he was doing in giving Simon bar Jonah a new name, the rock upon which the church was built. But from our perspective it is neither right to ignore the special role this apostle had to play in the church nor to elevate him to a position that is not supported by the New Testament or the voice of early church writers. Suffice it to say, this apostle was a man with his ups and downs like the rest of us, with some great failures and some brilliant triumphs. But for whatever he did right and wrong, in the end it is the legacy of this one man of faith which has become the fabric of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity and this we should remember today in celebrating this preeminent apostle.

## Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

In last week's gospel narrative we had a look at the calling of the first disciples after Jesus returned from his period of temptation in the wilderness. Taking to himself several of John the Baptist's followers, the Savior led his entourage north back to Galilee which all of the men called home. With his new found friends accompanying him, Christ made an appearance at a wedding reception in the Galilean town of Cana not too far from his own village of Nazareth. It seems from the context of the scripture that a relative of Mary was getting married and as a courtesy to his mother, Jesus was also given an invitation to the nuptial feast.

But we may infer that the bride and groom were not expecting Mary's Son to show up with a band of his cohorts numbering at least six if not more, and if the banquet had been intended for a small group of family members to begin with, conceivably Jesus' disciples would have put a strain on the supply of available food and drink. However it would have been inconceivable in the ancient Middle East, the center of hospitality to strangers to turn away those who hadn't been on the invitation list. They made due with what they had, but surprisingly after not too long, the wine ran out. More than likely this happened early in the festivities and presented a problem. Taking notice of the situation, Mary approached her Son and said point blank, "They have no more wine."

It is hard to say exactly in which tone she phrased this statement to Jesus. It might have been matter-of-fact, but we could imagine that it was a mild rebuke as if to say, "You created this problem; now fix it." Clearly if an unexpected overflow of guests depleted the wine before the end of the reception, Jesus would have had some degree of responsibility for the deficit, and at the very least Mary might have thought it best to apprise her Son of the situation to deal with it as he saw best. If we believe the childhood stories of the Savior, then undoubtedly Mary had seen her boy work many miracles before, and knowing that he was capable of such perhaps she was appealing to him to work another one for the sake of the guests saving the bride and groom from embarrassment.

She probably also was banking on the idea that her own offspring would not refuse to help anyone who was in great need especially if the request came from his mother. And needless to say, we Catholics have exploited this notion as far as possible in the past two thousand years asking Mary's intercession for our requests as a sort of "backdoor" approach to God. Counting on the idea that Jesus would never refuse his mother, we are always hopeful that her pull in the heavenly courts will do us good.

But whatever Mary's plan in bringing up the matter to her Son, it was probably met by what to her was an unexpected response, one which has caused some debate among those who hold the Christian faith. In some versions of the story like the King James, Jesus responded, "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" which on the surface sounds like Christ is rebuking his mother for even broaching the subject. We might be troubled to think that a spat was developing within the Holy Family which if it were true would mean that there was little hope for the rest of us. Though fortunately more accurate translations

of the narrative like the one we read today put Jesus' response in a better light than we might have feared. The Greek word translated "woman" is by no means a derogatory put down like we would use it in modern speech; rather it is a term of respect better interpreted as "madam," "lady," or in today's reading, "dear woman." It was the same kind of usage that Jesus employed later when from the Cross he said, "Woman, behold your Son."

Put another way, Jesus might have said to Mary in the vernacular, "Dear mother, why are you attempting to get me involved in this? Don't you know that my ministry has not yet begun?" In reality his reply to his mother was actually a rhetorical question expressing the humanity of the Savior at this time in his life. Here at the wedding feast of Cana he was on the brink of going public and beginning the three year mission among his people. He knew that working a miracle here would kick off this campaign and perhaps inside there was a little hesitance, for he knew that as soon as his work commenced he would be on a steady and sure road to Calvary. Undoubtedly, Jesus in the flesh would have liked to have delayed this just a little bit more if it were possible but now he knew his hour was at hand.

Recognizing that her Son was not going to deny her request, Mary instructed the servants at the banquet to do whatever Christ should tell them to do. And after working through any internal resistance to working his first public miracle, the Savior proceeded to direct the attendants to fill up six of the large stone water jars that were in the house. Common in many homes, these vessels were for the purpose of ceremonial washing as the Jewish people often became defiled in the normal course of the day and needed to wash again to be ritually pure. Additionally, such water was used for guests coming into the home off the dusty roads of Palestine. Covered with the dirt of the highways and byways of Israel, it was routine to use the contents of these water jars to wash any visitor's feet clean, a service that we all will recall that Jesus performed for his disciples at the last supper.

These big containers could hold anywhere from 20 to 30 gallons of water each, and we are told that the Savior ordered that each of the six be filled to the brim. So upwards of 180 gallons of water were brought in from the well to top off each of the jars before Jesus performed this first of many public miracles. More than making up for the initial deficit brought on by his disciples unexpected appearance at the party, Jesus produced a couple hundred gallons of wine for the new bride and groom which I am sure is way beyond what was needed for the guests that day. With such a large supply in the hands of the new couple, they would have enough to consume for a very long time afterwards and perhaps could even sell what they could not use. The Savior had indeed provided a very nice wedding present much to the relief of all in attendance on that special occasion.

Now though we have sketched out the basic story line from this gospel reading, there is more that can be said about the narrative on a deeper level. Some have considered the Savior's various recorded miracles and see a certain parallel or symmetry between what Jesus performed at Cana, his first miracle and at the Last Supper his final miracle. In both narratives we are presented with a similar supernatural occurrence, for unlike all of the other signs and wonders he produced during his ministry, the first and last miracles involved the transformation of substance from one thing into another. At Cana, the water

was turned into wine, and then at the Last Supper, the wine was turned into his very own Blood.

With water, wine, and other symbols in today's gospel story there is no lack of allegorical interpretations that can be attached to the account as well. And the first one to consider is water which we have discussed on prior occasions as a being a symbol of the divine life-force that is poured down upon all of creation. In this context, what is important is that we have this life giving water being poured into the large stone vessels at the wedding reception. It is probably not a coincidence that there were specifically six jars which Jesus commanded to be filled to the brim, for that number in the system of biblical numerology has a special significance. Most would identify the number six as the number of man in connection with several scriptural ideas. In Genesis we have man created on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the week, and in the Ten Commandments we have a precept that dictates that man should labor for six days and rest on the 7<sup>th</sup>. As one less than seven, the number of perfection in the bible, some appropriately see six as a representative of imperfect man. But probably one of the most significant linkages between man and the number six comes from Revelation in which the legendary beast is said to have the number 666, and we are told directly that it is the number of man.

If six is decidedly the number of man, then we may see the stone jars as symbolizing people in need of God's divine power. The apostle Paul had made an analogy to the material body of man as compared to jars of clay holding a precious treasure within. And likewise we may see these stone vessels as representations of the physical body which is spiritually empty until it is filled with the life-force from on high. Jesus instructed the servants to fill these containers to the brim, for allegorically he desires to fill each one of us to saturation, drenching us in the divine tide.

Certainly the water as described in this part of the narrative illustrates this principle that we have previously discussed, but it also has another very different significance in this story which may help us to understand the meaning of the wine that is the focal point of the miracle. Since it is contrasted with wine, it may help us to explore the differences between the two fluids. In this particular account, we are presented with stagnant and insipid water sitting in the stone jars. Compared with the active and moving water that depicts the flow of divine power, the fluid sitting idle in these containers may be regarded as relatively lifeless and inert, not at all a symbol of the divine. As a bland and tasteless liquid, the water in this context represents something stale and lackluster lacking vitality.

The flavorful wine on the other hand has very different properties to dull and uninteresting water. It is a substance that is charged and effervescent, a fluid with some zip and kick to it. In contrast to water, it is very much alive and invigorating. Because of this characteristic, we often call wine and other liquor "spirits" for they have a quickening effect on the one consuming them, altering the mind and intoxicating. Alcoholic substances make the drinker to fly high feeling a burst of life inside.

Of course the earthly intoxication that is produced by wine is only a symbol of a form of heavenly intoxication which we might call ecstasy and that is the result of being full of

the power of God. As an earthly spirit, wine is then a representation of the Holy Spirit which moves people in a divine inebriation. Such was the case with Hannah the mother of Samuel in the Old Testament. When praying in the temple, the holy woman of God was exhibiting strange behavior to the priest who was monitoring her so much so that he rebuked her for being drunk. But hardly intoxicated with too much wine, Hannah was drunk on the Spirit, a condition that regrettably many men feebly try to replicate through the abuse of alcohol. Instead we should follow the words of Paul who commanded us not to be drunk with wine but to be filled with the spirit. If there is any deeper meaning to the Wedding at Cana, it is this!

## **Feast of Divine Love**

Today we are celebrating the Feast of Divine Love which gives us an opportunity to reflect on one of the special teachings of the Orthodox Catholic Church. An aspect of the Christian faith that is rarely considered, we call to mind the idea that there is a softer side to God, a feminine part which represents love. Frequently in spiritual symbolism, the mind is associated with the male gender while the heart is linked with the female, and it is this, the more tender side of God that we remember on this Feast Day.

In an age of monotheism, it is common among the world's three great religions to refer to God as a single gender, and particularly because these traditions developed in patriarchal cultures, this deity has primarily been spoken of as "He" or "Him." After all, from a human perspective a single being cannot have more than one sex, and we find ourselves forced to assign to God one or the other gender when we refer to the Lord of the Universe. Right or wrong, for a very long time this has been male as Western Civilization has been built on the dominance of the stronger sex. But in much earlier times stretching back to the earliest of civilizations there was no such constraint on identifying God as male or female. And naturally this was because early man was polytheistic worshipping many gods of both genders. For our ancestors, both the stronger and gentler aspects of deity could be found among a whole pantheon and in a sense they were free of some of the limitations of monotheism as the world now knows it.

In primitive cultures, a whole host of gods and goddesses were embraced, and each deity personified what for early man and his limitations was the power behind the natural forces in the world around him. Gods of thunder and lightning along with gods of sea and sky dominated his thinking. Deities existed for just about every aspect of the creation as the explanation for what controlled things in the natural world, but as early man reasoned from his own experience, he decided that all of these lesser deities must have had some origin just as he knew that all mankind had a beginning through a set of earthly parents. For our distant ancestors, among all of the deities in the ancient world many civilizations believed in a Great Father God and a Great Mother Goddess who gave birth to all of the lesser gods and goddesses as well as all of creation. Two great parents were believed to be at the head of the entire pantheon. Essentially the ancients endorsed God the Father and God the Mother as the progenitors of all that exists.

Frequently the Great Father deity would be identified with the sun and the Great Mother deity would be associated with the moon, the two brightest objects in the sky. But among their many children, early man would link the other heavenly bodies that he could see with the naked eye to their important offspring. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn were all considered foremost lesser deities of the ancient world, and not too infrequently one of these planetary gods was grouped together with the Great Mother and Father to form a sort of trinity of gods that were preeminent in the minds of the early civilizations. At times this great trio took the form of the Sun, Moon, and planet Venus which has commonly been known as the Bright Morning Star. For the Babylonians of old the threesome consisted of Inanna, the mother figure, Tammuz the father figure, and Marduk a prominent son of the deities. In Egypt, three principle deities comprised a unit of Osiris the father, Isis the mother, and Horus their son.

While the followers of these ancient religions weren't quite advanced enough to understand that in reality only one God had created all things, they were nonetheless not too far off the mark with their conception of an overarching trinity of supreme deities. Whereas we believe in one God in three persons, they simply believed what was more readily understandable to a less evolved mind, three separate gods functioning in an intimate unit. Though most in modern Western religion would see their concept of a divine family of three members to be a little strange, we in the Orthodox Catholic Church hold that their image of the Godhead was in a sense much closer to reality than the 21<sup>st</sup> century monotheistic idea.

Based on the precedent of the ancients in conjunction with biblical and early church evidence, we assert that the Christian Trinity is in fact a family of Father, Mother, and Son. Even without these sources, this conclusion can be drawn from natural evidence itself, for in the words of St. Paul, "God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." This is to say that as a rule physical things mirror spiritual things as the old adage maintains the principle, "As above, so below." That creation mirrors the Creator is to say that because the family unit exists within humanity it originally is to be found within God himself. Since father, mother, and child form the basic building block of community, we infer that the same structure is to be found in the Godhead in the form of the Divine Father, the Divine Mother, and their offspring the Divine Son. And this Mother figure is none other than the Holy Spirit who for most Christians is a nebulous member of the Trinity whose role in the Divine Family has been clouded at best.

Though not at all in a sexual way which is only appropriate for the physical world, we believe that at the dawn of Creation the Trinity manifested forth in a logical sequence of Father, Mother, and then Son all in the same instant of time. It is the Divine Son who in the words of Paul is the "firstborn over all creation" the first and fully divine offspring of the Father and Mother of all. It is he who is the Elder Brother of all Creation, for we are all the children of the Great Mother and the Great Father and rightly his siblings in a true but greatly inferior way.

It is the relationship of Christ to his Divine Mother that is intimated in today's epistle from the Book of Proverbs where we read about the mysterious person known as Wisdom. Throughout the early chapters of this book, wisdom is praised as something to be acquired but many times it is also spoken of as a real entity, a divine being that exists with God and has always existed with God. Always referred to as a feminine person, Wisdom is described as having an ancient origin before the world began. Speaking in the first person, this Being describes herself as having been brought up with God as if to say that she was his consort from the dawn of Creation. Indeed, as we believe the Holy Spirit was the Divine Spouse of the Father from the very beginning, Wisdom seems to fit the role of this member of the Trinity.

In a somewhat enigmatic passage from the gospels, Jesus associates himself with this Old Testament character in a way that leaves little doubt as to his family relationship with this

Person. A narrative from Luke has the Son of God recalling how the Pharisees had labeled John the Baptist a devil despite the fact that he didn't indulge in the normal pleasures of bread and wine. After the reference to John, Jesus commented on how he also was criticized as a drunkard and glutton for eating and drinking as men normally would. Then Jesus uttered what superficially appears as a mysterious summarization of the whole affair. Despite what the Pharisees said about both him and John, Jesus asserted that "Wisdom is justified by her children." In effect Christ identifies himself as the Son of Wisdom or as we would more commonly refer to her, the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps more and more, the members of the Christian faith have suspected that there is a female component to the Godhead, and the more progressive among us have pushed in recent years for gender inclusive language in liturgy and song. While we do God no offense by calling the Divine Majesty "him" or "her," movements exist to speak of the Godhead in a neutral way without being partial to either gender. Conceivably this practice was spawned by intuition or even the inspiration of angels and saints who are preparing the world for the New Age in which women will at last play an equal role to men. But it is also likely that Christians have been reading the scriptures more closely and seeing all of the feminine references to God that are embedded in it

That both male and female exist within God is actually something that we can derive right from the very first chapter of Genesis itself. We are told in that popular passage that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." If there ever was a clearer statement about how both genders on earth reflect both genders within God it is this one. But other elements of the Hebrew Scriptures reveal that both sexes are to be found within God. Any scholar of the ancient text would know that unlike in English, specific genders are attached to words in Hebrew so that not surprisingly, the word for spirit which is also appropriately the term for breath and wind is decidedly feminine. And as in fact we believe that the Holy Spirit is God the Mother, this is hardly a coincidence especially in spite of the fact that the society of the ancient Jews was extremely patriarchal.

Besides statements in Genesis and nuances of language, there is other strong evidence for the feminine part of God throughout the Old Testament. A number of passages dare to cast God in maternal imagery, two of which come from Isaiah. Speaking in the first person, God asks, "Can a mother forget her baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" Speaking words of assurance to Israel, the Lord is also quoted as saying, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem." At times God is also conceived as a mother bird caring for her young as we find in the Psalms which speak of the Almighty covering his children with his feathers and hiding them under the shadow of his wings. Another passage from Deuteronomy imagines God as a mother eagle which hovers over its young and carries them in its talons. The bird motif even carried over to the New Testament where in the baptism of Christ, his Divine Mother the Holy Spirit descended upon him as a dove, and it should be realized that for the ancients this bird was by and large regarded as the symbol of a female deity.

That the Holy Spirit was considered to be the Loving Mother within the Godhead finds support as well in the practice of the early church. In a number of documents we see the Holy Spirit referred to in phrases like the “Compassionate Mother,” “the Mother of Wisdom,” and the “Holy Dove.” St. Augustine is quoted as saying in as late as the early fifth century that there were Christians in his day who believed that the “Holy Spirit was the “mother of the Son of God and wife of the Father” as indeed we do. And though modern Christianity has by and large forgotten God the Mother, she continues to be present in her churches in the form of veiled images once understood by those who lived long ago. The entire Trinity is represented on our altar today, and while most would recognize the Son of God linked with the Crucifix and perhaps the Father of lights with the burning candles, it is the Holy Spirit, the female member of the Trinity who is represented by the delicate flowers which always adorn the table of the Lord in every church.

Though it would surprise many, the Trinity is also represented in another important symbol that is well known to the world. But to most, it is simply the ancient symbol of the Christian faith. What we are speaking of is what is usually regarded as a fish, though in reality it is not a fish at all but a more elaborate symbol constructed from the union of two overlapping circles. To the ancients, one circle represented the Male Deity and the other circle symbolized the Female Deity. The area of overlap between the two signified their offspring who for us is the Divine Son. What we then regard as a fish was to the early church a composite Trinitarian representation of Father, Mother, and Son that they illustrated on all the catacombs and secret hiding places around the Mediterranean.

On this Feast of Divine Love, we remember in a special way the one member of the Trinity who most epitomizes this attribute of God. May we not be afraid to call God Mother for our Lord has just as many characteristics of the softer sex as the stronger one. In the age that is now dawning, the Holy Spirit will once again be acknowledged according to her true identity, and among other duties of the Orthodox Catholic Church, it is our mission to share this truth with all those who would receive it.

And now may the Holy Spirit, source of sacred Mother love transmute the darkness of our souls and from the stony ground within us draw forth the sparkling flowers of her great virtue. Amen.

## Septuagesima Sunday

Across all major religions and stretching back far into history is a tradition that is both difficult and counter-intuitive for the masses of humanity. A practice that runs against the deeply ingrained instinct of self-preservation, the ancient custom of self-inflicted suffering is one that understandably boggles the mind of the natural man. We are all wired toward maintaining our best interests, and the idea of voluntary deprivation, hardship, or pain doesn't on the surface seem to be for the greater good of any. Yet whether Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or one of many of the native tribal religions, there is a consistent thread of members taking on self-inflicted suffering. Perhaps those who dare deny themselves in this way only do so through the eyes of faith, for in the physical world there is clearly no tangible value to such acts.

On one end of the spectrum, the souls who practice voluntary suffering elect to harm the physical body, and we have seen a common example of this in the widespread practice of circumcision in the ancient world which left a man sore for days after the ritual blood-letting. Other traditions have involved ceremonial piercings and bizarre customs like those found among Native Americans who permitted biting ants to sting their flesh in their religious gatherings. Certainly those who participate in such acts see a value to them beyond what the senses can detect, and for many a spiritual advantage souls from all walks of life throughout history have been not only tolerant of such voluntary acts of suffering but have in many cases been zealous to bring upon themselves pain and deprivation in one form or another.

Within our own long-standing Judeo-Christian tradition there have existed both forms of bodily mutilation as well as lesser injustices to the body. And at the other end of the spectrum some souls have sought to inflict pain upon themselves only in the sense of denying themselves a pleasure which as far as the body is concerned there is no real harm inflicted save the mental anguish of missing out on something that brings a positive stimulus to the senses. Certainly among the ancient Jews the anguish of circumcision was part and parcel of life in Israel if not just once in a lifetime for a male, but lesser acts of self-denial were to be found among the residents of Canaan including those performed by a Nazirite. For such a soul life entailed giving up the pleasure of alcohol as well the fruit of the vine in any form. Additionally one could not cut his hair or shave and if this was a burden particular in the hot summer months, then a certain degree of pain or discomfort was involved in this religious vow.

While relatively few took on this form of self-denial it was far more common among the Jews as it was among all of the people of the Middle East to practice what was usually a mild form of bodily harm involving the refusal of food to the body. By this we are referring to fasting which has probably been one of the most universal forms of self-inflicted pain and detriment to the body that the members of most every religion practice on an ongoing basis. For the Israelites, this mode of voluntary suffering dots the pages of the Old Testament being routinely mentioned in the life of the Jews. In many cases the reason behind this act of deprivation is described revealing one of several spiritual motivations for self-inflicted harm. On a number of occasions, the Jewish people either

personally or corporately abstained from food as a means of obtaining the favor of their Deity. Denying oneself the nourishment of food was considered a sacrifice and an acceptable offering to God usually in the interest of getting a desired result as a reward for the voluntary discomfort associated with it. At times the fast was for self interests such as when the priest Ezra proclaimed a fast to obtain a safe journey back to the land of Israel when the exile was ending. But often the denial of food to the body was offered to God on behalf of another in a more selfless way. When Saul died in battle, David and his men fasted for him and his son Jonathan as an offering to obtain help for the slain men in the afterlife. The narrative illustrates along with many others that we can offer our own good works to be merited toward another cause outside of ourselves. And we see the same principle applied in the Book of Esther when the Jews abstained three days from food before the queen dared go before the king unannounced with her petition. In a similar way David also offered a fast for the intention of his dying infant son hoping that his act of self-denial would attain the life of his child, though unfortunately after a week of fasting the son died nonetheless.

But there are more dimensions and motives to voluntary suffering particularly in the form of fasting than just seeking to gain favor with God for some intention. Across all religions, the faithful have sought to do themselves some mild or greater form of harm as a means of reparation for their own faults and sins. Embedded in the consciousness of man is the need to make atonement for his failures, and indeed we all must make repayment for the many sins we have committed not only in this life but in those many ones that have preceded our current existence. It was on the Day of Atonement which the world knows as Yom Kippur that the Jews would seek to do penance for their sins and the way they pursued making expiation for their iniquities included among other things abstaining from food during that High Holy Day. Though the Israelites were not so novel in this approach to pay their debts, for many of their neighbors were savvy enough to know that God would receive the sacrifice of a good intentioned fast in reparation for sins. This was evident in the story of Jonah when after the prophet's preaching the entire city of Nineveh repented in sackcloth and ashes and declared a fast. God apparently accepted their acts of deprivation, for the city was spared and did not receive the punishment that Jonah had foretold.

While clearly acts of self-deprivation are frequently offered to God seeking his favor or to make restitution for wrong-doing there are yet deeper motivations for inflicting harm on the body or denying it the ordinary pleasures of life. Particularly in the New Testament more profound reasons for voluntary suffering appear not only among the apostles but in Christ himself. As many of us remember, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness abstaining from food after his baptism in the Jordan. No doubt his act of fasting had many facets to it, but importantly through denying food to his body he certainly sought to draw very near to God, to hear his voice perhaps to know what God willed him to do in the ministry he was now ready to embark on.

As a general spiritual principle, suffering like everything that happens to us in life is meant for our highest good. And with that being said, the purpose of pain and sorrow in the world is so that humanity can recognize and feel its separation from God. It is this

anguish of disconnection from God that is designed to drive us toward him, creating a longing within the soul for union with its Creator. History has shown that many an afflicted soul has consequently drawn very near to God to come into a state of rich intimacy with him which would not have happened had life been easy and carefree.

Yet not a few souls have waited for suffering to strike to spur on this seeking after God; voluntarily inflicting pain upon themselves, pious people have sought to obtain the benefits of the pain of separation through their own efforts. Coming very close to God through self-denial, members of religions around the globe have reported entering into a higher state of consciousness and achieving spiritual experiences and visions through their acts of self-inflicted suffering. Within the Book of Acts this kind of phenomena are corroborated through a few stories including that of Cornelius the pious Roman centurion who happened to be fasting when he saw a vision of an angel instructing him to find Peter who would bring him into the Christian faith. Similarly it was when the church at Antioch was fasting that they heard the voice of the Holy Spirit giving instruction to send out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. Without question, the Savior spent forty days in the wilderness denying himself his daily bread only to become very attuned to the voice of God before setting out on his three year mission.

But voluntary affliction has yet more facets to the spiritual benefits one can receive by denying the body. Today's epistle clues us in to that in the words of St. Paul who said, "I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection." Rendered in another translation, the apostle says, "I beat my body until it becomes my slave," and from his precedent the church has adopted a long standing tradition known as the mortification of the flesh. The key spiritual principle here is that voluntary deprivation particularly from the ordinary pleasures of life helps one to become detached from the material world and long for heavenly existence. As long as a soul is controlled by physical desires, it will remain bound to physical life forcing it to return time after time to life in a new incarnation. By depriving the body of its cravings and even inflicting injury to it as Paul suggests, the spirit can acquire mastery over the flesh which is the cause of many sins that are common to man. By denying the body the pleasure of food, sex, sleep, and other simple drives of physical man, one can become less prone to gluttony, fornication, sloth, and other vices which are associated with the weakness of the flesh. Through the practice of mortification as the Church calls it, a soul can learn the virtue of self-control acquiring mastery over the wiles of the body.

Following St. Paul, many a would-be saint has from the time of the early church until the present sought to beat his body until it should become obedient. A long history of those who embraced an ascetic lifestyle colors the annals of the Church, and with few exceptions all those who have achieved sanctity have to one degree or another practiced the art of voluntary suffering to achieve salvation. In the first few centuries many were to enter into the solitude of the desert choosing to live lives in seclusion, fasting and praying much of the time. Free from the distractions of the world such souls were happy to be hermits, for they not only achieved mastery over their bodies but soared to great heights of intimacy with God in their isolation.

But mere fasting was not the full extent of self-denial looking back at the history of the Church. Quite a few aspiring saints took St. Paul's words very literally and besides denying food to the body, others would deny it sleep. The early hermit Simon Stylites was so zealous in his deprivations that he would force himself to stand by day and night until his limbs would no longer sustain him. To keep his body in the upright position without fail, he finally resorted to binding himself to a stake so that he would not collapse in his vigils. Other Medieval saints such as the Spanish mystic Peter of Alcantara, would force himself to stand on his feet through most of the night only allowing himself to sleep one hour.

If these activities didn't take a harsh toll on the body, the self-flagellation that was popular in the Middle Ages was sure to inflict scars and physical pain that the penitent was only too zealous to endure. The popular 13<sup>th</sup> century saint that we all know as Francis of Assisi frequently scourged himself in addition to his other penances of fasting and all night vigils as did the famed mystic Catherine of Siena a century later. The likes of St. Thomas More in England and St. Ignatius of Loyola were also fond of another form of suffering that entailed wearing a hair shirt which was always sure to irritate the skin to no end.

The saints of the past undoubtedly took seriously the importance of voluntary suffering, and while we may be tempted to be critical of the extremes that they went to, it is not for us to judge the particular path that any soul has been on in its journey toward God. However, as a general rule it is probably fair to say that while some degree of self-inflicted suffering should be part of the life of a soul desiring sanctity, God is not necessarily asking any of us to cause irreparable harm to our bodies. It is important to be good stewards of the physical frame God has entrusted to us and it is best that we exercise moderation in our forms of self-denial.

Perhaps unfortunately, the youthful enthusiasm of some well-known saints in their self-deprivation brought premature wear and tear on their bodies leading to an early demise. We could speculate that if they had been more moderate in their penances, taking better care of the body they might have lived longer to serve God in greater ways over many additional years. Francis of Assisi seems to have regretted abusing his body over the long-term for at the end of his life he asked pardon of his body which he called "little brother ass." Dying at the early age of about 44, he might have wished he had longer to build the fledgling religious order he had established, guiding it in the direction he thought best until it was firmly rooted in the rule he desired for it.

For those of us aspiring saints in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what is prescribed is a life without indulgence and marked by some degree of fasting and prayer but not to the point of wearing out the body before its time. If we are attempting to make reparation for our sins we can do so in this traditional way, but it is far better that we take the alternative and spiritually higher route. Through love and service to God and our neighbor, a soul can achieve more in a positive way than can ever be obtained through the negative effects of self-suffering. As the Psalmist wrote, "love covers over a multitude of sins" and if we

seek to serve God and our fellow man with all of our heart, we will erase much of our sins and draw steadily closer to union with the Creator, the goal of all of our striving.

## Sexagesima Sunday

Among all the vices that plague mankind there is perhaps none more insidious than pride. When once we think we have conquered it, putting it under foot forever, it rears its ugly head again in another subtle way, for as the old saying goes, “like a bad penny, it keeps turning up.” Though we disagree with him about many things the Reformer John Calvin may have been on the right track when he said, “Every man thinks himself within his breast a little better than his neighbor.” Lamentably the ego-self within man inevitably asserts itself from time to time, even among the holiest of people on the planet. Unfortunately we may never kill it off completely, and even in the best of us remnants of this vice may cross over with us to the other side when once we finish mortal life forever.

But unless we greatly subdue it and keep it in check, this evil will undoubtedly bar us from entering the kingdom of heaven. We may ask then how are we ever to defeat this wretched enemy of the soul that is so deeply engrained in our being. While there are many approaches toward overcoming the evil that we do, there is a simple method that often works well. In order to conquer vice, we may do well to practice the opposing virtue which slowly but surely will weaken that particular form of corruption and build positive characteristics within us. Many examples abound to illustrate this point, and we could consider how one may defeat negative feelings about others simply by routinely praying for the individuals who cause us to be jealous, envious, or angry. In a similar way, if we are to cure a depressed and a melancholy spirit that has taken hold of us because of self-pity and inward focus, we have no more to do than to switch gears and turn our attention outward. Through seeking to help others, we will forget about ourselves and after awhile our depression will pass out of sight and out of mind.

Following along this train of thought, it is probably obvious that one recipe for subduing pride is by seeking ways to humiliate ourselves by which exercise we repeatedly deal blow after blow to this insidious evil. At least at some stages in our spiritual journey this approach will work well to cut some branches off the tree of pride, but we need to be careful that we do not create a larger problem by becoming proud of our humility. There is an old monastic joke that suggests this very thing, and as it goes the members of some order are quoted as saying, “We are not known for our poverty or the strictness of our rule, but when it comes to humility, we’re tops.”

Assuming that we go about it the right way, humiliating ourselves can chip away at the iceberg of pride, and to corroborate this there is no shortage of biblical stories which present this very idea. One noteworthy example comes from the life of David, the noble king of Israel. At the time when the Ark of the Covenant was being transported from a private home into the city of Jerusalem, it was an occasion for great celebration, and behaving in a manner that some would say was unbecoming a king, David danced and leapt before the Lord wearing nothing but a simple linen garment. When his wife saw him, she was disgusted and chided him for disrobing in the sight of the common folk, putting off his royal robes and parading like a drunken man through the streets of the city. To this comment David offered a firm rebuke saying, “I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes.”

This very popular monarch of Israel seems to have realized the value of humiliations in the spiritual life, and not a few of his successors followed suit in various ways. When the Book of the Law of Moses was found in the temple after being forgotten about for decades on end, the good king Josiah was greatly grieved at Israel's omission to comply with the laws of God, and he publicly tore his robes and wept before the people as a sign of humble remorse. In a similar way, King Ahab of Israel after recognizing that he had behaved in a sinful way did not hesitate to discard his royal robes and don sackcloth, meekly going around in public clothed in this degrading garb while fasting before God.

Considering today's epistle reading, it seems that St. Paul continued the tradition of his ancestors by attempting to starve pride in his own particular way. And according to the text he sought to do this by speaking of his weaknesses rather than boasting of his strengths. Following in his footsteps, we should not be afraid to confess our incompetence, ignorance, or general disabilities not to mention the sins we fall prey to from time to time. Rather than feigning strength and know-how, we should be quick to reveal when we don't know something or don't know how to perform a certain task. Once again, as long as we are not attempting to convey how much worse off we are than others, insidiously trying to gain their pity or conversely their awe at how much adversity we are enduring, the method may have some merit to it.

In general the apostolic writers tended to emphasize their own frailties rather than glory in any triumphs. In actuality they were careful to give credit to God for all successes and great works during the course of their ministries while taking the full responsibility themselves for all failures and shortcomings. Probably a good posture to take, we are encouraged to give God the glory for all the good we do and blame ourselves for whatever evil we confect.

Though in a sense this way of thinking is a little misleading, for as free moral agents, each one of us is really capable of doing both genuine acts of goodness to our credit as well as pitiful works of evil to our own reproach. However, the reality of the situation is that none of us can do anything praiseworthy in and of ourselves without reaching out for a little help from above. The truth is that our relationship with God is a partnership, and the good that we do is a result of cooperation between man making an effort and God offering assistance. It is through the flow of the divine life-force which we have learned permeates all of creation that man is enabled to beautiful things in the world to the extent that he opens up his heart to receive it. But it is when he wanders far away from this divine river that he is left to himself and quickly falls into mischief.

The Apostle Paul seemed to realize this in his words to the Galatians. In a familiar verse he said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" which is probably an acknowledgement that the admirable works he performed in life were directly linked with the divine power which he allowed to flow through him in his ministry to others. In another place Paul asserts, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" which again seems to be a realization that man is enabled to do great things by opening himself up to the stream of divine help.

With all of this being said, all of the saints appropriately give credit to God for their noble acts in the world, and wisely do they do this for as he often does, Satan would tempt them to self-exaltation by focusing on a half-truth, that what they have accomplished is of their doing and is duly worthy of praise. True enough, it is partly their doing and partly with the help of God, but once we begin to flatter ourselves in our progress we are on the slippery slope of becoming inflated with pride. To counter this temptation, the saints tend to speak of themselves as terrible wretches reporting their many sins rather than their successes.

St. Paul sought to denigrate himself at every opportunity, hoping that such actions would deal a death blow to pride. Putting himself down for the life he had previously led, he gives full tribute to God for his current devotion to the work of the Lord. In a spirit of humility he said, "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was within me."

Indeed those who are devoted servants of God often accomplish much in this life, but they are weighed down by trials that most people are not burdened with. In the epistle we are considering today, we are informed that like many saints, Paul was blessed with mystical abilities that were probably greater than most of his contemporaries. It is a sobering fact that those who are favored with such supernatural visions and experiences are tempted sorely by the devil to boast of their otherworldly encounters, and those who succumb to such temptation run the risk of becoming inflated with pride, stepping onto a slippery slope that leads downward. While we would like to take credit for such magnificent things, they are clearly not of our doing, and boasting in them is sinful not only because it elevates self but because it may lead others into envy or misunderstanding.

Unless there is a good reason why we should share something that has been shown to us in a mystical way, we are obliged to keep silent for our good and the good of others. Of the many saints with regular supernatural contact with the celestial realms, we only know a small fraction of what they learned through visions and out of body experiences, perhaps only what God wanted them to relay to us. Some saints did their best not only to hide their private ecstatic revelations but also to suppress any supernatural manifestations that could happen in public view. This was true of the famous 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic Teresa of Avila who would frequently go into ecstasy during Mass at which point she would begin to levitate. To prevent this from happening, whenever she felt it about to happen she would ask her sisters to jump on top of her to keep her from flying up into the rafters in plain sight of all parishioners. Likewise in modern times, Padre Pio the very gifted saint of the 20<sup>th</sup> century always took efforts to conceal the blood that continuously flowed from his hands. Wearing gloves out in public and while saying Mass, he attempted to hide the fact that he was a Stigmatic bearing the wounds of Christ.

Like these other saints, Paul was certainly at risk for bragging about the favor he was given in not only being an apostle but one who received direct contact from God on

numerous occasions. Perhaps mercifully he was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble and remind him of his proper place. It seems likely that this mysterious thorn was probably a bodily injury that he received, perhaps after being stoned or falling off his horse on the way to Damascus. More than likely Paul limped throughout his ministry and according to the chapter he asked God to take it away from him three times. And wise as God is, he refused to lift this burden from Paul for his own good. Indeed those of us who are blessed with mystical knowledge are oftentimes weighed down by many problems, and we should thank God for them, for without the restraint of opposition we might easily forget our role and inflate like a balloon.

Though Paul begged God to give him relief from his infirmity, he heard one response which is a favorite verse of millions of Christians the world over. He was told, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” And in fact it is true that the divine life-force cannot flow through those who are strong and self-reliant for they do everything in their own power and through the might of their own ego. But supernatural power is able to course through those who are weak and lowly, reliant on God and humbly acknowledging their weaknesses. The scriptures inform us of this spiritual law, which states that “God refuses the proud but gives grace to the humble.” And that grace is none other than the life giving stream that flows to those who are open to God’s power in the midst of their own frailties.

It is those who are confronted by hard situations finding themselves very vulnerable and weak who are open to see the hand of God produce what is often considered the impossible from a human perspective. When our backs are against the wall and there is no way out, it is only then that God has an opportunity to show his power and make things happen. It is when we have no recourse but to solicit his help that Paul’s paradoxical words come true: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” When we are tired, sick, disabled and don’t seem to have the energy or strength to do what needs to get done, it is then that miraculously we can be given eagle’s wings and keep marching on despite our frailties. It is then that God will surprise us and come through in a big way. And following St. Paul, in such situations we can rightly boast, for clear to ourselves and those around us, the credit can only go to God who provides the help.

## Quinquagesima Sunday

Today's epistle reading is a very familiar text which anyone who has been to a wedding has probably heard many times before. Interestingly, though this passage is chosen for marriage ceremonies, the type of love that is celebrated in the chapter is not romantic or physical love but a much higher form, the highest type that human beings can share in this life and the one that represents the standard of perfection for mankind. In the Greek original that Paul wrote in, the word to denote this kind of love is *agape* which is love in a social or moral sense. A pure selfless love that is concerned about the welfare of others without an ulterior motive, agape is a disinterested love which is expressed without any hope for tangible benefits in return.

Not that man is capable of demonstrating this kind of love in the early stages of his development, like all things a true disinterested love evolves over time from cruder and baser forms. For all of us, at first extensions of kindness toward others come from a desire to benefit ourselves. Perhaps because we like the way that someone makes us feel or what they do for us we become inclined to show forms of benevolence to another. And at this stage in our spiritual journey, love is no more than one hand washing another, treating others well who in turn do us good in some way or another. All too often this is the basis of many marriages, for a man will show tenderness to his wife because she meets his material needs like cooking and cleaning as well as his sexual needs. And wishing to preserve these benefits he is prompted to reciprocate to meet her needs in a particular way. But though a relationship might start out this way as a form of basic mutualism, over time it can grow into something more than this simple give and take arrangement. Living with her for many years, a bond of affection will likely form, and even when his wife is old, frail, and unable to do for him as she did before, he may still seek to be attentive to her without demanding anything in return.

In this way, lower forms of love tend to develop into higher ones, and so while *eros* or erotic love is decidedly very shallow and material in nature, it serves as a necessary precursor to greater expressions of charity to one's neighbor, a building block to higher things. For primitive souls, infatuation and sexual love may be the only form of love that they ever give, and while we may be tempted to be critical of this, over time the affections that form through this experience can give way to more selfless forms. Ultimately over many many years, man will make the transition from the instinctual natural kind of love to the supernatural kind of love which is marked by the ability to love the unlovable and to put others before self without expecting anything in return.

If we consider that at the most basic level human beings are animals, then we may begin to appreciate why it is necessarily a long process for a soul to evolve from a selfish to a selfless kind of love. By default, it is this bestial nature within man that is selfish, seeking only its own comforts and welfare. The creatures of the field are our distant cousins, and observing their behavior communicates to us something about our own lower nature, for the beasts of the field graze or gather nuts and seeds only to feed themselves. Independent, animals live their lives basically alone looking out for their own needs as they have been programmed to do, for indeed they have been designed to

fend for themselves as an instinct toward their own survival. They do not attend to others needs when they are sick, undernourished, or injured, for lacking the intellectual capacity that we have they are unable to understand the needs of their fellow creatures and respond to them.

It is this self-preservation and selfish instinct that is the default nature for man as he has evolved up from the animal kingdom. It is therefore self-love that dominates the nature of a young soul, but because he is a man with a very high intellectual capacity, he cannot remain an island oblivious to the concerns of others indefinitely. With greater intelligence comes greater awareness along with responsibility for the welfare of others, and it is this strong mind that facilitates the development of spiritual virtues like love that animals are incapable of displaying.

When early man first started making the transition from higher animal to primitive hominid, his increasing intellect facilitated the germination of the spiritual nature which is essentially dormant in animals. And this paved the way to move from his base selfish nature toward the higher selfless nature for which he is called.

We can imagine this process happening in stages. Early man like other animals would have gathered his food solo, but his budding intellect allowed him to realize that many more resources could be gathered working together as a team than alone. And so a primitive community was born in the form of a group of hunters united in a goal of bringing back a kill to share together. At first such collective efforts were mostly selfish on the part of the participants for they all hoped to benefit from the group effort. But eventually we can conceive that working together began to nurture affection for one another. And as each saw his fellow partner as valuable to the success of the hunt, there arose within the hunter a desire to look out for his neighbor, though admittedly at first he was only motivated for the sake of the preservation of the unit. But such feelings would push early man to do things his animal forbears would not have considered like rescuing a comrade in danger or attending to his injuries even at the risk of his own life. Again at first the motivation would have been the health of his band of hunters which was vital to ensuring the food supply. But overtime, man's initial selfish interests had a path to blossom into the selfless love that he is called to as a high intellectual being. No longer an island, he would forever be a part of community in which disinterested love had an opportunity to grow among all members.

While for the primitive man who was just learning the value of community the bar was fairly low in terms of God's expectations of his capacity to love his neighbor, for us who have evolved hundreds of thousands of years from that point, the standard is much higher, and the way that our acts of love are evaluated is certainly different than our ancient ancestors. As with every deed that we do in the flesh, it is not as much important what we do as why we do it. So the motivation for our actions has greater value than the actions themselves.

If we only show acts of kindness and mercy toward our neighbors out of a feeling of obligation or because of a sense of cultural expectation, then what we do has relatively

little value in the eyes of God. And if we do outward acts of goodness while there is hypocrisy in our hearts then as far as God is concerned, the situation is far worse. The prophet Isaiah had harsh words for those who do good on the surface while their hearts are far from God. He indicated to the people that “all of [their] righteous acts were like filthy rags” which is to say that God considered them as unacceptable as the defiled clothing a woman wears while menstruating. Before being carted into exile, the Israelites of old would fast and offer token sacrifices to God while at the same time persisting in their evil ways. Isaiah berated them for hypocritically showing these signs of love for God while exploiting their workers. He went on to say that as soon as their fasting was over, they immediately began to quarrel and fight with each other demonstrating little regard for the God they were supposedly worshipping..

Rather than paying lip service to their Creator, Isaiah told the people that God was interested in sincere love and devotion to him that would be corroborated by a selfless love of neighbor. Instead of their phony fasts and sacrifices, Isaiah indicated that the Lord was more interested in “loosing the chains of injustice and setting the oppressed free, sharing food with the hungry and offering shelter to the stranger.” The problem with pre-exilic Israel was that it was thoroughly selfish, denying the concept of community along with the welfare of the poor, the fatherless, and the widow. And for these sins of omission it was led to seventy years of punishment.

Now admittedly the example of the rebellious Israelites is an extreme case and point about gauging the value of our works in the eyes of God, and it should only serve as a reminder that God cannot be mocked. Though we are all imperfect in our ability to show disinterested love does not mean that we shouldn't do our best, for God will assess us according to the level that we are at. Even though our motives aren't always completely pure, as long as we are making a sincere effort he will judge our labor to love accordingly and as long as we are not acting hypocritically or doing acts of kindness just for show, he will accept our offering. But it cannot be understated that mixed motives are never an excuse not to do an act of kindness, for from God's perspective it is far worse to omit a work of charity than to do it with a partially selfish agenda. The Israelites learned the hard way that their failure to help the poor and downtrodden was a great offense to God.

In today's epistle reading, Paul also seems to echo in a round about way the sentiments of Isaiah about the value of certain things without the virtue of love. The Corinthian Christians who were very blessed with supernatural gifts and manifestations were placing a premium on them and forgetting what really counts in the eyes of God. Throughout much of the epistle, the apostle rebuked the people at Corinth for many evils including sexual immorality and factions that had developed among them, and within this the famous “love” chapter of the bible, he strove to communicate that all that they held in esteem was really meaningless without love, the king of virtues behind it. Paul firmly declares that such prizes as mystical ability, knowledge, and faith are all to no avail without genuine charity attached to them. And even more sobering, he suggests hypothetically that even giving all of one's possessions away to the poor and surrendering one's life to martyrdom can also have little value if not accompanied by love.

Concluding this sketch of the highest of human virtues, the message in a nutshell is that love is the gauge by which we are measured for all that we do, and in the end it is the only thing that will count. Scholarly knowledge, fame, and fortune will all be consumed in the fire, and only what is done in love will survive. If we acquire anything in this life, it is this supreme virtue that we must diligently seek to possess, for only those who have learned to love selflessly and without personal agenda will be fit to enter the kingdom of God.

## First Sunday in Lent

After his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And this story follows a pattern that is true in the journey of this life for all of us. After a high spiritual experience like baptism, we are often put into a situation of trial and dryness to prove us for a season, and of course this is because it is not in the high time that we experience growth, but in the valley and the barren wasteland.

Jesus was demonstrating this spiritual cycle of a low following a high that had been played out a number of times earlier in biblical history. For it was after the Israelites crossed out of bondage in Egypt through the Red Sea that they immediately began to wander for many weeks in the Desert of Sinai. What had been for them a spiritual high, the allegorical equivalent of baptism as they passed through the waters to freedom was only to be met by the stark parched landscape of the wilderness. Not surprisingly, after such a miraculous liberation from captivity, the people quickly began to complain about their new surroundings, for they had not anticipated the difficulty of life in the wasteland.

A similar scenario was also evident in the life of the great prophet Elijah many centuries earlier. After confronting the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel and achieving a decisive victory over them he immediately entered into a ferocious trial. After the high spiritual experience on the mountain in which Yahweh proved himself publicly by fire, the prophet found himself quickly fleeing for his life as Queen Jezebel threatened revenge. Running from Mt. Carmel to the desert of Judah, Elijah entered a state of despair in the arid climate of the wilderness and having become so depressed he begged that he could die. We are told that at that point he was instructed to journey to the mountain of God and for forty days and forty nights he went without food or water, strengthened only by the last meal he had eaten.

Interestingly, the story of Moses also has a parallel with this episode from Elijah's life at the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments. Moses had been instructed to climb the mountain and receive the two tablets of stone, but it wasn't a daytrip that God had in mind. According to Exodus, he spent forty days and forty nights on top of the mountain without eating bread or drinking water. It is probably clear that recalling the narratives of both Moses and Elijah, the apostle Matthew wished to form a connection between the lives of these two great prophets and the life of the Savior who also spent forty days and forty nights fasting in the wilderness. Not necessarily a literal time span, forty is an extremely prolific number in the bible to signify a long period of time. The number can have many implications but it is usually thought of as a comprehensive timeframe in which something is completed. At times symbolizing a time of waiting or preparation, forty is probably most well known as a period of trial and testing which is why Matthew uses it to characterize Jesus' experience in the desert.

The children of Israel had spent forty years wandering in the desert which according to Moses was for the purpose of humbling them and testing them to know what was in their hearts, whether or not they would ultimately keep God's commandments. And while this

is generally why man is tested, we may ask why Jesus who is the Son of God had to be tried like any ordinary man.

People are often under the impression that the saving work of Jesus was accomplished within the three hours he hung on the cross or perhaps a little longer considering the entire Passion which began the night before. And while it is true that an enormous repository of good merit was accrued for the human race through the final hours of the Savior, it cannot be forgotten that his entire life was also redemptive for mankind. In a sense, while his death dealt with the negative side of the salvation equation, the debt of sin that man has laid upon himself, his holy life satisfied the positive end of the equation granting man not only the forgiveness of sins but the power to live a virtuous life and become sanctified.

That Jesus was tempted in every way that we are but remained blameless has won for the human race the grace to conquer sin rather than be its perpetual victim. By being tested in all ways common to man and remaining sinless, the Son of God obtained for mankind the ability to do the same. It would not have been enough for the Savior just to appear out of heaven one day, go to the cross, and then return back where he came from to win for humanity all of the graces necessary to achieve salvation. Rather in order to be our authentic representative, it was necessary that he be a real man living through real life experiences to qualify him in that role. He had to be one of us going through all of the difficulties we encounter flawlessly to serve as the benefactor of mankind.

And so Jesus willingly subjected himself to the wiles of Satan who sought to prove him to the fullest extent possible. Not that he would have succumbed to any of the tests that were given him, for it is not within the nature of God to do evil, but the temptations to which the Savior was exposed were nonetheless very real and because of the human nature which Christ has assumed, he felt them to the same degree that we feel them, if not more. Because the Son of God is familiar with the great weight of this burden, the apostle Paul infers among other reasons that it was necessary for Jesus to be tested, namely to “be able to help those who are being tempted.” In a sense, Jesus is much better able to assist us in our struggles through having a true experiential knowledge of what a man goes through rather than just a theoretical one. And from our point of view, he has become a tangible model of perfection that we can emulate, something that mankind was lacking until he appeared on the scene 2000 years ago.

Though he was proved by the devil his whole life just as we are day in and day out, in a special way the Savior entered a period of testing while he was in the desert for forty days. We are aware of three temptations to which he was subjected, and more than just a random sequence of tests, we understand them to represent in a comprehensive way the things to which men are vulnerable to attack by the forces of evil. From the first to the last they symbolize a progression of harder and harder tests which mirrors the challenges that men encounter in their evolution from primitive to perfect souls.

The first temptation represents the most basic seductive force that humanity is subject to, the weakness of the flesh and the demands of the physical nature. Christ had entered the

wilderness to fast for forty days and not surprisingly as the apostolic writer tells us, he was hungry and vulnerable to giving in to the needs of the body while he was denying himself food for such a long time. Even though he was in a remote region perhaps without the availability of food for many miles, Satan suggested to Jesus that he could easily manufacture some loaves of bread to assuage his hunger.

In the region of the Dead Sea where he was spending his time of solitude there were many stones of various shapes strewn along the ground. Undoubtedly some were round and flat in shape representing the normal unleavened bread that was the common staple in Palestine at the time. By his supernatural power, the Savior was challenged to turn these stones into bread to satisfy his hunger. On the surface it might have seemed like a harmless thing to do. If one has miraculous powers, why not employ them for a good cause like alleviating a state of starvation? But in that lay the subtlety of the devil's provocation of the Son of God. If one has paranormal abilities above and beyond mere physical skills, it would be a grave sin to use them for selfish reasons to make life easier or more comfortable for oneself. Rather, the only acceptable use of supernatural ability is for the good of others, and clearly Jesus did not hesitate to turn water into wine for the sake of the guests at the Wedding Feast of Cana.

Countering the temptation offered by the devil, Jesus employed a methodology that should serve as a model for us all. Warding Satan off by invoking the scripture, "Man does not live by bread alone" he successfully passed the first test. But the devil being very crafty decided to play his game in the second test by taking another well known scripture and misrepresenting it to bait Christ into another seduction. Though this time, he wasn't going to lure the Savior into sin on a purely physical level, for he had demonstrated his ability to resist temptation on this very basic plane. Instead he stepped up the testing another notch to a higher form, perhaps one that could be called a trial on the mental level.

Taking him to the pinnacle of the temple in the heart of the hustle and bustle of the city of Jerusalem, Satan suggested that Jesus throw himself down into the street below. Though on the surface, such a provocation may sound absurd, the devil made reference to a verse from Psalm 91 in which it is promised that God will command his angels to guard the man of God in all of his ways. They will lift him up in their hands so that he should not strike his foot against a stone. And while it might have been true that God would come to the rescue of a loyal servant who was falling, again on the surface we may wonder why Christ would ever be inclined to jump off the top of the temple just to prove the validity of the scripture. Though clearly there was a motivation to do this even if it wasn't said explicitly in Matthew's narrative.

At this point in time, Jesus was just about ready to begin his ministry and was probably contemplating how he would go about starting it. Undoubtedly he wanted to attract as many people as possible to listen to his message, and while on the pinnacle of the temple he seriously contemplated invoking the promise of Psalm 91 to this end. Casting himself down from that lofty height only to be caught by angels to the amazement of hundreds of onlookers would have won him an immediate audience and the undivided attention of the

people of Jerusalem. What a way to commence his ministry in high gear! But attempting such a stunt was clearly a move to make the ends justify the means. To achieve a greater good, Jesus was being baited to show-off or to exhibit a little pride to make things happen. And often it is the case that once sublimating many physical vices, man is still prone to pride in various forms even under the guise of precipitating a greater good. Seeing through the veil of Satan's deception, the Savior once again countered the devil's suggestion with a scripture found in Deuteronomy, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." What Satan failed to mention in his quotation of Psalm 91 is that it only pertains to those who are in danger through no fault of their own and certainly not by their own volition. Appropriately Christ recognized that trying to force God's hand to come through was equivalent to testing him and demanding that he perform, and with this realization he successfully passed the second test.

But Satan was not finished with his attempt to prove the Son of God, and one last time he sought to lead him into sin. Though this time around the trial would be much greater than the previous one, for it was the highest kind of trial on a very spiritual level. Once again, superficially it is not even conceivable how this temptation of the devil would have even been an attraction to Jesus. If many an imperfect man with numerous faults would not stoop so low to worship the devil, how is it that Christ could be instigated to do so? Like the prior temptation, the full scope of this test isn't borne out in Matthew's account, but needless to say the Savior knew exactly what Satan was driving at in this invitation to pay homage to the Prince of Darkness.

Essentially what the devil was saying to Jesus was that if he would just bow down and worship him once, he would transfer all the kingdoms of the world into his power. That is to say, in exchange for an act of veneration to the Prince of this World, Satan would immediately withdraw his assault on mankind ushering in peace for the entire planet. As another subtle temptation in which the ends justify the means, Christ found himself tried with the same test that afflicts very spiritual people who are working for God. When things are difficult and wearisome, the temptation exists to give up the long arduous journey on the narrow path to salvation. In the case of this third temptation, the Savior was being offered an easier way to achieve peace that not only would allow him to side step the cross but would prevent the continued suffering of humanity as it continues right down through the ages to the present. A paradise on earth was being offered in exchange for surrender to Satan. And yet Christ knew that this could never be realized, for the way to salvation involved not only his suffering but the suffering of all mankind until it should merit everlasting life. A final time he countered the devil with the scripture and quoting from Deuteronomy once again said, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."

In the end, the Savior beat the devil even in the midst of his physical weakness while being assaulted for forty long days in the wilderness. But he had not gotten rid of him forever, for Luke tells us that Satan only left him for a season. Like all of us, Jesus had to continue to face the challenges of the Evil One all the way to the end of his life, and certainly in the Garden of Gethsemane, the battle was probably the fiercest of his entire life. The good news is that one Man has demonstrated that overcoming temptation is a

possibility for all of us. If he could do it, then we also can successfully pass the tests that come to us if we make a great effort, for nothing is given to us beyond which we can bear.

## Second Sunday in Lent

Our gospel story today tells a familiar tale of Jesus and his famous inner circle of disciples. As we have touched on before, repeatedly in the gospel narratives we see three of the twelve apostles receiving special privileges that were not afforded to the others. Peter, James, and John were often either given information that the other disciples were not or were taken to witness some event for which their comrades were left out. The chosen three seemed to have access to Jesus for private conversations such as when they asked the Savior about the signs of the end of the age. And they were invited to see some of the Lord's great miracles like the raising of Jairus' daughter to the exclusion of the rest of the disciples. At the end of Christ's ministry his whole band followed him out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, but only Simon Peter and the Sons of Zebedee were asked to accompany Jesus a little bit deeper into the trees to be with him and witness the great anguish of soul that had befallen him before his arrest.

It was therefore at important moments that the Son of God called upon his inner circle to be with him, and the account we read from Matthew is one such special occasion. The story begins with the Savior and his three followers wandering up a high mountain somewhere in northern Israel, and we are clued in that something of great magnitude is about to happen. Frequently in the scriptures, mountains are the scene of high spiritual experiences. And perhaps this shouldn't surprise us for at least symbolically high peaks represent being closer to God in the heavens and being lifted up from the plane of the material world. Allegorically high elevations signify states of greater spiritual consciousness and awareness, and considering some of the famous events that have happened on the top of a mountain throughout the scripture, there is a consistent theme supporting that imagery.

We have made references to Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai on a number of occasions where during his forty day retreat he was privileged to behold the glory of God on that holy peak. We have also made allusions to Elijah, the other great hero of Judaism who witnessed another great manifestation of God on the top of Mount Carmel. It was there that God's power descended in a blaze of fire to consume the sacrifice he had prepared licking up even the water and stones that were there. Prior to both of these men, high elevations figured into the story of Israel even in the life of Abraham who heard the voice of God atop Mount Moriah when he was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac to the Lord. Many religious experiences both literal and allegorical can be pointed out in the story of the Jews somewhere on a hill or mountain. And it should be said that not only the people of God but the native Canaanites who first inhabited the land also had an appreciation for higher elevations in the practice of their religious worship. Throughout the narratives of the Old Testament we have references to the "high places" which were mountain shrines in which incense and sacrifice were offered to some deity, a practice that was followed by Jew and Gentile alike in ancient times.

It is clear that Jesus himself valued the mountain as a place of literal if not figurative spiritual significance, for we are told in the gospels that it was his habit to withdraw up the side of a mountain to pray and commune with the Father. And now here in this story

from Matthew we see Jesus again scaling a high peak with a few of his beloved disciples in tow for another great encounter with God. Exactly which mountain in Palestine this was is not directly indicated in the narrative, but circumstantial evidence tends to narrow it down fairly well.

Traditionally it has been the belief of the church that this location was Mt. Tabor to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee, but modern scholarly research has shied away from this long held idea for a number of reasons. It has been noted that Tabor just doesn't fit well with the context of the story for we are told that Jesus and the inner circle climbed up a high mountain and Mt. Tabor hardly fits this description at a mere 1800 feet above sea level. On top of this geographical difficulty, it is known that at the time the Son of God lived among us there was a Roman military fortress situated on the peak of Tabor which makes it unlikely to be the location of the heavenly experience detailed in the story.

What is much more likely to be the true mountain of the Transfiguration is Mt. Hermon which straddles the northern border of Israel just south of Lebanon. As the tallest mountain in the land, it boasts an elevation of 9000 feet dwarfing Mt. Tabor and the other mountains of Palestine. As Jesus was at Caesarea Philippi north of the Sea of Galilee immediately before scaling the great mountain, Hermon fits best with the storyline for Christ was already in the far northern reaches of the nation at the time of ascending the holy mountain. But whether the scene of Matthew 17 was Mt. Hermon or the traditional Mt. Tabor, it is important to note that both peaks were special to the ancient Jews and were celebrated in their spiritual writings of old. Particularly in the Psalms these high elevations are spoken of as if holy mountains of God. The Psalmist writes, "Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name" and in another place the dew of Mt. Hermon is compared to sacred oil running down the beard of Aaron. Even the Song of Solomon alludes to the spiritual nature of these places, particularly of Hermon to which the Lover and his bride ascend the summit.

Whatever the case may be, it was up a sacred mountain in Israel that Jesus and his disciples climbed to the summit one day just a few months before he went to his death. Sometime after reaching the top we are told that Christ was transfigured before them so that his face shone like the sun and his clothes became a dazzling white. No other biblical narrative resembles this miracle save for what we know of the life of Moses, for after routinely entering the Lord's presence in the Tent of Meeting he would emerge with his face shining radiantly. So bright was this to the Israelites that they requested him to put a veil over his face in such situations to shield them from the brightness.

Though it is not clear exactly by which mechanism this brilliant manifestation happened to Moses, regarding the Savior what transpired fits very well with a known psychic phenomenon. Many biblical miracles fall under the category of what may be called dematerialization in which someone or something experiences a temporary dispersal of the physical elements that make it up. What happened to Jesus on top of Mt. Hermon was none other than a partial dematerialization of his body, a reduction in his body weight and thinning of his frame to produce a marvelous sight to behold. More or less his physical form was peeled back to reveal the exceedingly bright spirit that lay cloaked

inside, normally veiled under a canopy of flesh and hidden from sight. In a rare exhibition of his true self, the Lord of Glory pushed aside the material body in which he came to earth in order to demonstrate his true essence underneath.

We may ask why he performed this miracle at this particular point in his ministry, and examining the narratives surrounding Matthew 17 there appears to be several motives for the Savior wishing to display his glory to the inner circle. The Transfiguration was preceded by an important event at Caesarea Philippi in which Peter made his confession that Jesus was the Christ in front of all the disciples. And then followed Christ's words that his church would be founded on Peter never to be overcome by hell. Perhaps out of a desire to confirm the words that were spoken in that encounter about a week earlier, Jesus thought it necessary to show these disciples that they had really put their faith in a Divine Being who would not disappoint them. And apparently so strong an impact it made on them that these disciples mention the miracle several times in their writings. Particularly John starts off his gospel testifying to this marvelous event, for he writes, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The inner circle recognized that they were shown a glimpse of the glory that Jesus had with the Father before he humbly descended to earth in the form of a finite and lowly man. Indeed we can conceive that the disciples needed this demonstration of the true identity of the Savior to bolster their faith, for hard times were on their way. Not only did Christ give the disciples a bold promise about the church he was about to found, he began to speak repeatedly about his imminent death which undoubtedly disturbed them, and were it not for the glimpse of his glory that they beheld on Mt. Hermon, who knows if they all would have utterly despaired.

Certainly these are reasons why the Transfiguration was called for at that particular moment in time, but there is more to the story than that and reading further along in the account we are filled in to another important purpose for this special event on the holy mountain. More than just for displaying his glory to his chosen disciples, the Lord had official business to conduct at the summit of Hermon. A meeting was to take place between him and the two most prominent Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah. The rendezvous between the three was not just a casual and friendly visit between the Son of God and his premiere saints but a legal transaction between two parties. In a formal way, Moses and Elijah had come to pass on the baton to Christ to signify the transition from the Old to the New Covenants. The old system which had embodied what has been known as the Law and the Prophets had come to the table in the form of Moses the great lawgiver and Elijah the great prophet of God to officially bring to an end the old dispensation. Though Matthew doesn't allude to it, Luke mentions that the two men spoke of Christ's impending death which would bring to fulfillment their work and that of the whole Jewish system that had been in place for nearly 1500 years. The meeting was to signify that a new era was beginning no longer governed by the blood of bulls and goats but by the blood of the Son of God, the new and holy sacrifice offered for the redemption of humanity.

While this business transaction was occurring, the inner circle watched in amazement and undoubtedly at first they couldn't believe their eyes. The whole affair seems to have

caught them in a stupor, for Luke tells us that they were sleepy and we may presume that the Transfiguration happened in the middle of the night for this reason. Perhaps a bit groggy Peter began to speak irrationally, for Luke says he didn't know what he was saying. The premiere apostle volunteered to build tabernacles or temporary dwellings for their beloved Master as well as for Moses and Elijah on top of the mountain. It may be suggested that Peter was confused at first and desired to make some shelters for the men to stay in as a courtesy to the celestial guests, but his gesture says more of spiritual things that we can identify with.

More than likely, the three disciples were caught up in the height of this spiritual experience, and for those who have had mystical experiences of divine ecstasy they certainly don't want them to end but to continue as long as possible. We may suggest that the desire to build shelters for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus was an attempt to prolong an experience of divine rapture. But unfortunately, moments like this cannot continue but for short spans of time. They come to us only as foretastes of heaven amid the often routine and lackluster ebb and flow of life. And often for the purpose of giving us a little encouragement to keep persevering and working hard in a difficult life they come our way to keep the goal firmly in our sights.

Surely Peter and his fellow disciples would have loved to linger in the glory of the experience on top of the mountain, but before they could proceed to start building any temporary dwellings, we are told that a cloud enveloped them. But this was no ordinary fog settling on a high peak. As we have seen before the cloud is a symbol of the divine presence, and many times in the Old Testament God manifested himself to the children of Israel in the form of a cloud whether leading the people through the desert, descending on Mt. Sinai in a great billow of smoke, or filling the magnificent temple of Solomon on the day of its dedication.

Here on Mt. Hermon the same divine cloud known to the Hebrews as Shekinah descended and the voice of God the Father spoke from within it. Only three times in the gospels do we have recorded the voice of God speaking out of the heavens, and two of these marked very special occasions. At the beginning of his ministry when the Savior was baptized in the Jordan the Father publicly attested his approval for Jesus when he said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." And closing on the end of his ministry at the Transfiguration just a few months before the crucifixion he spoke the same words again in praise of the Divine Son and the work he had done. The voice of the Father bellowed out from the sky to confirm that the Old Covenant was now ending and giving way to the New. Speaking from the cloud, he ratified the business meeting with Moses and Elijah to proclaim that a new dispensation had dawned.

## Third Sunday in Lent

If you were compared to a sheep, quite possibly you would consider that a somewhat positive association. After all, considering all the many creatures in the animal kingdom including rats and snakes, we could clearly do worse than being linked with this docile and quiet animal. Generally what comes to mind for most is the image of a gentle and agreeable mammal grazing in a pasture without a care in the world. If these thoughts sit well with us, then it might make us even more appreciative of comparisons of people to sheep to learn that this kind creature possesses a sharp sense of individuality and has the intelligence to recognize the faces of ten people and fifty other sheep that it hasn't seen in two years. Like us, sheep are capable of expressing emotion and believe it or not mourn for others who have been absent from their presence for awhile. Preferring a smile to a grimace, this easy-going creature also has the sense of mind to react to facial expressions perhaps more than other animals on the farm.

But if we have liked what we have heard so far, it might disappoint us to be made aware of some other characteristics of this woolly creature that are a little less than desirable. Sheep have a fairly narrow field of vision, maybe even what we would call tunnel vision, and as a result they become absorbed in what is right in front of them, many times oblivious to their surroundings. Unfortunately this tendency puts the beast in danger, for the sheep will only be too happy to be munching on a tuft of grass unaware that it is on the edge of a cliff ready to fall to its death.

Like all animals, the sheep is preoccupied in feeding itself and can drift a good distance away from its fellow creatures in search of something to nibble on. But prone to wander after the call of its stomach, this beast may find itself in a predicament that doesn't plague many of our other four-footed friends. Unlike other creatures, the sheep has a poor homing instinct and gets lost very easily. Very unlike a dog which can find its way home from many miles away, the sheep is utterly helpless when it has roamed too far from the flock leaving it vulnerable to the attacks of predators and other animals that would do it harm.

While these characteristics of this docile animal are less than favorable, we might be inclined to once again think more positively of the sheep because of its strong herding instinct. Like a strong social bond, sheep tend to stick together in a group as the animal is a natural born follower. Driven once again by the quest for food, if one sheep sees another moving it will follow it for the sheep reasons its friend must know where there are greener pastures to munch on. Unfortunately this trait also carries with it negative consequences as a story which took place in Turkey some years ago illustrates quite well.

Somewhere in Eastern Turkey several thousand sheep were grazing in the fields when their shepherds decided to take a breakfast break one morning. Temporarily leaving the animals to roam free, the men enjoyed their morning meal while the gentle creatures were left on auto-pilot for a time. But their lack of vigilance would prove deadly to the flock, for in their absence one sheep wandered off the side of a cliff and following suit 1500 sheep chased after their unlucky friend into the ravine below. In the end 400 animals

died, perhaps somewhat fortuitously breaking the fall of 1100 more which survived. Committed to the path of one creature veering into danger, this story sadly depicts the nature of the sheep to blindly follow a leader no matter where it is going.

Such is the nature of sheep for good or bad and whether we agree with the assessment or not, the writers of the bible have seen this animal as the best representative of people. In particular the Psalmist has celebrated the sheep motif over and over again remembering at first how God brought his people out of Egypt like a flock. He speaks of the Lord leading them like sheep through the desert. Frequently he compares the people of Israel to the sheep of God's pasture and refers to the Lord as the Shepherd of Israel. And even those people who are least scripturally savvy know if nothing else the popular lines of Psalm 23 which begins, "The Lord is my Shepherd."

Knowing human nature very well, God has recognized that mankind has many of the same weaknesses of the sheep and so is in need of the work of a shepherd to keep him in line. Prone to wander into sin, we like sheep go out on our own leaving the flock and getting into trouble. While out of the fold we mirror the sheep's vulnerability to attack from wolves and predatory animals in the form of various forms of the forces of darkness. And not unlike the sheep, once far from the pasture we have a hard time getting back home again and need someone to help us find our way back to the fold. On top of all of these frailties, we are susceptible to following bad influences without a second thought much like the 1500 sheep who followed a leader off of a cliff to their deaths. As a social animal, mankind is inclined to respond to peer pressure and drift along wherever the prevailing wind is blowing.

We get the picture that a sheep is naive and trusting, characteristics which are a double-edged sword, for the sheep doesn't have the discernment to know if its leader means it good or evil. Some leaders have done great harm to the poor unsuspecting animals, and unfortunately in the history of Israel there is a sad indictment against those who were entrusted by God to shepherd his flock. Over and over again, the civil and religious rulers of Israel were referred to by God as shepherds watching over the people he had charged them with. Kings, prophets, and priests all had the duty of serving as caretakers of God's chosen people, but they failed miserably in that task to the ruination of the entire nation.

Many times figures like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah railed against those who should've been guiding the Jews in righteous, but instead drove them off the path to God. Through these spokesmen, the Lord offered his complaint about the work of the leaders of Israel saying, "My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains." Without a devotion for God themselves, the officials of Israel had no direction or fear of the Lord by which they could guide the sheep, and to this charge Jeremiah wrote, "The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who deal with the law did not know me; the shepherds rebelled against me." Totally self-absorbed and preoccupied with their own welfare, the shepherds of Israel were most guilty of a sin of omission for they failed to corral the flock and keep it from wandering into trouble. Ezekiel from whom today's epistle is taken says, "Woe to the

shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves!” and his sentiments are shared by Zechariah who echoed with similar words, “Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock!”

Clearly Israel had its share of useless guardians who did the people more harm than good, but we can't forget that the nation also benefitted from good leaders like Moses and Joshua who led the Jews into the Promised Land and supervised their victory over the Canaanites. And among all of the decent leaders of Israel, we can probably look to David as a fine example of a good shepherd who selflessly did his job. Before he came to be the ruler of God's people, he had much practice pasturing his father's flock of sheep in Bethlehem. It was there that he often risked his own life in defense of the animals, for when a lion or bear would dare to carry one off for dinner, he would go after it and kill the predator.

Like David, a good shepherd demonstrates his love for the sheep in a number of ways through the use of two very important tools that we read of in the 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm. From that popular passage, we are familiar with what are known as the rod and staff of a shepherd, a source of much comfort to the sheep. And it is probably by the latter that most people would identify the caretaker of the sheep. A long slender stick with a crook at the end, the shepherd uses this instrument frequently in his work with the animals. He may use it to draw sheep together into an intimate relationship such as in the event that a newborn lamb becomes separated from its mother. Gently lifting the lamb with the crook of his staff he places the animal back in the bosom of its mother without touching the creature himself, for otherwise there would be a risk that she would reject her newborn tainted with human scent.

Sometimes the shepherd will also use the staff to reach out and catch particular sheep to draw them close to himself for a look over, and so this utensil of the trade is fairly useful in commandeering the shy and timid animals of the flock who try to keep a distance from the shepherd. Not infrequently, the guardian of the sheep must use his staff to rescue a creature which in its drive for a few mouthfuls of grass finds itself stuck in a bramble bush unable to extricate itself. It is then that the crook serves as a wonderful tool to free the animal from the tangle it placed itself in. Yet other times, the staff functions as the guiding instrument of the shepherd as he gently prods a sheep along a desired path, and in this way it becomes the main device to encourage an animal along a difficult or dangerous route.

While we may be acquainted with these different uses of the shepherd's staff, many would be unaware of the caretaker's rod, let alone what it does. Among other purposes, it is with this tool that the shepherd of the flock defends his sheep from the attacks of wolves and other carnivores who would seek to devour the docile animals. No doubt this is what the shepherd boy David used to drive off the lion and the bear that stalked his precious creatures, but the rod has many more utilities than that.

While it could be used as a club to beat off intruders, it could also be thrown through the air to communicate to a sheep that it was in danger. Should an animal be veering too far

from the flock, attempting to eat something poisonous, or just plain getting into trouble, the shepherd would send his rod whistling through the air which in turn would send the sheep quickly scurrying back to the others.

Yet another purpose of the rod is referred to directly in the Old Testament in the prophecy of Ezekiel who speaking for God to the Israelites said, "I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant." For the ancient shepherd, besides being used as a weapon and a warning device, this tool was employed to examine and count the sheep which euphemistically meant that each animal passed "under the rod." More than just a cursory tally of the creatures, coming under the rod meant that the sheep was carefully and intimately examined to make sure that all was well with it. Because of the animal's long wool, diseases and wounds could easily be concealed without closer probing, and so the shepherd would use his rod to open the fleece of the sheep and then run his hands over the body searching for any trouble. Clearly both the rod and the staff serve a purpose in the life of the sheep that mirrors the care of God for humanity, and in this last function of the rod we can imagine how he with his divine rod seeks to closely inspect the condition of man uncovering any defects or spiritual concerns that he must treat. But there is one final function of the shepherd's rod that we may initially have a hard time associating with the love of God for his people, yet upon close consideration we may be able to see that it is only because of his compassion for the wayward animal that the shepherd uses his rod for an ostensibly unsavory job.

Most have seen a picture of the Savior in what appears to be an affectionate pose carrying a sheep on his shoulders. Indeed it is a loving image, but few would be aware that the reason that Christ is toting the animal around is because it has a broken leg. Well we might be inclined to conceive that the creature hurt itself falling into a hole or off some embankment but would probably be revolted to learn that the sheep's leg was deliberately broken by the Good Shepherd.

While it might seem the height of cruelty never to be associated with God, there are times when because of his concern for the sheep, the shepherd has no choice but to inflict this injury. When the animal repeatedly goes astray time after time and will not heed the rod and staff of the shepherd, he can either let it go off on its own and inevitably stumble into danger or he can take a last drastic measure for the good of his animal. Because the shepherd loves his sheep, he is not willing that it should depart and go among the wolves to its own destruction, so taking his wayward animal aside, he cleanly strikes its leg with his rod to make it lame. Then binding up the injury, he carries the sheep on his shoulders throughout the time it is recovering. And through this time of intimacy with its shepherd, the animal finally learns to love and follow its guardian.

Once healed that sheep will never go astray again, for it experienced the cords of love which bound it up during its time of weakness and need. In fact this seemingly cruel act of the shepherd is directly analogous to God's care of the human flock, for it is through the pain, affliction, and weakness that he inflicts upon us that we learn to cleave very close to him, It is through our infirmities that we develop love and devotion to the Creator, and knowing that in our strength and pride of life we would be inclined to forget

him and wander far away, he mercifully engineers a way for us to stay very close to him, even within the warmth of his bosom and upon the sturdiness of his shoulders. May we always keep in mind that the One who breaks our bones does so not out of malice but out of a deep compassion that only has our best interests at heart.

## Fourth Sunday in Lent

Usually for any given Sunday, the readings are chosen to fit a particular theme, and today is no exception. Both in the Gospel and in the Epistle we have the common element of bread tying together the passages. As the staff of life and the food staple of just about every civilization, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised to see loaves of bread mentioned fairly frequently in the bible, but the accounts presented to us today have a unifying element beyond just a mere sharing in a meal of grain. In both narratives there is a supernatural aspect to the story that says more than just a group of people sat down for dinner.

What is depicted in each passage is the miraculous multiplication of bread to nourish a family for a long period of time or to feed a humongous gathering for a midday meal. In the case of the Old Testament reading, Elijah the prophet assisted a woman on the verge of starvation during a long drought in the land of Israel. While she was preparing to make a final meal for her and her son before wasting away from hunger, the prophet intercepted the desperate widow promising that her jar of flour and flask of oil would not go empty until rain came upon the land and the drought ended. And so the widow's cupboard mysteriously kept generating more and more grain and oil from the little that was there to start with.

In the New Testament reading we are told the familiar story of the feeding of the 5000 which seems to have occurred by a similar mechanism. Starting with only five loaves of bread, somehow through divine intervention this meager amount of food was increased many times over at the hands of the Savior. And in the end, twelve baskets full of leftovers were picked up from the crowd before they went home.

Not that these are the only stories of food replication in the bible, in both Testaments we see additional tales of similar events. The gospels also reveal that on another occasion Jesus fed 4000 people starting with just about the same number of starting loaves, and in the Book of Kings we learn about a lesser known story of Elisha who fed one hundred men with 20 loaves of bread and likewise had some left over. There are clearly no shortage of accounts in which food is multiplied to meet the needs of some group of people, and in some narratives it seems that bread was actually created out of nothing to feed an entire tribe in the desert.

Of course the reference is to the miraculous feeding of the nation of Israel day in and day out while wandering in the barren wilderness over a span of forty years. Each morning a substance called manna would fall from the sky and cover the people's tents, and they would take this food, knead it and bake it for their sustenance. To them it was the "Bread from Heaven" sent by God to nourish them when there was no opportunity to plant crops or forage for food in the desolate countryside that they roamed for a very long time.

While all of these stories share the common theme of God supernaturally providing for people, there is a deeper significance to all of them that we recognize in the life of the Savior himself. All of these similar miraculous accounts really serve as what we may call

foreshadowings of something greater, and in particular the allusion is to the Eucharist in which Jesus took ordinary bread and performed the greatest miracle of all by transforming it into his very Body, the same flesh that lived upon this earth 2000 years ago.

Although we understand very well that it wasn't just bread but also wine that was involved in that miracle. As two common staples of the ancient world, this combination of food and drink also has its precedent in the scriptures prefiguring the time when it would not longer just signify physical sustenance but a divine spiritual meal. Even as far back as the time of Abraham we see the special meaning of these two substances in the story of his encounter with Melchizedek, the king of Salem. After returning from a war with some of the local Canaanite kings, Abraham was greeted by Melchizedek who put before him bread and wine to eat. What is particularly important about this narrative is that the shadowy figure of Melchizedek who we understand to be an earlier coming of the Son of God deliberately set out these elements as if to hint at the miracle he would perform 2000 years later.

Other more subtle allusions to the Eucharist can also be found in Genesis, namely in the story of Joseph who is also widely regarded as a major Christ figure of the Old Testament. Some may recall his time in prison when he was accompanied by Pharaoh's butler and baker when they had offended the king for some reason or another. In one regard the two servants of Pharaoh represent the good and bad thieves who hung side by side with the Lord on Calvary for the baker was executed while the butler was restored to his former service and continued to live. But in another way, each servant of the king symbolizes one element of the Eucharist, for the butler's chief function was to fill Pharaoh's cup with wine while the baker's job was to provide bread for the royal household.

Like many things that have been revealed to us under the New Covenant, these images from the Old Testament serve as a precursor to what Christ has instituted in the current age, the age of sacraments. And chief among the seven that God has given to us to help us achieve salvation is the great gift of the Eucharist that Jesus gave the church at the Last Supper. Simple bread and wine were transformed into his very Body and Blood to be consumed by the faithful for generations to come.

It probably goes without saying that this belief of the Catholic Church is generally hard for people to accept. It was hard for the pagans to embrace during the apostolic era, and it was even hard for the disciples of Jesus, many of whom walked away when he told them that they had to eat his flesh and drink his blood. We may ask as many have throughout the ages if this sacrament is really equivalent to some form of spiritual cannibalism, and the short answer to that question is in fact yes. While what we consume is not a gory mess by any means, we are feasting on the real Body and Blood of the Lord when we eat the sacred elements. And that God asks us to do so is an extension of an ancient theological tradition going back to the earliest days of man.

Particularly as we have seen, blood represents the life-force within an animal, the spiritual essence that animates the creature, Early man sought to capture this force within himself by drinking the blood of the mortally wounded, whether beast or human to infuse its vitality into his body. Perhaps desiring to increase his strength, a hunter would consume the fresh blood of a lion he had killed. Ritual sacrifice routinely employed the same concept as the faithful would drink the blood of countless bulls as well as eat their flesh to heighten the life-force within themselves. Even the blood of human sacrifices was consumed, and especially in war, the victor would drink the blood of his defeated enemy to gain more vitality and power over his foe.

Because of the spiritual reality behind this practice coupled with the great danger involved in infusing the spiritual essence of someone, good or bad, as time went on some religions prohibited the drinking of blood, and we find in the tradition of Noah the injunction against consuming any blood whether of man or beast. It is no wonder that the contemporaries of Christ would have initially been repulsed at his suggestion to eat his Body and drink his Blood for it was offensive on two counts. Not only was it cannibalism but it was also a breach of the Jewish law against the drinking of blood.

We may ask if Jesus was asking his followers to abandon the tradition of their ancestors in favor of his radical request, and it would seem that in fact he was. Although he was really asking them to make an exception to participate in cannibalism and the drinking of blood for a very special case. The only being whose flesh and blood humanity could really benefit from consuming is that of the God-man, a pure unadulterated soul with a fountain of life within his veins. In the greatest and most intimate way possible, Jesus has given to the church his own Body and Blood to consume so that his divine life may be absorbed into our weak and frail frames. In this way he provides us with an extremely powerful gift to assist us in the process of our salvation, for those who feed on him receive tremendous graces to live a holy life and acquire the virtues needed to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus said, “Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of his blood, you shall not have life within you.” Taking these words at face value, all of the Early Church fathers were very enthusiastic about receiving the Eucharist and receiving it often. Just as we need physical bread on a regular basis to sustain our material life, so also do we have a great need of Christ’s spiritual life infused within us as much as possible to grow in holiness and love. St. Augustine who wrote much on many theological subjects is not afraid to equate our often unperceived need for spiritual nourishment with our ongoing need for physical nourishment for he says, “You ought to know what you have received, what you are going to receive, and what you ought to receive daily.” St. Basil echoed those words when he said, “It is good and beneficial to communicate every day, and to partake of the holy body and blood of Christ. For he distinctly says, ‘He who eats my body and drinks my blood has eternal life.’ And who doubts that to share frequently in life is the same thing as to have manifold life. I indeed communicate four times a week on the Lord’s day, on Wednesday, on Friday, and on the Sabbath, and on the other days if there is a commemoration of any Saint.”

But as much as receiving the Bread of Heaven on a frequent and regular basis is a wonderful recipe to achieve eternal life, there is nonetheless a word of caution that needs to be said about it. In the first century the liturgy of the Eucharist was evolving and was very different from what we have today. Initially, a local community of believers would gather and share a common meal just like Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples on the night of the institution of the Eucharist. After eating and drinking regular food together in what was known as a love feast, the priest would then take a portion of unleavened bread and a cup of wine and proceed to the words of consecration after which the community would partake of Holy Communion.

Apparently some were getting drunk during the communal meal at least in Corinth and then receiving the Eucharist, a situation that St. Paul complains about in his letter to this often undisciplined church. Issuing a stern warning to them, he said, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.” He went on to say further, “That is why many of you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.”

Unfortunately, at times including the early part of last century the church has taken a posture of fear of the Eucharist so that the faithful would very rarely receive, perhaps just once per year lest they eat and drink damnation to themselves. However Paul’s words were not meant to discourage frequent reception but to ensure that all communicants examine themselves carefully before consuming the Sacred Body and Blood. We need to make sure that we are not conscious of any grave and unrepented sins, for if we have the guilt of serious sin upon us, then the Blessed Sacrament will have just the opposite effect on us that it ideally should. Acting like a double-edged sword, receiving the Eucharist unworthily will cause us spiritual harm in addition to running the risk of severe judgment. Fortunately for our sakes, God has not left us without a remedy when we are laden with sin, and just to play it safe, the church has always recommended confession before receiving the Holy Communion.

Ultimately the key for any Christian to enter the kingdom of heaven is a regular combination of Eucharist and Confession, a powerful duo that God has given us to achieve human perfection. May we all not fail to take advantage of what he has given us, for it is through the sacraments lovingly given to us by Jesus Christ that we have a sure path to eternal life.

## Fifth Sunday in Lent

We spoke last week about how the many miraculous stories of bread in the bible all led up to the revelation of the Eucharist, the Bread from Heaven that Jesus gives us that we might enter eternal life. Although the miracle of bread and wine at the Last Supper naturally serves as the fulfillment of all of these prefigurations throughout the scriptures, there is yet another Old Testament story that also functions as a forerunner of the Eucharist and provides another dimension to this great Sacrament of the Church. As we are considering again the subject of Holy Communion alluded to in John's gospel that we have read today, it is important to see the connection between the Last Supper and another great Jewish feast.

Many would recognize that we are referring to the Passover which until this day is celebrated by faithful Jews around the world in commemoration of an event which occurred roughly 3500 years ago in the land of Egypt. Just before the Exodus, the Lord instructed Moses on the details of this feast which was to be held annually by all Israelites for generations to come. He was told that on the tenth day of the first month of the year each family was to select a year old male lamb without defect from the flock, and after tending to it for four days it was to be slaughtered at twilight. Taking some of the blood from the freshly killed animal, the Israelites were then to smear a portion of it on the doorframe of the home where they lived. After completing this procedure, the family was to roast the animal without the normal butchering preparations that would usually be done. With head, legs, and internal organs intact they were to cook it over a fire and then proceed to eat it along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. And besides this unusual element, the Israelites were advised that they had to eat this meal with cloak tucked into their belt, sandals on their feet, and staff in hand as if ready to go out the door.

On the first Passover that the Jewish people celebrated in Egypt a miraculous event happened which opened the door for the Chosen People to make their departure from the land of Egypt. Moses had been promised by God that during the night the Angel of Death would visit all of the homes in Egypt and put to death the firstborn of every household that did not have the lamb's blood applied to the doorframe. Needless to say, the eldest children of the Egyptian households died on that fateful night whereas the Israelite families were spared this great tragedy, and having had enough the Pharaoh of the day gave the Jews permission to leave his land as Moses had been requesting for some time.

There are probably a number of levels of meaning to this famous story and ongoing tradition of the Jews with both literal and figurative aspects as well as immediate and prophetic angles to consider. On the surface, the celebration of Passover is one of liberation from slavery and the commencement of a life of freedom for the Jewish people who were the bondsmen of Pharaoh for over 400 years. Many of the elements of the story communicate this idea not least of which is the bitter herbs that the family consumed with the meal. Representing the hardship, struggle, and tears of enslavement

these acrid vegetables were to be a lasting reminder of what the Israelite was released from early in the nation's history.

That the people were to leave their misery behind abruptly making a rapid transition to freedom was captured in other parts of the Passover feast. The whole theme of the meal is one of haste as if to leave slavery behind as fast as possible. For this reason the lamb that was slaughtered was not dressed as one normally would but was roasted whole in the interest of time. The unleavened bread similarly was commanded because it could be prepared in a hurry without the need for yeast to do its slow work of raising the dough. And that the Israelites ate this meal dressed to go out the door was to symbolize the same concept.

While these interpretations serve to give meaning to the Passover on a basic level, one remembered by the Jews to this day, as Christians we derive more from the account on the allegorical level that may be applied to the common spiritual journey of all humanity. From this point of view, we see the story as depicting the transition of man from the domination of his lower nature, the flesh represented by the land of Egypt to a state governed by his higher nature which we know as the spiritual. The narrative consequently represents a "passing over" from the way of sin to the way of obedience to God. For this reason, we can interpret the absence of yeast in the bread to a turning away from sin, for as we have seen, a number of times in the scriptures leaven represents corruption and the spreading of iniquity.

Continuing further on this idea, that the entire story from consuming an unbutchered lamb to partaking in the meal fully dressed to leave the home, we glean that the haste that is demanded of the Jew is one that implies a clean break from sin, running away from it if that were possible and beginning a new life set on holiness. We are not to be sluggish in our abandonment of the ways of the flesh but put it behind us as quickly and efficiently as possible. Like those who left Sodom and were told not to look back, we are also to forge ahead with great determination and effort, even fleeing from the occasion of sin as Joseph ran away from the would-be adulteress, Potiphar's wife.

And considering the bitter herbs which are a part of this special meal, more than just symbolizing the pain of slavery that the Jews endured in Egypt, we can understand them to represent the struggle of a soul in making the transition from a carnal to a spiritual way of life. Nothing happens instantaneously in this world, and while the Israelites symbolically crossed the Red Sea in a matter of hours, for all of us the change from a will dominated by selfishness and animal appetites to a will seeking to serve God with all of its heart takes many years and many lifetimes to achieve. It is one marked by great effort as well as suffering and sacrifice to achieve, and for this reason it is a bitter path that all must journey on before coming into the freedom of the kingdom of God.

Along this way of man's pilgrimage to spiritual things he must work hard paying off his debt of accumulated sin. Hopefully he will be proactive in this job for if he does not find a way to make atonement for his failures, then God will arrange that his debts be paid for in a less than palatable manner. This is perhaps the symbolism of the Passover lamb. If

through our efforts we offer sacrifices to God through works of charity and love for him and our neighbor, we will make payment for our iniquities and appease divine wrath. It was the merit of the Passover sacrifice that turned away the Angel of Death from those Israelites who offered it, but those Egyptians who did nothing experienced the loss of a child which allegorically symbolizes how sin will be punished through suffering if we do not seek to settle our debts in a more constructive way.

Much more can be said about the Passover feast from a prophetic point of view which is how we connect the Institution of the Eucharist with this Jewish tradition that preceded it by nearly 1500 years. While the sacrificial lamb may represent our general spiritual sacrifices to God to make reparation for sin, it prefigures the much greater and radical Sacrifice of the Cross by which Jesus provided a comprehensive redemption for all humanity. John the Baptist appropriately called the Savior the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, a title which rightly links him to the Passover animal whose blood spared the Jewish firstborn. Even the Apostle Paul recognized the connection and referred to Jesus as Christ our Passover who has been sacrificed for us. And so the bread that we consume in our Eucharistic celebration, the Body of Christ was long ago foreshadowed in the lamb which was eaten generation after generation in the Passover.

Many elements of the original Passover narrative parallel the events of Jesus' life leading up to his Sacrifice on the Cross during Passover of 30 A.D. and serve to illustrate the Savior as the prophetic fulfillment of this Jewish festival. Recalling that the Jews were instructed to select a lamb on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the first month, it is important to recognize that Jesus entered into Jerusalem on this same day and appeared in the temple as if to show the Jewish community that the Lamb of God had been chosen and was now marked for sacrifice. Like the Passover lamb of old which needed to be an animal without defect, Jesus came and presented himself before the people as a man without any stain of sin. And later at the Crucifixion, the Savior fulfilled an additional ordinance of the Passover by dying without breaking a bone. It was required that in sacrificing the lamb not one of its bones should be broken in the process or while consuming it. Though probably the Israelites of old considered it a peculiar instruction to carry out, it nonetheless found its realization in the Messiah who died before the Roman soldiers could break his legs and precipitate suffocation and death. Instead he was pierced with a spear to ensure he was dead, and that it was significant that it should be this way, we can consider Psalm 34 where David proclaims that God protects the bones of a righteous man so that none should be broken.

The outline of the Jewish Passover is limited in scope to the details that have been provided so far, but it is interesting to know that over time the tradition of celebrating the Passover began to evolve with elements that continue to reinforce the connection with the Lamb of God. Though it was never specified how the animal was to be roasted over the fire, the Jewish method involved running a wooden spit from the head all the way down to the backside and hanging the creature vertically over a fire. Many have seen this as an allusion to the wood of the cross upon which the Lamb of God was hung in an upright position

Additionally since the alteration of this feast after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., lambs are no longer sacrificed as part of the ritual. Instead of partaking of the flesh of one of the flock, the provisions for the modern Jewish Seder prescribe the substitution of matzah bread as a replacement. Perhaps unwittingly for Jews this form of unleavened bread provides stunning Christian imagery for during the meal, three matzahs are put together conspicuously representing the Trinity. Then the middle matzah is broken in two symbolizing the death of Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity. After this, the broken matzah is wrapped in a white cloth and hidden in the house, and we are reminded of how Jesus was wrapped in white linen and concealed in the tomb. At the end of the meal a child searches for this hidden matzah and when found it is unfurled from the cloth and eaten to represent Christ's resurrection and emergence from the grave. If these modern practices are not striking in and of themselves, even the physical description of matzah is an impressive tribute to the Savior, for its striped appearance as well as its perforated texture illustrate how Jesus was both scourged and pierced.

Indeed the Passover celebration is probably one of the greatest precursors to the Eucharist and the Sacrifice of Christ that we can glean from the scriptures. At this time of year in which we celebrate the Savior's Passion, let us remember that the Body and Blood he provides for our spiritual nourishment was given to us at the cost of a Great Sacrifice to himself. The Lamb of God laid down his life to make an atonement for the sins of humanity and to open wide the door to eternal life.

## Palm Sunday

This week we celebrate Palm Sunday, the day that Jesus entered into Jerusalem to the praise of a multitude, only to be cruelly rejected by the same crowd a few days later. It is on this Sunday that we remember in a special way the Passion of the Lord who offered himself up to the Father as a sacrifice on our behalf. An ingenious plan to redeem mankind, from the dawn of time God had engineered a method to ensure the salvation of the human race without violating his own immutable laws, particularly the law of justice whereby a man reaps what he sows.

Before the Savior came, those who achieved salvation had to do so the hard way paying for every last sin down to the last jot and tittle before entering into the glory of heaven. The souls of men like Abraham, Moses, David, and a number of the prophets accomplished this great feat on their own without any special assistance. And because of the difficulty of expiating all of our sins on our own, relatively very few people in Old Testament times ever became saints. Not wishing mankind to struggle so much on this hard journey to holiness, God planned to help the human race in a big way, making it far easier to enter the kingdom of heaven than it had ever been in the past.

The principle that was employed in making this happen involved the simple concept of one soul sharing the value of its good works with another, much like transferring funds between two banks. Among ordinary mortals it is quite possible to do a good work and ask God to credit it to the account of a neighbor thereby cancelling out a small portion of the friend's debt of sin. But because mere men are finite and have numerous faults, the good we do in the name of a neighbor is of very limited value toward his spiritual progress. So it was planned that a man of infinite worth, one who was also fully divine would appear on the scene to earn an enormous amount of good merit that could be shared with everyone in superabundance. Living thirty some odd years in the land of Palestine, the Savior amassed quite a storehouse of spiritual treasure to be credited to humanity through the love and compassion he showed to all he met. But this repository of good became for all intents and purposes limitless in potential once the Savior willingly laid down his life for the sake of mankind. So much value was there in this one great act of love that it stood to wipe out the entire sin debt of humanity in one fell swoop.

For this reason, biblical writers have often regarded the promised Messiah as one who would take on the sins of the world, even as if carrying them within his own body where they would be neutralized en masse by the infinite value of the Savior's good works. Many Old Testament passages foreshadowed this idea that Christ would carry man's sins upon his own shoulders. In the Books of Moses we read that "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse," and we understand from this that figuratively Jesus would absorb the curse and penalty of humanity's collective sin while hanging on the wood of the cross. Similar motifs are also found in the narratives of the Jews' wandering in the desert, when on a certain occasion many Israelites were getting bitten by poisonous snakes and dying as a punishment for sin. As a remedy for this problem, Moses erected a bronze serpent on a wooden pole so that anyone who looked at it would recover, and so

we have another foreshadowing of one being lifted up on a tree and symbolically absorbing within himself the sins of others. Even that the Savior wore a crown of thorns during his Passion was to signify that he was going to personally bear the penalty of sin, for the curse of sin in the Garden of Eden was that vegetation would bring forth thorns and thistles as a punishment.

Not just these passages, but dozens of Old Testament references foreshadow the Passion of the Lord in suffering vicariously for humanity. One very detailed prophecy appears in the writing of Isaiah who foretold that the Messiah would offer his back to those who beat him and his cheeks to those who pulled out his beard. Not hiding his face from mocking or spitting, the prophet went on to say how Israel's Savior would suffer terrible pain and public humiliation. And according to the gospel narratives, Jesus was indeed ridiculed and spat upon first by the Jewish religious leaders who could not accept his claim of divinity and later by the Roman soldiers who arrayed him as a king with scarlet robe, crown of thorns, and scepter made out of a reed only to jeer and spit at him.

While the New Testament doesn't mention it specifically, according to Isaiah the soldiers pulled out Christ's beard. Needless to say this was a very painful torture but was also very embarrassing for in Middle Eastern culture a man's dignity was attached to his facial hair, and the only time it would be shaved was for a period of deep mourning. To have one's beard shaved off or plucked out was considered a great insult as indeed it was for a delegation of King David's men who were scorned by a nearby king and sent home with their garments cut in two as well as their beards half shaved off.

But that Jesus offered his back to those who beat him as Isaiah prophesied is more than well attested in the gospel stories which tell of the scourging at the pillar. Traditionally, the victim was tied to a post with his entire back exposed to those who would whip him. Not just a flimsy willow switch snapped off from a tree, the instrument of punishment was heinous. A leather strand with small pieces of sharp bone and metal tied to the end, the scourge was designed to rip the skin off of the back penetrating down to the victim's very bones. Traditionally by instruction of the Mosaic Law, a criminal could receive no more than forty blows for with the substantial blood loss the recipient very well could die from the flogging alone.

In fact that Jesus survived the scourging to go to the cross was quite a stupendous feat, for many other victims would not have made it that far instead collapsing along the way. But the Son of God being of good physical condition had the constitution to proceed to what the Father had called him to, the agony of Golgotha, and it is that story that was foreseen by David 1000 years earlier when he penned today's epistle reading from Psalm 22. Carrying the crossbar upon his shoulders, the one to be crucified would be led out to execution through the streets of the city until coming outside of the wall the soldiers would begin their grisly task. Showing a semblance of mercy the victim would first be offered a narcotic to deaden the ensuing pain otherwise known as wine mixed with gall, but when extended this palliative drink, the Savior refused it choosing instead to bear the full magnitude of the suffering as a sacrifice for humanity, a courageous gesture that few if any others would have done.

David foretold in his Messianic Psalm that the hands and feet of Christ would be pierced, an amazing prophecy when considering that it was written hundreds of years before crucifixion was invented as a means of execution. The usual method of putting a victim to death in this way involved first nailing the hands to the crossbeam that he carried to the place of crucifixion. Then with these limbs firmly secured to the wooden bar, it was raised up upon a vertical post known as a stipes and locked in place. Finally the feet would be nailed to the upright post securing both legs in an awkward and painful posture.

Because of the contorted position that the victim would assume upon the cross, the muscles and joints would come under tremendous strain. The shoulders and elbows would frequently get dislocated perhaps along with other joints which seems to be a fulfillment of David's prophecy when he wrote, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint." Additionally the one being executed would suffer a great loss of blood through the continually bleeding wounds through hands and feet, not to mention a flogging if it preceded the actual execution. This condition led to a state of severe dehydration which David recognized when he said, "My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me ... and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth."

The torture of the cross was long and slow, and though death could come from a number of factors, frequently it was the result of suffocation. The hanging position the victim assumed on the cross made it nearly impossible to exhale and so there was a constant and exhausting struggle to breathe. The sufferer quickly learned that he could help himself by attempting to push up with his feet, relieving the strain on his chest muscles to take a normal breath. But this was done at a great price for the pain of standing up on the nails driven through the feet was excruciating in itself. Hence the one being executed had to choose between breathing and pain and vacillated between the two options for hours until exhausted he succumbed to asphyxiation. Sometimes to hasten death, the soldiers attending the execution would break the legs of the victims preventing them from pushing up to breathe and causing them to expire quickly. In the case of the thieves hanging next to the Lord this was the scenario, but as Jesus had already died before it was necessary for him to suffer the same blows, the soldiers drove a spear through his side just to make sure he was dead. And this became a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy that the Messiah would be pierced, run through with a sword in the sight of all.

The contents of Psalm 22 along with many other Old Testament prophecies paint the picture of the Savior's last hours in amazingly good detail, and while there is no lack of predictions that came to pass in a literal way, saints and mystics throughout the ages have seen great allegorical significance in the Passion of Christ as well. Anne Catherine Emmerich, an 18<sup>th</sup> century nun had much to say about the suffering of Jesus after receiving many visions of those long ago events. For her the cross wasn't just a cruel instrument of execution, but was foremost a tree which reminded her of another ancient tree that had existed in the very beginning. Emmerich writes, "Thus was the blessed cross of our Lord planted for the first time on the earth; and well might it be compared to the Tree of Life in paradise, for the wounds of Jesus were as sacred fountains from which flowed four rivers destined to purify the world from the curse of sin and to give it

fertility, so as to produce fruit unto salvation.” This saint envisioned the erection of Jesus’ cross as a restoration of the Tree of Life which had been barred from mankind through sin. Once again available to the nations to feed on, she was reminded how four rivers flowed out of the garden to water the earth and saw the blood which poured from Jesus’ four wounds as the equivalent of these ancient streams.

John Chrysostom, the famous early church orator also saw significance in the wounds of Christ, particularly the wound in his side from which the apostle John tells us flowed blood and water. Chrysostom writes, “Since the symbols of baptism and the Eucharist flowed from his side, it was from his side that Christ fashioned the Church, as he had fashioned Eve from the side of Adam Moses gives a hint of this when he tells the story of the first man and makes him exclaim: “Bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh!” As God then took a rib from Adam’s side to fashion a woman, so Christ has given us blood and water from his side to fashion the Church. God took the rib when Adam was in a deep sleep, and in the same way Christ gave us the blood and the water after his own death.”

Allegorically others have seen the Passion of Christ as an example that he has left humanity to follow. We are exhorted in the New Testament to be imitators of Jesus, and at least for Paul this meant not only mimicking him in life but also identifying with him in his death. The idea that is conveyed to us in the Crucifixion is that what the scriptures refer to as the “old man,” the lower nature of the flesh needs to be put to death. The old self needs to be sublimated so that the spiritual self can take precedence. We accomplish this every day in our spiritual journey when we practice various mortifications in an attempt to snuff out the dominion of the animal nature. But considering the symbolism of the cross, we have a graphic representation of this process, for the pierced hands and feet symbolism the destruction of our evil actions. The crown of thorns around the head signifies the eradication of sinful thoughts and ideas, and the spear through the heart communicates how the hardened heart of sinful man needs to be broken and reshaped into something soft and tender.

Even the form of the cross relates to us this process of sanctification. Perhaps in the mind of God long before Christ walked those painful steps to Calvary, he had envisioned the special shape of this conduit of death. With its long upright post, we have an image of the spiritual which points to heaven. The bigger of the two it represents the higher nature of man with great potential for growth. The shorter horizontal cross bar signifies the opposite idea. Running parallel to the earth it symbolizes man’s fallen nature or lower nature. The message of the cross is that this horizontal bar, the lower self must be lifted up from the earth and mounted up on the vertical beam. That is to say the lower nature of man must be raised up and joined to the spiritual, sublimating the old man and making him spiritual.

So many messages are hidden in the Passion of Christ that we celebrate today, and it is on this occasion that we take time to contemplate the mystery of the Cross upon which the Savior won salvation for the human race. We need to remember both the example of the Cross as well as the magnitude of the sacrifice that Jesus made to purchase redemption of

mankind. Indeed we remember it in every Mass that we celebrate for each one is a representation of that glorious Sacrifice that happened on a lonely hill in Jerusalem many centuries ago.

## Easter Sunday

As we begin the Easter season, we consider the resurrection of the Lord, one of the main teachings of our faith. Almost all of the New Testament books make reference to it, and we understand that it was very important to Peter, Paul, and the other disciples in their ministry. Even Jesus spoke of his resurrection on many occasions as cited in the gospels. Particularly near the end of his three year ministry, Christ began to tell his followers that he must go up to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, be put to death, and then rise again on the third day.

The Savior apparently had to repeat himself on numerous occasions to the disciples because they weren't grasping what he was saying. Though his prediction was not something that he just pulled out of the air, like the other pious Jews of the time, few could understand the Old Testament basis for the suffering Messiah and perhaps fewer still that the Christ would rise again from the dead. We have already considered the Passion of the Lord which was foretold in great detail throughout the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures, and now it is time to take a look at how the prophecies of old anticipated that Jesus would rise from the dead after his brutal and savage murder.

There are admittedly only a few direct passages that suggest that the Son of God would come alive again after his demise and the New Testament writers have not failed to quote them as proof that God should raise Jesus to life. Probably the most popular reference comes from the Psalms and has an immediate application to David, the servant of God who wrote it. Rejoicing in the fact that God is his refuge and the One who keeps him safe, the king penned these words: "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your faithful one see decay." Translated another way, "faithful one" is rendered "Holy One" and the likes of Peter and Paul saw the resurrection of the Lord as a progressive fulfillment of David's words seeing David's royal descendant as literally escaping the clutches of the grave.

In fact all of the other verses that allude to the resurrection need to be interpreted in the progressive sense in order to apply them to the Messiah, and so we understand Psalm 49:15 which promises that "God will redeem my life from the grave" as another passage with its ultimate fulfillment when Jesus vanquished death. Even more pertinent, some are fond of quoting Hosea who spoke of the nation of Israel which turned from its rebellion after the exile. The prophet wrote, "Come let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us that we may live in his presence."

While these kinds of references may validly be used to support the idea that Christ would rise from the dead, for those who are willing to see deeper messages in the ordinary narratives of the Old Testament there are yet more allusions to the resurrection embedded throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Actually Jesus pointed one out to the Pharisees who were asking him for a sign, and in response the Savior told them that the only omen they

would receive was that of the prophet Jonah who spent three days and three nights in the belly of a whale. Without using too much imagination, we can see the whale's gut which held Jonah in prison as a symbol of Christ's tomb. Likewise we can understand the fish spitting the prophet out after three days onto the land and into the light of day as a representation of Jesus rising from the dead and exiting the dark and dank tomb.

Though Christ only gave us this one example of a symbolic narrative, there are certainly others we can draw parallels with. Going to the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis, we recall how in many ways this favorite son of Jacob served as a Christ figure throughout his life. Particularly relevant is the narrative early in the life of Joseph in which he shared a few dreams that got him into trouble with his brothers. He recounted to them how he saw himself with his brothers in the fields binding sheaves when his sheaf stood upright and all the other sheaves gathered and bowed down around it. He spoke of the same dream in another form that suggested that eleven stars were prostrating themselves before him. Ultimately Joseph's predictions came to pass, for when he became ruler of Egypt in the time of famine, all eleven of his brothers came to him for food and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground. In a similar way, this story reminds us of Christ before his ascension when the eleven disciples gathered around him at the mountain in Galilee and bowing themselves low, worshipped him just as Joseph's eleven brothers paid homage to their erstwhile enemy.

Moving a couple books ahead to Leviticus, we have yet another cloaked image of the resurrection in a ritual that was to follow the Passover. During the feast of Unleavened Bread and on the day following the Sabbath, the Israelites were to take the first sheaf of grain from their harvest and present it to the priest to wave before God as a sign of thanksgiving for the grain that was brought in. Known as the firstfruit of the harvest, until this offering was made to the Lord, the Israelites were forbidden to eat any of their new crops. The Apostle Paul saw in this ritual a sign of the resurrection, for clearly this offering was made on Sunday, the day after the Passover Sabbath when Christ rose from the dead. Additionally he equated Jesus with this firstfruit of the grain, waved as an offering to God that paved the way for many others to enter the spiritual harvest. For all intents and purposes the kingdom of heaven was off limits until he the firstfruit of those who should rise from the dead opened the door to eternal life.

Having explored some of the prophetic background concerning the resurrection, we may now consider the subject of why it was important that Jesus rise from the dead in terms of the work of salvation. Technically speaking, the Savior's death alone was sufficient to provide humanity with the forgiveness of sins, and had things ended with the cross, we would still have had the full power of the sacraments to assist us toward the goal of eternal life. And while this may be true, mankind was nonetheless in great need of the witness of the resurrection for without it our Christian faith would have been stillborn and the church would have perished early on never spreading very far and ultimately rendering the Sacrifice of Christ of no avail to the masses.

In rising from the dead, Jesus communicated many things to his followers and those who knew of him in the land of Palestine to ensure that the new faith would get off to a solid

start. Among these was the important notion that man survives death and that there is life beyond the grave for all of us. In returning from the dead, Christ made clear to all that our mortal life is not the end of our existence, and therefore we should not fear death which inevitably comes to all. With this sure hope, he instilled in those who witnessed his resurrection that our current life has meaning, and our time spent here on earth should be more than about eating, drinking, and being merry before the grim reaper comes and ends the party.

But even more than this, in rising from the dead Jesus communicated to his contemporaries that all that he said and taught was endorsed by God. In effect by bringing him back to life, God was putting his stamp of approval upon his Son, telling the world that he accepted his sacrifice on behalf of mankind. As a divine proof of Jesus' credibility, the Savior's entire ministry was validated along with all he taught and all he predicted would happen in the future. And with this shot in the arm, the faith of the disciples was bolstered to the point of ensuring the church would have what it takes to blaze a trail in the ancient world.

In fact, it is certain that without the resurrection, the disciples would have remained disheartened and quickly returned to their old ways of life, going back to fishing, tax collecting, and their other professions. But the reality of the resurrection galvanized them into a formidable army, transforming them from a band of sheepish followers to zealous pioneers of the faith. That they witnessed Jesus rising from the dead was the motivation for dedicating their lives to his cause, preaching tirelessly and even laying down their lives for him, for no one becomes a martyr unless he is totally convinced of his cause. And so it was necessary that Jesus' followers behold the Risen Christ to give them the courage to spread the good news even at the cost of making the ultimate sacrifice.

In order to ensure the budding church had a strong enough infusion of faith to begin its mission it was not sufficient for the Savior only to appear to a few devoted followers as proof of his divinity. Over the forty days that he remained on earth following the resurrection, Jesus made sure that great numbers became privy to the miracle of his rising from the dead. Not just the Twelve, but on at least one occasion 500 saw him at once, and many were privileged to see him not just once but several times while he tarried in the land of the living. In fact, so widespread was the knowledge of the Resurrection within the land of Palestine that it could not be hidden, and despite this the Jewish religious leaders still attempted to conceal it by bribing the soldiers from telling the truth about what they saw that Easter Sunday morning.

Now aside from the practical necessity of the resurrection as we have described so far, there remain other symbolic and allegorical meanings to Jesus' greatest miracle with relevance to our own spiritual journey. As we have mentioned on other occasions, the life of Christ often serves as an example of the road that man must take on his path to God, and the story of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection convey a recurring message of the scriptures. As has been alluded to earlier, the dying of Jesus represents the death of man's Old Self, the lower nature which has dominated his existence from the being. By

contrast, Christ's resurrection symbolizes the birth of the New Man, the higher nature which rises up out of the ashes of the Old Self.

Not surprisingly, God has hidden this message within nature as well, and some have been fond of telling the story of the caterpillar as an analogy to the Resurrection account. It is that earth bound creature, the caterpillar which signifies the old nature of man, stuck on the earth plane and limited in its mobility and speed. At one point in its life, this insect undergoes a pseudo-death of sorts. Wrapping itself in a cocoon that it spins around its body, a magnificent metamorphosis happens to it while lying dormant within its self-erected tomb. When the transformation is complete, it emerges a new and much more beautiful creature able to take flight and leave the ground behind forever. Soaring into the air, the butterfly symbolizes the spiritual self which has supplanted the lower nature with a path into the heavens and a far more attractive figure than its former self. While before its existence was in the darkness of its cocoon, it now enters the light of day which parallels what happens when man becomes spiritually aware breaking out of the darkness of material life.

Messages such as this are cloaked in the story of the resurrection as well as other pertinent innuendos that echo the message of our particular church. One has to do with the gospel writer's testimony that upon entering the empty tomb, the grave clothes were found to be folded up neatly including the cloth or napkin that had bound the Savior's head.

“In order to understand the significance of the folded napkin, you have to understand a little bit about Hebrew tradition of that day. The folded napkin had to do with the Master and Servant, and every Jewish boy knew this tradition. When the servant set the dinner table for the master, he made sure that it was exactly the way the master wanted it. The table was furnished perfectly, and then the servant would wait, just out of sight, until the master had finished eating, and the servant would not dare touch that table, until the master was finished. Now if the master was done eating, he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers, his mouth, and clean his beard, and would wad up that napkin and toss it onto the table. The servant would then know to clear the table. For in those days, the wadded napkin meant, 'I'm done'. But if the master got up from the table, and folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, the servant would not dare touch the table, because..... The folded napkin meant, 'I'm coming back!'”

## First Sunday after Easter

There are a number of points to consider in today's gospel reading, and while it may be traditional to focus on the familiar story of Doubting Thomas, we are going to develop another verse in the text with very important ramifications for this divine organization that we call the church. Within the passage we find one of several allusions in the gospels to Jesus' establishment of Holy Orders or what we more commonly refer to as the priesthood.

From the earliest days of religion there has with few exceptions always been a group of ministers within a particular faith who have served as intermediaries between God and the people. Traditionally these special individuals that we know as priests have had the job of offering up sacrifices to God on behalf of the community. Whether presenting to God a simple offering of grain or a more elaborate animal sacrifice, these men and women have sought by their work to both make atonement for the sins of the people as well as invoke the blessing of God upon those they served.

And following in a long succession of religions including the Jewish faith upon which ours is built, the Christian religion has also been set up with a priesthood to stand in the gap and serve as intermediaries between God and the people. Within our Catholic faith it is the special job of the priesthood to administer the sacraments to the faithful, transmitting the saving power of those sacred rites from heaven to earth to aid those working toward salvation. Perhaps God could have designed it otherwise, but in this age the benefits of the cross and Jesus' sacrifice flow to us through the sacraments and those to whom they have been entrusted to administer. Within the Catholic priesthood then is the authority to grant or withhold the saving power of God as it sees fit as Jesus intimated whoever they forgive are forgiven and whoever they do not forgive are not forgiven.

As the representatives of Christ himself, these special ministers of his salvation are therefore critical to the very existence of the church itself, for if our priesthood disappeared so also would our very Christian identity. And this was realized early on by Saint Ignatius who writing in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century spoke frequently of the three fold ministry within the Catholic Church. In his epistle to the Trallians, the famous bishop wrote, "In like manner let us reverence the deacons as Jesus Christ; and the bishop as the father; and the presbyters (priests) as the Sanhedrin of God, and college of the apostles. Without these, there is no church."

So important is the work of the ordained within the church that Jesus made provision for Holy Orders even starting early in his ministry to prepare and train men for this role once he ascended into heaven. What we see through the gospel narratives is the precursor to this threefold ministry as it evolved in the lives of the apostles even before the church itself was born on the day of Pentecost. During the course of the few years that they were with the Savior, the apostles were ordained in successive order to each of the three ranks of the Christian priesthood. As they learned more about spiritual things and grew in holiness, they were cloaked with more and more authority until at the dawn of the church they were vested with the full power of a bishop, the highest rank in our faith.

We see these various stages of the Christian ministry embodied in several narratives beginning with one common to the Synoptic gospels. Luke tells us that “When Jesus called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.” We understand from this passage that Christ was at this point in time vesting his disciples with the authority of a deacon, for among other roles, it is principally his responsibility to preach the gospel and even in our churches today it belongs to the diaconate to read the gospel and at times preach the sermon during the Mass.

After serving in this role for a little more than a year, Jesus elevated the Twelve to a higher rank bestowing on them the power of a priest during the events of Passion Week at the very end of the Savior’s life. We all recall well the story of the Last Supper on the night before his death when celebrating the Eucharist for the first time in the presence of his apostles, he gave them the charge to “do this in remembrance of me.” In effect on this evening he ordained the Twelve with the power of transubstantiation to change ordinary bread and wine into the sacred Body and Blood of Christ. As it is the principle role of the one who holds the office of priest to offer sacrifice on behalf of the people, we can identify this night as the evening in which the devoted disciples were first enabled to perform this central role of the priesthood.

But their elevation to this office was not yet complete, for a few days later on Easter evening, the Son of God vested in the Twelve yet another power particular to the priesthood as we read in today’s gospel. After passing effortlessly through the walls of the Upper Room, he greeted the disciples and bestowed on them his peace. And after that initial salutation he performed a gesture that we might consider a little strange but yet was full of significance. John tells us that Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In effect not just by his words, but by his action the Savior was imparting on the disciples the power of the Holy Spirit. Both in the Hebrew and the Greek languages spirit and breath are synonymous terms, and so through this respiratory motion Christ sought to invoke on the Twelve the descent of the Holy Spirit. An important participant in every ordination, it is she who infuses in the candidate the authority to perform the supernatural actions of his office, and at this particular juncture it was the ability to forgive sins that was vested in the apostles.

One of the unique functions of the Christian priesthood, the ability to absolve sin is an extremely important function of the person who holds this office. In coming to offer himself a Sacrifice for the world, the Savior sought to make the process of salvation much easier for mankind than it had been in ages past. For all the many millennia leading up until his first Advent, men had to struggle paying off all of their sins through their often slow and inefficient efforts, but through the merits of the Cross, forgiveness became available. Belonging to the priest is this beautiful privilege to loose a penitent man or woman from the weight of their iniquities. But with great privilege also comes great responsibility, and it is also imperative that the priest who exercises this role as the representative of Christ be very careful who he does and does not absolve. Those who

are not sorry for their failures are not worthy of this sacrament, and for this reason Jesus did not fail to say that “if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Though the Twelve had been raised to the rank of priest by Easter Sunday, this was certainly not the end of their initiation into the ministry of Christ, for it yet remained for them to assume the highest rank of priesthood that we know as bishop. Over the next forty days, Jesus would give further training and instruction to the disciples preparing them for this lofty job as the spiritual leaders of the Church he was founding. But before they could assume this role, an additional downpouring of the Holy Spirit was necessary to equip them with the boldness and zeal to go out and evangelize the world. So we recognize that on Pentecost Sunday, some fifty days after Easter the apostles received their ordination to the episcopacy. The Savior had told them to wait in Jerusalem until they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and indeed when she came into the Upper Room on that Sunday morning as a mighty rushing wind and in tongues of fire, the apostles completed the last phase of their induction into the sacred priesthood. Set apart as bishops of the Church, they assumed the one unique function that separates them from the lower ranks of the ministry. Having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, they in turn became qualified to bestow it on others, and so it is the bishop who alone has the right to invoke the Holy Spirit to ordain others or to confirm as is still the case today.

So at the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost, the priesthood of the Christian religion was firmly in place in the form of twelve men. Initially these apostles vested with the full authority of a bishop exercised all aspects of the threefold ministry, but this was not to be for long. After a short period, the men to whom the Lord entrusted his church realized that they couldn't handle everything themselves. It was clear to them and the others who joined the budding Church that ministerial helpers were needed to assist the apostles in the rapidly expanding faith, and recognizing their own mortality it was also obvious that others would be needed in the future to replace the Twelve so that the mission could continue through the centuries ahead.

The first move to delegate priestly power happened early in the book of Acts when the material needs of the community began to encroach on the work of the apostles. The daily distribution of food to widows within the church was becoming an issue, and considering it not a good use of their time to wait on tables, they chose seven holy men full of the Spirit and of wisdom and ordained them to the diaconate to carry out this function. A term deriving from the Greek “to serve,” those elevated to the office of deacon have as their principle responsibility attending to the needs of the people especially their material concerns. Historically they have been considered the assistants of the bishop helping him in whatever way should be required.

But it should not be forgotten that though they manage temporal concerns to relieve the higher clergy from carrying out these jobs, they nonetheless also have spiritual and liturgical work to do. As we have mentioned earlier, like the Twelve who were sent out by Jesus to heal, drive out demons, and preach, it is the work of the deacons to perform these tasks as well as to administer the sacrament of baptism. Our earliest record of this sacramental function also comes from the Book of Acts when Philip baptized the

Ethiopian on his way back home from Jerusalem to his native country, and this role has traditionally been maintained in the church to this day. Additionally, the deacon has a prominent role to play during the Mass, for as we have seen it is frequently his job to read the gospel and/or preach the homily during the Divine Liturgy. And it is his privilege to minister at the altar and along with the higher clergy distribute Holy Communion to the faithful.

Turning now to the office of priest itself, it seems likely that the apostles did not ordain any to this the second rank of the threefold Christian ministry. At least from the New Testament record it seems that provision was made for the offices of deacon and bishop, for there is no direct mention of priests through the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles. More than likely the need for the intermediate clergy only evolved with the ever growing church as it expanded into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. At least from the testimony of Saint Ignatius writing early in that period and shortly after the apostolic age had ended, we get a firm indication that the threefold ministry was firmly in place throughout Christendom much as it is today. Ignatius implies that for any given church, there was a bishop in charge of the oversight of the entire community who in turn was assisted by a group of priests. The saint wrote of the harmony between the bishop and his helpers in his letter to the Ephesians saying, “For your famous presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the bishop, as the strings are to the harp.”

It might be noticed that the early church fathers more commonly referred to those in the office of priest as presbyters as implied in this quotation. This was actually a common way to refer to the second rank of ministry in the early church for a very deliberate reason. Especially in the first century, the Christians sought to differentiate themselves from their Jewish counterparts who had their own priesthood, and not wishing to confuse the two decided to use a different term. Even after the dismantling of the Jewish priesthood toward the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Christian priests were still commonly referred to as presbyters to distinguish from the many pagan priests throughout the empire. It wasn't until Christianity became the official religion of the empire and supplanted paganism in the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the term priest came into regular usage as rightly it should have to characterize those who offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

In modern times, this threefold ministry of the church with a root in the gospel narratives and a firm footing in the early church continues in all those denominations which claim apostolic authority like our own. As a team working together to serve God and man, the community of bishops, priests, and deacons persists as a divine institution to meet the needs of the people and to offer sacrifice on their behalf. As Christ promised that his Church would survive until his Second Coming, so this ministerial priesthood will remain until his glorious appearing when he institutes a new religion and new paradigm upon the earth.

## Second Sunday after Easter

Many have noted the similarities between today's gospel reading and another story from Luke that bears a strong resemblance. Many details between the two narratives are comparable and for this reason some scholars have actually considered that the two passages are actually one in the same as has been speculated about some other similar accounts in the gospels. While we believe that the two narratives are both unique and independent events in the life of Jesus and his disciples, it is nonetheless true that the two stories are interconnected sharing a common theme.

In Luke's account we are presented with a tale from the Sea of Galilee near the very beginning of Christ's ministry. The crowds had been gathering around the Savior and desiring a better vantage point to teach, he solicited the services of Simon Peter whom he had met sometime earlier in Judea. The soon-to-be disciple, perhaps as a courtesy of kindness indulged his request and put out into the water a certain distance from the shoreline but still within earshot of the crowds along the water's edge. There Jesus taught from the sea, and when he had finished it would seem that he desired to reward Peter for the use of his boat, for he told him to "put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch." But it would seem that Christ's new friend was a bit skeptical of the Savior's fishing prowess and was quick to rejoin that he and his partners, the professionals had been working all night and hadn't caught a thing. In what sounds like an attempt to humor the Master, Peter obliged the advice that his friend gave him quipping, "because you say so, I will let down the nets."

Carrying out the request, Peter undoubtedly was amazed at how accurate the Savior's prediction was, for they pulled in such a large quantity of fish that the nets began to break. Peter immediately signaled to his partners for help, and James and John the sons of Zebedee quickly got in their boat to offload some of the large catch into their vessel. But even after dividing the fish between them, both boats began to sink under the weight.

Perhaps overcome by the immensity of the miracle and somewhat remorseful about his initial disbelief in the Savior's words, Peter fell to his knees and said, "Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man." Indeed this is the normal response for those who come near to God, for entering into his presence they feel the weight of their sinfulness along with a general sense of unworthiness. It was Isaiah who centuries earlier responded in a similar way who entering into the very throne room of God in a vision said, "Woe to me; I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

Though Peter did not recognize Jesus as God at this point, he nonetheless responded as if he innately knew this to be the case and sought to move away from the brightness of Christ's presence. But not seeking to condemn, the Savior quickly began to comfort Peter and his companions with the promise that from that point onwards they would catch men. Using a metaphor that he would employ a few times in his ministry including his Parable of the Net, Jesus wanted to convey to these tradesmen that they would still be busy about trying to pull in a catch, but the fish they would be getting would be in the

form of men's souls, a much higher calling than their current profession. Undoubtedly the large quantity of fish that the men dragged to shore prefigured the mission and scope of their spiritual work among the nations, and responding to Jesus' invitation they left everything behind to begin their new job.

For three years the new disciples labored at bringing souls into the kingdom of God assisting the Master in his ministry in the land of Canaan until at the end of that ministry, shortly before he ascended into heaven we are presented with the other fishing story from today's gospel. Set again on the Sea of Galilee, the old fishermen decided that it was time to go back to work in the profession that was most familiar to them. Probably as funds were low in the common purse, Peter recognized that the disciples were in need of income again and so taking with him a few of the Twelve put out in his boat to fish through the night as they had done several years earlier.

Again working the nets through the early morning hours, they came up with nothing to show for their labors until a stranger began to call to them from the shore. Perhaps from the distance they couldn't recognize that it was the Lord through the early morning mist and presumably his voice was a bit muffled through the distance so that they could not positively identify him as the man they had just spent the last three years with. It is at this point in the narrative that the account begins to show different elements from the story that happened a few years earlier, for the first thing we notice is that Christ is on shore and not in the boat as he had been on the earlier occasion. It could be that this is just an incidental detail, but we may possibly read into it a little more. At the beginning of his ministry it was necessary that the Savior "be in the boat" with his trainees as they needed to intimately learn his ways and recognize their teacher much as a sheep learns to know its shepherd. They would have someone "holding their hands" as they learned their new occupation as fishers of men. But here at the end of the ministry when Jesus was about to go back to the Father a distance appears between him and his disciples. At this point, the Twelve are about to embark on their fishing expedition for souls without the Lord, only hearing his voice and direction remotely as indeed the rest of us do until this day.

Though we are told that the disciples did not know him at first when called from the coastline, it seems that they trusted the voice enough to follow through on his recommendation to cast the nets on the other side of the boat. We are not informed about whether they deliberated about this or dialogued with the stranger before taking his advice, and we could speculate that the disciples might have once again been indignant about a novice trying to tell the professionals what to do. It could be that from the vantage point of the land, Jesus could see a school of fish breaking the water on the right side of the boat which was not obvious to those in it and informing the anglers of this they hearkened to his words. Whatever the case might have been, they followed through on the tip and once again pulled in a miraculously large harvest of fish.

At this point John positively recognized the stranger in the distance as the Son of God that had been with them for three consecutive years. Perhaps remembering the first miraculous catch a few years back, it immediately dawned on him that this was the same

man responsible for that bounty. And here we also observe another difference between the two stories. Whereas in the first miracle on the Sea of Galilee Peter desired to retreat from the Lord aware of his own sinfulness in the presence of Deity, in this narrative Peter demonstrates the opposite behavior diving headlong into the water and swimming to shore to meet the Master. This was a completely different response to say the least and we might wonder how it is that the man who had denied the Savior in such a grievous sin was so eager to greet him. In fact, it might have been that Jesus had communicated to Peter on an earlier occasion that he desired to speak to him privately about that very thing and so with great anticipation of that meeting he plunged into the water to see Jesus on the shoreline.

Meanwhile the other disciples dealt with the load of fish that needed to be hauled in and brought to land. As the quantity was so great, they were unable to pull the net into the boat and so were forced to drag it along the rocky bottom, towing it to the coastline. Miraculously we are told that the net did not tear despite the great stress that was upon it, and once again this element of the story is a little different than the account three years earlier. We may suggest that like the contrast between Jesus in the boat and Jesus on the shore in the two stories, this detail also communicates an idea. On many occasions after the Resurrection the Savior attempted to prove to his followers that he was the same flesh and blood person who had lived with them for three years and was in no way any different than the person they had known. He demonstrated that he was a real man and no ghost by eating a piece of fish for them in the Upper Room as he also shared breakfast with the disciples in this narrative. By preserving the nets from ripping, Jesus might have been striving to communicate to his disciples that his miracle working power was not at all diminished but if anything increased, for this supernatural act was therefore greater than its predecessor in this regard.

On the surface, we interpret this second fish story as a reenactment of the first. Being intricately tied together, we see the second narrative as a renewal of the calling that was initially given to the apostles in the first account, namely to be fishers of men. And while there are some rich details in the plain analysis of the passages, we do well also to consider some of the allegorical elements in the story, for like many scripture texts, symbolism plays a significant part.

One detail that is probably worth mentioning is that in both stories the fishermen had caught nothing during the nighttime hours. Of course it is normal for anglers to be about their trade at this time while everyone else is sleeping and they wouldn't be out at those early hours were it not generally a good time, for during the heat of the day fish tend to go deeper beneath the surface and are not as easily caught with a net. But the message in these stories may be to convey another point. As we know, John likes to use imagery of light and darkness, and this element of both stories may suggest to us that it is during our time in spiritual darkness, the ignorance of sin that we are unfruitful in our labors and come up empty-handed. By contrast only when the dawn breaks and the light of God enters our lives are we able to start producing a spiritual harvest.

But this image is a peripheral symbol next to the main element in the story, namely the fish. And in order to understand the significance of this finned creature, it may help to remember the symbolism of water that we have considered on prior occasions. We have seen that just as water brings physical life to all creation, so does the divine life force of God bring spiritual vitality to the world. In this regard fish are intimately connected with this sacred element, and we can think of this creature which is spawned in the water as a symbol of spiritual substance that manifests itself in the life giving stream. Perhaps in the form of a realization of truth or the fruits of the Spirit, fish represent the harvest of the spiritual life that is produced in the divine river.

In the first narrative from Luke, Jesus told Peter and his coworkers to put out into deep water to get a catch which is a suggestion that the real meat of the spiritual life is to be obtained by moving beyond mere superficial contact with the life giving stream and immersing oneself deeply in the divine life force. Often this translates into going beyond the mere superficial study of the scriptures and instead probing its hidden and allegorical meanings which are laden with rich substance.

In the second fish story, the harvest of spiritual substance is said to be found on the “right” side of the boat. And it probably doesn’t take too much of an imagination to see a deeper meaning in this detail. From the earliest days of man when left-handedness was observed to be uncommon, it came to be regarded as wrong or evil, and it is the Latin root of the term we know as sinister which conveys this negative meaning. For the disciples to switch gears 180 degrees from the left to the right side of the boat may signal a complete change in thinking and the beginning of correct and wholesome living which brings as its reward the harvest of the spirit.

Keeping with the theme of the fish, probably the most interesting detail in today’s gospel reading is the unusual mention of how many fish were actually caught in the net. We may ask if it was just a random notation to indicate how large the harvest actually was or if we should somehow glean a little bit more from this very specific figure. Bible scholars throughout the ages have thought the number to be pregnant with meaning and the Early Church Father Jerome had his own take on it. He made reference to the ancient Greeks who identified a total of 153 different species of fish in the sea which might represent the totality of the human race that the apostles were charged with evangelizing and converting.

Saint Augustine on the other hand concentrated more on the mathematical nature of 153 and noted that it is a special number. Specifically it is what is known as a triangular number, for it is the sum of the numbers 1 to 17. For Augustine, 17 implied  $10 + 7$  which he equated with the Ten Commandments and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit respectively. Others have noted that 153 is a rare mathematical number in another sense, and that is how it is the sum of the cubes of its own digits. That is  $153$  is equal to  $1 \times 1 \times 1 + 3 \times 3 \times 3 + 5 \times 5 \times 5$ .

But for the mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras along with the ancient Greeks, 153 had yet another significance and it is quite possibly the same allusion that the apostle

John is making in his gospel story. To those in the Greek world of the time, 153 was one of two special numbers that characterized the geometry of the Vesica Piscis, that special mystical shape we have considered earlier. By overlapping two circles such that the circumference of each circle cuts through the center of the other, a unique oval shape is formed with a resemblance to a fish. The ratio of the height of this oval to its width was known to be 153:256 which the Greeks referred to as the “measure of a fish,” and because of the spiritual meaning of this shape, 153 also came to be regarded as a special number.

We have considered the ancient spiritual significance of the Vesica Piscis, also known as the bladder of a fish as representing the union of the male and female deities with the area of overlap symbolizing their offspring. For early Christians, this oval shape represented Jesus Christ, the Son of the God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It was common to depict the infant Jesus within this oval as a symbol of his incarnation, the union of heaven and earth within the womb of Mary, for the very shape of the Vesica Piscis resembles the female reproductive anatomy.

Early Christians modified the Vesica Piscis slightly adding a tail to the oval body to clearly depict a fish. It was common to inscribe within this shape the word *Ichthys*, the Greek term for fish which more than just an obvious label for the shape served as an acrostic, for the five letters forming this word (IXOYE) were short for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”

Especially in the early years of the church, the fish logo was used as a secret symbol to represent Christians in a time of persecution. It would be drawn on rocks and walls in advance of a meeting to alert the initiated of an event, and it served to harmlessly introduce two Christians to each other without risk of being found out. Upon a meeting of two strangers who might have suspected each other of being Christians, one would draw one of the arcs of the Vesica Piscis in the sand and walk away from it. If the other completed the shape by drawing the other one, they could then positively identify each other as fellow believers.

So much for the number 153 which probably has more shades of meaning than we would at first expect. With that we wrap up our look at John and Luke’s fish stories with their literal and figurative elements, both of which convey many spiritual truths for us to digest over the coming week.

## Third Sunday after Easter

In today's epistle reading we encounter one of those terms that we see often in the scriptures, a word that we are fairly familiar with and can connect with certain individuals even though we might not exactly understand what it means. Like acronyms which we often throw around without really knowing what they stand for, we know this word by context though we are not always acquainted with the idea behind it. That pious term that we are referring to is apostle, a very religious word that probably only gets used in spiritual conversations though its meaning is more generic than we may think.

Oftentimes we interchange the words apostle and disciple, not always incorrectly but because we do not grasp the nuances of these terms we sometimes equate them when we shouldn't. What we should understand from the gospels is that one term is fairly broad and the other is fairly specific, and it is the broader term disciple which we will consider first. When we describe someone as a disciple we are identifying him as someone who follows or learns from a teacher. The word discipline is related to this word, for the disciple is one who attempts to shape the pattern of his life sometimes rigorously around the teachings of the master.

Though sometimes we don't focus on the sheer numbers presented in the gospels, Jesus had in fact many disciples, perhaps hundreds of them who travelled with him throughout the countryside of Palestine, living in a communal arrangement with a common purse as the Savior was about his itinerant preaching. Both men and women and perhaps their children too accompanied Jesus in his travels back and forth in the land of Israel. To get an idea for how many disciples actually followed the Lord in his work, we can recall that at one point in his ministry he sent out 72 of them in pairs to evangelize the nation. Later at the end of his ministry there was a large group of 120 gathered in the Upper Room awaiting the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and we are told that a whopping 500 disciples received a special post-Resurrection appearance by Christ sometime before his ascension.

But while the band of disciples or simple followers of Jesus was very large, among this great number was a much smaller subgroup, a dozen men which the Savior gave special attention to apart from the rest. These people were often pulled aside to dialogue and receive instruction from Christ to the exclusion of the community. Many times he spoke to the masses in cryptic language using parables, but afterward he would gather this privileged few together and explain everything he said so that it was made plain to them. He intimated to this small number that they had been chosen to receive the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to the exclusion of the rest. Of course this little group we are referring to are more properly known as the apostles, a title that we shall see fits in with their special role in the wake of Jesus' ministry.

Not that the special treatment that they received from the Savior qualified them to be known by this word, for the preferential attention he gave them was only part of preparing them for the great role they would have in the Church, the role of premier missionaries and evangelists to the world. In fact this is what apostle really means. A

Greek word translated as “one who is sent,” an apostle in essentially a messenger or a missionary bearing some news or special word from the Sender.

Jesus called the Twelve together for this lofty purpose, to act as his official representatives among the nations. As eyewitnesses of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, they were charged with the job of testifying to the good news of the Savior. Often with special apostolic power in the form of signs and wonders, they were equipped to command an audience and build the church during the 70 or so years after Pentecost. In fact we are told that in one of the epistles that this church of ours is built upon the foundation of the apostles, for their work as missionary agents was critical to establishing this divine institution we know as the people of God. Not just through the power of their preaching and conversion of many souls, it was their special position as the first bishops of the church that enabled this divine enterprise to grow and continue to the present day, for as we have seen it is the apostolic succession, the power of the priesthood which has descended from them that has secured the sacraments, the vehicles of salvation to all members of the Holy Church.

That Jesus chose 12 apostles for the job of building the church is also significant for it forms a consistent thread with the Old Covenant upon which the New is constructed. We recall that the nation of Israel was the progeny of one large family in which there were 12 sons, the progenitors of twelve united tribes who would inhabit the land of Canaan. In biblical symbolism, the number 12 is often associated with ruling power or government and perhaps this is because the twelve patriarchs of Israel were the original heads of their respective clans. Seeking to keep continuity with the old system, the Savior chose twelve men to be princes and rulers of the church he established governing the affairs of the community of faith. In fact Christ suggested this role to his apostles when he told them that they would sit on twelve thrones judging the house of Israel. While they are no longer here to administer that rule, it is their successors, the 3000 or so bishops of the world who reign as princes of the church governing the affairs of the people of God.

Not only was Jesus deliberate in choosing 12 men for this job, he was also careful to select men with another qualification, namely their ethnicity. Far from being an international band of special messengers, the apostles were all Jewish hailing from the land of Palestine. We might wonder why he hadn’t taken a sample of men from several countries as a strategy in appealing to the world, and again the Son of God had a good reason deriving from the Old Testament prophecies. From the beginning it had been the calling of the nation of Israel to evangelize the world with the knowledge of Yahweh, a task that they hadn’t necessarily lived up to in the many centuries before Christ’s birth, but in keeping with this commission, it was appropriate that Jesus choose twelve Jewish men to fulfill the words of Isaiah who speaking of Israel said, “I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

It was therefore Jesus’ desire to stick with Hebrew nationals to accomplish his mission many of whom were related to each other to form an intimate group of apostles. Many of us would be aware that Andrew and Peter were brothers, the sons of Jonah as were James and John who were the sons of Zebedee. It was the latter pair that were nicknamed the

Sons of Thunder by Jesus because of their impetuous nature which was no doubt associated with their fiery and youthful enthusiasm. It was they who had the gumption to directly ask Christ to sit at his right and left hands, needless to say a presumptuous request that the Savior could not grant.

While we are generally familiar with these two well known sets of brothers, it is often not realized that three other apostles were likely all family members. Matthew, the other James, and Thaddeus were all referred to as the sons of Alphaeus which certainly implied that they were cousins if not immediate siblings. Regarding the other five, they don't seem to be tied in to any other family groups nor do they play any major role in the gospels save Thomas known as the Twin for he strongly resembled Christ and Judas Iscariot, the man from Kirioth who betrayed him. Philip and Bartholomew as well as Simon the Zealot all play a background role in the scriptures though we know more about them from the stories that come down to us of their missionary activity in the Near East during the Apostolic Age.

The missionary efforts of the apostles at large seem to have begun after the martyrdom of James the son of Zebedee in 43 A.D. when according to various apocryphal accounts, the men divided up the world between them and headed in their several and separate directions to evangelize the known world. It seems that all save John the son of Zebedee ended their life's work in martyrdom after working in various countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia. And this apparently was a fulfillment of Christ's words that his apostles would be persecuted and would be required to take up their crosses to follow him.

Many of us are aware that after evangelizing in various places over his lifetime both in Palestine and as far as Italy, the chief apostle was crucified upside-down in Rome choosing that inverted posture because he felt himself unworthy to die in the same way as Christ. His brother Andrew likewise met his end after serving in south-western Russia and Greece upon an X-shaped cross which to this day has become known as the St. Andrews cross. According to some apocryphal accounts, Philip also died of crucifixion after preaching in various places including Scythia, Greece, Parthia, Carthage, and perhaps even France.

Others faced similar excruciating deaths like Bartholomew who according to some sources was flayed alive and then beheaded in Mesopotamia where he had worked among the Parthians and Armenians. His partner Simon the Zealot who after first evangelizing Egypt went to Parthia where he worked with Bartholomew. According to an apocryphal text, like the prophet Isaiah of old, he was cut in half with a saw. James the son of Alphaeus also known as James the Lesser was according to legend a missionary to Persia and was apparently beaten to death with a club. And Thaddeus who was the first bring the good news to Edessa, a city in Mesopotamia apparently met his end on a cross.

A few of the other apostles seemingly died less painful deaths like Matthew who was killed with a halberd, a two-sided axe on a long pole either in Persia or Ethiopia where he had worked. Thomas who evangelized India was killed by a spear after successfully

founding a Christian community known to this day as the St. Thomas Christians on the Malabar Coast of that nation. Finally, Matthias who was Judas Iscariot's replacement was according to legend stoned and beheaded in the mountainous Cappadocian region of modern day central Turkey where he had evangelized.

And speaking of Matthias, the last apostle to be added to the original number, we understand that the Eleven seemed to feel it was very important to preserve the special quantity of 12 men after Judas took his own life. For reasons that have been cited, the significance of the number 12 probably weighed heavily in their minds and even before Pentecost the group decided that it was important business to select a replacement as soon as possible. In choosing a candidate they decided that the person to take Judas' place would have to be like themselves in respect to being a fellow disciple with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry, an eyewitness of his life, death, and resurrection. They identified two men who could foot the bill for the position, Barsabbas and Matthias and cast lots to determine who it would be, and the lot as we know fell to Matthias.

And while their whole deliberation to choose a replacement was seemingly the right thing to do at some point in time, there is reason to believe that they might have rushed the whole affair. Jesus had told the Eleven to "wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit" which we could interpret to mean "do not make any major decisions." And though they had received that instruction, they nonetheless attempted to make a big move by selecting another for Judas' office before the Day of Pentecost. Not only that they forced God's hand in the casting of lots by only giving him two ballots, one for Barsabbas and one for Matthias. Perhaps to be fair, they should've thrown in an extra blank ballot which if God should choose it would imply that the Eleven should wait for further instructions.

In any event, Matthias came to take the place of Judas whether it was ideally God's preference or not, but the evolving story would tend to suggest that God really had another person in mind for this special office. About a third of the way into the saga of the Acts of the Apostles, we find the narrative of the conversion of a man to the Way as the early Christian movement was called at the time. A man who would become a formidable force for the faith especially among the Gentiles and would go on to write half of the New Testament single-handedly, Paul frequently referred to himself as an apostle as we see in today's epistle reading though he considered himself the least of their number because he had formerly persecuted the church of God. Often he cited his credentials on par with the Twelve alluding to the fact that he could perform great signs and wonders as the others. He even suggested that like the originals, he was an eyewitness of the Resurrection, for he had seen "Jesus our Lord" in a vision on the road to Damascus. There is reason then to believe that God might have had the mighty Paul of Tarsus in mind as Judas' replacement, and though officially he was never the Twelfth Apostle, practically he might have functioned as one nonetheless.

However, although Paul frequently called himself an apostle, there is also reason to believe that he used the term in a more progressive way than the original understanding. Not only did he call himself an apostle, but he referred to others in the church besides the original Twelve in the same way. Throughout his many writings, he called apostles the likes of Barnabas and Silas his missionary companions, James the brother of the Lord

who was preeminent in the early church, Apollos the Alexandrian Jew and former disciple of John the Baptist, Timothy his protégé', and a pair known as Andronicus and Junias who were part of the church at Rome. Clearly from Paul's perspective, anyone who could credibly claim that they were on a mission for the gospel could fit into the category of apostle as the name implies.

Perhaps by the latter half of the First Century a delineation was forming between those we call Apostles (big "A") and those we call apostles (little "a.") In the category of the former we have the Twelve perhaps along with Paul and in the category of the latter we have many others named and unnamed who occupied important positions in the early church. Perhaps those in a senior bishop position who had much influence would be referred to in that way. Whatever the case might have been, apostle became a generic term by the end of the First Century when documents such as the Didache refer to this office in a general sense and embracing a number of people within the church. That short document instructs the brethren saying, "Let every apostle, when he comes to you, be received as the Lord," a command that was given when most if not all the original Twelve were dead.

It would seem that Paul was successful in broadening the scope of the word beyond the Twelve, and he even employed to it refer to the Savior himself where in the Book of Hebrews he says, "Fix your eyes on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess." Ultimately the church has followed Paul's progressive tradition, for throughout the ages the church has recognized many servants of God as apostles. Often they have been celebrated as the principle evangelists to nations and ethnic groups, people responsible for wholesale conversions including among others: St. Patrick, "Apostle of Ireland," St. Augustine of Canterbury, "Apostle to the English," Saint Boniface, "Apostle to the Germans," Saints Cyril and Methodius, "Apostles to the Slavs," and Saint Francis Xavier, "Apostle to India."

Clearly the word "apostle" has at least two applications in the formal and informal sense as we consider the history of our Church. Ultimately it means "one who is sent" with the message of bearing the good news to others. In that respect, and in a certain way each one of us can strive to be modern day apostles carrying the gospel to the communities in which we live.

## Fourth Sunday after Easter

Among the many virtues that we must acquire to enter everlasting life, there is one very important one crucial to the development of all the others. Over and over again it is faith that is the focus of St. Paul's teaching and here again today in the Beloved Disciple's epistle we find it mentioned again. It is John who extols the virtue of belief in this passage with the same vigor as his contemporaries calling it the "victory that overcomes the world." And no doubt both apostles understood why this was so.

Thomas Aquinas the great doctor of the Medieval Church recognized the significance of this spiritual quality in his theological masterpiece the *Summa Theologica*. In that document he identified faith as the first virtue which of necessity precedes all of the others, and for that reason it is imperative that one cultivate it to allow the others to emerge. We must understand that belief is the beginning of the entire spiritual life and is hence the mother of all virtues. Though it starts off like an inert seed in the cold dark earth, once it germinates it unlocks a new world for man, one which he never knew existed.

By default man is governed by his natural inclinations, the pursuit of temporal things which the gospels metaphorically refer to as "wine, women, and song." Without belief, he is locked into the physical life concerned only about this present and visible world. With the motto on his lips: "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die," he goes about life attempting to maximize pleasure and minimize pain until at last the party sadly ends forever.

Man lives a life bent on seeking pleasures of the flesh, attempting to satisfy them in all ways possible even at the expense of others who can be used or abused to facilitate this goal. But when faith in higher things beyond the here and now begins to take root in an individual, it becomes a powerful engine to drive him to do things he would have never before imagined. When belief first begins to stir, man in a peculiar way finds himself starting to deny his natural inclinations and beginning to take an interest in things beyond the sphere of his earthly existence. The onset of faith mysteriously starts to push him to behave in a way better than his animal nature would dictate

Of course the reason for this change is apparent, for within the budding man of faith is a new conviction that a Being (or beings) greater than himself exists and to this Higher Power he is responsible for his actions and behavior. An interest germinates within him to please this newfound Deity who holds his life in the palm of his hand and whom he now fears. And so man starts to do things which formerly seemed strange to him. Abandoning self-interest, he begins to be concerned about the welfare of his neighbor to which he was in past times oblivious. With an awareness that the invisible world is watching, he finds himself refraining from hurting others or manipulating them for his own benefit knowing that he must answer for what he has done in this life. And with a conviction that the other side is listening, he begins to offer prayers and worship to the powers beyond the grave that they might show him favor and grant him assistance in the land of the living.

We may ask at which point in the lengthy journey of man that he ceases to be a heathen and begins to turn away from his sole objective of “satisfying his stomach” to quote the words of Paul. Suffice it to say, with a wide range of personalities and dispositions among men, there is no precise answer to this question, but an allegorical interpretation of a story from the Book of Joshua may qualify it for us to some degree. Sometime after the children of Israel invaded Canaan and began to conquer the inhabitants of that land, one indigenous group known as the Gibeonites heard of it and in fear attempted to protect themselves from Joshua’s sword. Pretending that they had come from a far away country, a delegation of the people of Gideon met the leader of Israel asking to make a treaty of peace with him, something that Joshua would only consciously agree to do with non-residents for he was charged with totally wiping out all the people of Palestine. Not confident that their words alone would convince the commander of Israel that they were in fact foreigners coming to make a pact of peace, the Gibeonites cleverly reinforced their ruse by giving the appearance that they had travelled very far to the land of Canaan. Carrying with them dry and moldy bread along with old and worn sacks and wineskins and being dressed in old patched clothes and sandals, they stood before Joshua asserting that all was new and fresh when they began their journey a long time earlier. And buying their story, the leader of Israel swore an oath that there would be peace between his people and Gibeon from that day forward.

While there is much that could be said about this passage on a literal basis alone, it is symbolic meaning that we are after here, and considering basic biblical imagery, we can think of the Gibeonites as a representation of the natural man as indeed the unbelieving and godless Gentiles frequently fit this part in the pages of scripture. By contrast, the Israelites, the would-be light of the nations can be interpreted as the symbol of the spiritual man. In this respect, the narrative reveals that man dominated by the sense life only begins to seek after the spiritual after a very long time of wandering on his earthly journey. After a lengthy time of leading a life focused on the physical, natural man finally approaches the man of the spirit looking for peace. That is to say that the lower self which long has ignored and resisted the way of the higher at last comes to take an interest in the spiritual after a prolonged period in which he has meandered to and fro upon the surface of the earth.

After many incarnations in the land of the living, when the soul of man is old and experienced in the ways of the world, it is then that it begins to seek the spiritual life for the first time in its extended existence. And among several mechanisms, it is principally the fact that the soul has become bored with what earth life has to offer that it begins to long for something higher and more fulfilling, for the satisfying of its physical appetites no longer holds the same interest for it as it once did. Reaching out for more meaning to life beyond the five senses, it becomes a seeker after a hoped for invisible world that can offer greater fascination and new knowledge. Though not only boredom, but disenchantment with material life through the experience of pain and suffering can effectively goad man on to long for something higher and bigger than himself to make sense of his existence and provide some glimmer of hope for the future. It is when an individual has come to these crossroads at some point in his soul’s journey that the seed

of faith will finally begin to germinate, a process that once started will carry the soul from seeker all the way to sage before having mastered life on earth all together, it leaves physical existence behind forever.

While belief may begin to stir in us for the first time at some point in our long tenure on the earth, it is certainly true that none of us just wake up one morning with a full-fledged faith. Like all life processes belief is something that grows by exercising it. Baby steps are taken at first and when positive feedback returns to us for taking this first step, we become fortified to push out a little further. We should be under no illusion; faith is not something we practice without a return on investment, for it is always rewarded sooner or later in a way that confirms our belief. And this is what the Apostle Paul meant when defined faith as “the evidence of things not seen and the substance of things hoped for.” While the object of our faith may never be seen in the land of the living, the work of the invisible realm is nonetheless realized and identified by the one who exercises faith so that he becomes convinced that powers beyond the material world are at work. And little by little this conviction grows with greater and deeper experiences. Along the way, the man of faith learns to see the hand of God in all the little details of his life whereas before in his heathen state he ascribed everything to chance and coincidence. Once recognizing that the unseen world is orchestrating the events of his life, the man with a fledgling belief has his faith further affirmed and strengthened.

Not that it is easy for the seeker to begin exercising his budding and fragile belief, for initially it takes a step of faith to pray, projecting his words into the air and taking a risk that he is not just wasting his time talking to himself. And even more of a gamble is offering the sacrifice of praise to an unseen God in celestial spheres, taking the time out to worship for an hour or so each week with other religious people when the opportunity to do more tangible and immediately gratifying activities presents itself as a tempting alternative. But after time, the investment of faith brings its own reward and the soul receives consolations in various forms that it is on the right track. And though God can communicate this positive feedback to the soul in many ways, for most it is at the very least that subjective feeling within the heart that it is going in the right direction.

Though every man starts out his spiritual journey in a tenuous way having to “throw the dice” on a new way of approaching life, eventually after many more incarnations his growing faith becomes so tangible with the subjective evidence so great that he is being led by unseen forces that his belief actually becomes knowledge and ceases to be faith. Once again in the words of the Apostle Paul, “we shall know fully even as we are fully known.”

The whole of man’s journey is geared toward acquiring this kind of rock solid faith, for man must come to believe in the invisible God with great certainty until the level of trust that has been achieved is sufficient to obey him no matter what gets thrown his way. The level of trust must come to a point where he is prepared to endure personal hardship, ridicule, and sacrifice at great cost to himself because he believes in the One who is guiding his steps.

Of course people don't always venture out on their own to cultivate such a faith deciding to bolster it of their own accord, and so God puts them in situations where they have no choice but to exercise it. The Almighty has a training plan in mind for each one of us to develop a high level of belief in him, a plan which unfortunately for most of us is unpalatable but necessary. Initially we learn to have faith in small matters, but as this is not enough for us in the long run, harder and harder circumstances are thrown our way in our human travels, new situations which we haven't dealt with before that force us to exercise belief in the Unseen Power in a greater way as we wade through previously uncharted waters.

Trial by trial will come our way until we achieve that faith as indeed it did for the likes of Noah who built a boat for a hundred years in a time when a drop of rain did not fall upon the earth or for Moses who gave up a life of power and privilege to lead the children of Israel or for Rahab who risked her own life in entertaining the Jewish spies. We could even consider the trials of Abraham who was asked to make the ultimate sacrifice of offering up his own child to God, and though more than likely God would never ask any of us to follow him in a form quite like that, certainly other things that cause us great discomfort and pain will at time be required of us and challenge whether or not we are ready to deepen our belief in the One who dwells in the invisible realm.

Eventually through life's school of problems and difficulties, the man of faith finally obtains an unshakable faith in the invisible world, one which gives him a sense of peace in whatever circumstance he finds himself in. For it is then that the man of faith becomes convinced that everything that happens to him is for his own good as indeed St. Paul teaches us from one of his many epistles.

## Fifth Sunday after Easter

We continue this week looking again at the all important virtue of faith that we sketched in the last sermon. Last time we considered the development of belief in the journey of a soul and how through the experiences of life it becomes cultivated into an unwavering conviction at the end of man's tenure on earth. Today we focus on the utility of faith and why practically speaking we need to develop this quality within us to be fit for the kingdom of God.

It should be clear by now that it is through belief that we are able to communicate and make any contact with the invisible God who dwells on a plane of existence far from our own, and with that being said, it is through faith that we are able to access the power of God in all of its infinite potential. In this way, we can think of belief as the key to unlock the great reservoir of God's divine resources allowing them to flow down to us here on earth. By analogy, if God's tremendous store of energy can be thought of as billions of tons of water behind a huge dam, then faith is the ability to open the overflow valve and siphon that fluid to ourselves or some other cause. In the gospels we see this illustrated in an almost impersonal way in the story of the woman with the issue of blood. After having a chronic hemorrhaging condition for twelve years, she exercised faith through the conviction that if she only touched the hem of Jesus' garment, she would be healed. And indeed she was, for as the narrative tells us, "Jesus realized that power had gone out of him." Through the functioning of this divine law, the sick woman extracted healing energy from the Savior even without him being aware of who had done it.

The more one's faith grows, the better equipped he becomes to tap into God's reservoir of divine energy conducting it from the spiritual plane to the physical plane to meet a wide variety of needs. Like an aquifer, the man of faith channels divine power from heaven to earth having developed those spiritual skills to access and pull it down. Rather than passively waiting for God to assist us, the man of faith actively employs his belief to draw water from the heavenly reservoir actively applying it to whatever cause that presents itself.

There is a very appropriate story that we can recount from the Book of Exodus to drive home this point. As the Israelites were fleeing from Egypt they came to the Red Sea and saw the Egyptian army racing after them. Realizing that they were trapped, they began to panic and they complained bitterly to Moses. Then the leader of Israel attempted to calm their fears asserting that the "Lord will fight for you; you need only be still."

This of course sounds like a good plan, placing trust in God to bail out the people from their imminent problem. But this was not exactly the idea that God had in mind to bring salvation to the people. Rather "the Lord said to Moses, 'Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through on dry ground.'" In effect God's message to Moses and the Israelites was as if to say, "Why are you crying out to me? Do it yourself and resolve your own problem. Take action and do not sit idly by waiting for me to help you."

Learning how to exercise faith is then an important skill that God wants us to acquire here on earth before we can move on to the heavenly realms where it will be required to function as a regular part of life in those planes. God desires that we develop our faith to such a high degree here and now to draw on the reservoir of his power in great ways, but lamentably few men have cultivated their faith enough to demonstrate big displays of God's might in the land of the living. We must remember that in many respects Jesus came to show us what it means to be a perfect man here on earth, and we can infer from his ministry that the marvelous acts that he was able to perform through his link with God should also be possible for us given sufficient faith on our part. In fact, the Savior said, "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these."

That is to say, the ability to calm a raging storm, to feed a great many people with little food, or to perform great healing miracles are within the scope of man's potential if he should only have enough faith to bring them forth. And according to Christ, relatively speaking it only takes a tiny amount of faith to accomplish great things, for he said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Within the gospels we see the evidence of those who had enough faith to obtain their own healing miracles. Without assistance from the Savior and primarily by virtue of their own faith in God, several people that we meet in the gospel accounts were able to procure a miracle for themselves simply by tapping into God's pool of divine energy. In the case of Blind Bartimaeus, the ten lepers, the two blind men, and others whom Christ encountered in his travels, he responded with one common message: "Go, your faith has made you well." Acting more as a witness to their healings than a participant, the Savior's words are meant to convey to us that we can also learn to harness the power of God and effect our own miracles without special help.

But of course, not everyone had sufficient faith to be healed of their own accord without Jesus' intervention and frequently he needed to supplement the weak or almost non-existent faith of those who came to him. We can see this in the story of the man whose demon-possessed son was brought to Jesus. Plagued from childhood with an evil spirit that caused him to be mute and deaf, the boy frequently suffered from attempts by the demon to kill him. After explaining to Christ the symptoms of the problem, the boy's father with a doubtful sentiment said to the Savior, "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Jesus responded to the man's uncertainty declaring that "everything is possible for him who believes." And at that remark, the man confessed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." Having to work with only a feeble faith on the part of the boy's father, Christ needed to perform the exorcism almost entirely through his own faith connection with God making up for what was lacking in the man.

Though a number of times Jesus supplemented the flagging faith of those who sought out his help, there is one occasion when even the Son of God refrained from working miracles and that was when he visited his hometown of Nazareth. As the old saying

goes, “familiarity breeds contempt,” and the residents of his boyhood town were offended by him in the ministry that he was now involved with. The message that we are to glean from this is that Christ was always willing to help those who had weak faith but were sincere. However he was unwilling to assist those who were stubbornly set in unbelief or a refusal to believe like the people of Nazareth and the Pharisees who so often opposed him. As God is never willing to violate our free will, he will not venture to help us if we really don’t want it, and in such circumstances we must continue to suffer of our own accord.

But aside from those entrenched in unbelief, Jesus sought to help all those who solicited his services, and he did this in a variety of ways which may be a bit puzzling on the surface. We may ask why the Savior didn’t just perform all healings and exorcisms the same way, and perhaps the answer to that question is that each situation required a different approach. We can probably identify at least two components for each case he had to deal with, namely the severity of the disease along with the amount of faith of the one who was afflicted. And depending on these factors and perhaps others, Christ treated his patients accordingly.

Some cases were no doubt easy to handle, and we can cite several examples where Jesus simply healed from a distance, perhaps miles away from the one who was suffering. We might call this remote healing which would involve mentally linking up with the infirmed one and directing God’s healing power to the recipient. We might remember two stories from the gospels which depict this method including the healing of the Centurion’s servant. In that case the Centurion had faith enough that Jesus could say the word and heal him without him entering his house, and perhaps with this great faith, Jesus’ work was made easy so that he could heal remotely. The other story which involves the healing of a nobleman’s son is a little different, for the father begged Christ to come to his home and heal his child. But apparently in evaluating the situation, the Savior decided this was not necessary and simply told the nobleman, “Your son will live.”

For a little more complicated circumstances, it would seem that Jesus thought it necessary to have a face to face encounter with the one who needed help, and we could consider a number of examples in which the Son of God exercised what we could call the power of the spoken word to effect a healing. Applying faith in the form of an authoritative word, Christ told the paralytic to “go take up your mat and walk.” On other occasions he addressed the demon-possessed commanding the evil spirits to “be quiet” and “come out of him.” And in the spectacular healing event that we associate with the raising of Lazarus from the dead, all that Jesus needed to do was say, “Come forth” and the dead man emerged from his tomb bound hand and foot in his grave clothes.

Yet other situations seemed to call for stronger measures and faith was required in the form of physical touch making a firm link between the Savior and the afflicted one. When Peter’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever, Christ took her by the hand and she was made well. Likewise, Jesus touched a man with leprosy and his disease departed. And not surprisingly, the other two resurrection stories that we find in the gospels both

apparently required physical contact as we might assume that the spiritual energy needed to repair a lifeless body is generally much greater than what it takes to restore the living. Christ took Jairus' daughter by the hand in bringing her back to life, and when he raised the widow of Naim's son, he touched the coffin.

And though physical touch might appear to be the strongest method employed by the man of faith in healing the infirmed, it can range from light and short contact to a prolonged connection between the healer and diseased one. In very stubborn cases where Jesus realized that he needed to make an extra effort to restore the afflicted one to health, he would spit on the eyes of the blind and onto the tongue of the mute. In this way he impressed a part of himself upon the recipient, the ultimate connection to allow the healing power of God to flow to the individual. And sometimes even this took a few tries, for in the story of the healing of the blind man from Bethsaida, after Jesus initially spat on his eyes and touched them, his vision was only partially restored. But after touching his eyes a second time, they were fully healed.

The healer must often gauge what his patient needs and when the easier method does not work, he must employ a stronger methodology. This we see attested in the Old Testament narrative of Elisha and the resurrection of the Shunnamite's son. At first when the prophet was told that the boy was sick, he sent his servant to the home of the woman with his staff to lay it upon the boy's chest hoping that the power vested in the staff would be sufficient to raise up the boy, but when this didn't work, he was forced to come in person to the house and making as full a physical connection with the child as possible, he stretched himself out on the boy touching eye to eye, mouth to mouth, and hand to hand until the woman's son's body grew warm and he came back to life.

From these many narratives we can see that a pattern is laid out for us to serve as conduits of God's power to the downtrodden and afflicted. Only through the vehicle of faith can a soul access this divine energy and make it flow from heaven to earth to help his neighbor in a supernatural way. God is calling us to develop such faith not just for our own benefit but to be employed in the service of others which is at once the goal of our spiritual lives.

## Sunday after Ascension

After his Resurrection from the dead, Jesus lingered with his disciples for forty days apparently with an agenda to complete a little more work. The passage that we have read from the Acts of the Apostles more or less sketches out the Savior's concerns for the nearly seven weeks he remained among his followers. We are told that some of the unfinished business to attend to involved giving instructions to his devotees, and we can imagine that he had much to say in regard to the formation of the church, its administration, and protocol, all things which have not been preserved for us in writing but through the oral tradition of the church. In addition to giving directions about the structure of the church, he no doubt also was busy with theological matters, for there was much that the disciples could not understand until after he rose from the dead. Perhaps he had to connect the dots for them showing how he fulfilled the entire Law and the Prophets in his work so that things could finally gel for his followers enough to go and teach others.

We are also told by Luke in this passage that it was also very important to Christ to prove to his adherents that he really did in fact rise from the dead and was among them as the same flesh and blood person that they had always known. Unquestionably many doubted initially upon hearing the incredulous news of his resurrection, and so to dispel any skepticism among those who were loyal to him, he made a concerted effort over forty days to show that he was very much alive. With numerous appearances to the Twelve and larger bands of disciples, even as large as 500 on one occasion, the Savior demonstrated that he was no ghost by eating in front of them and allowing them to touch him, even encouraging them to put their fingers in his wounds. Of course if the church were going to get off the ground, all who had supported Jesus would need to be entirely convinced that his victory over the grave were no myth, and so it was that Christ spent seven weeks making visits to those who had known him forging their misgivings into firm belief.

But after accomplishing these goals, it was at last time for the Savior to finally depart from his friends and return to heaven from which he came. We may ask why in fact this was necessary and if there should be any reason that he couldn't stay longer if not indefinitely. Perhaps in theory he could have lingered on earth, at least as long as the body of a man can endure, somewhat upwards of 100 years at which point the material organism inevitably breaks down as indeed it does for all. However this was not in the cards, for the Son of God had told his followers on an earlier occasion that it was in fact necessary for him to leave for his disciples to begin their work. He told them plainly, "It is for your good that I go away. Unless I go away the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send her to you." Continuing on he related to his disciples that his Divine Mother, the Holy Spirit would do a special work in the members of the new found church. He foretold, that She the Spirit of Truth would come and guide them in all truth as indeed She has led the bishops and other clergy for the past 2000 years.

But suffice it to say, even if the descent of the Holy Spirit wasn't pushing Christ to leave as soon as possible, his time walking among men would still be of limited duration for a

more fundamental reason. Historically the Second Person of the Trinity comes to earth at the end of each age to help humanity make a spiritual quantum leap to a new level, raising the consciousness and awareness of the race to a higher point that it could not have achieved without assistance. He comes and teaches a select band of followers, perhaps for several decades, instructing them in a higher way of truth. But there comes a point when he has disseminated about as much as the spiritual elite can absorb at which time he departs and commissions these disciples to spread his message throughout the known world, raising the spiritual standard of mankind. When after progressing on its own for another couple millennia, the Savior once again appears to help the race make another jump when after a long age it has matured enough to receive a yet higher revelation of the truth, and so the cycle repeats.

Having considered why Christ comes and goes, we can now turn our attention to the details of his actual departure when last he visited us on earth, the event we call the Ascension. It might be fair to say that the traditional image that most have in mind involves the Savior saying a few farewell remarks to his followers and then floating up slowly into the stratosphere and then into outer space and then beyond the furthest galaxies as if the heaven to which he was going were beyond the borders of the vast universe. In fact this popular idea traces itself back to antiquity when primitive man envisioned that heaven, the domain of God lay beyond the blue canopy of the sky, and so the prevailing notion is that Jesus began a long ascent to heaven which for all practical purposes might have involved a journey of millions upon millions of miles.

Not surprisingly, skeptics and modernists find the notion somewhat ridiculous, and in all fairness to their objections, we in the Orthodox Catholic Church would have to agree with their complaints about this traditional scenario. And we do so because we understand that the invisible realms of the angels and the saints and for that matter God himself are not a physical land beyond the outer reaches of the universe but are rather other dimensions superimposed right on top of our own. Those who dwell in the spirit world are not as far away from us as we might imagine. Dwelling in what we could think of as parallel universes, they are separated from us not by physical distance but by ethereal borders that divide the various planes of existence.

With this in mind, the miracle of the Ascension was essentially the passing of the Lord from this physical plane into the spirit planes through a well known psychic phenomenon that is known as dematerialization. Exhibiting itself in various ways, perhaps the most profound and difficult manifestation in this category of miracles is the instantaneous and complete disappearance of the physical body. The one who has such great skills can rapidly disintegrate his frame into its constitutive elements only to reassemble them potentially at a later time and perhaps in a different location if so desired.

Christ who had supreme command over his own body practiced this phenomenon on a number of occasions through the power of his own will, and we could consider several indirect references to it in the gospel stories. Both Luke and John cite occasions where Christ's enemies tried to run him off a cliff or stone him, and mysteriously the Savior eluded his captors. Sometimes they refer to him "walking right through the crowd" or

“hiding himself” but in fact all instances illustrate the same miracle of sudden disappearance whereby the physical body is broken down rapidly only to be rebuilt at another time and place. It was after the Resurrection that we begin to see direct references to the phenomenon with Christ walking through walls and suddenly disappearing from his disciples as in the encounter with the two on the road to Emmaus.

While perhaps only a few in history have had such command over the physical body to perform such complete dematerializations at will, there have been no shortage of those who have manifested what we could call partial dematerializations which in most instances involve a gravity defying feat. Jesus performed a few as recorded in the gospels, the most popular perhaps being the stunt he did on the Sea of Galilee where in the midst of the storm he approached the disciples’ boat walking on the water. In terms of a physical explanation for this famous miracle, we understand that the Son of God simply reduced the physical density of his body to a point where he was much lighter than water and able to stand on its surface without sinking.

But many throughout Church history have performed a similar deed actually dematerializing enough to become lighter than air. Saints such as Joseph Cupertino would frequently go into ecstasy and fly up into the trees where he would often get stuck and require assistance getting down. Others like Alphonsus Liguori would rise several feet off the ground while saying Mass while the likes of Teresa of Avila would fly up into the church rafters when it was time to receive Communion. Numerous other holy people could be named including Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assisi, Padre Pio, and St. Benedict’s servant Maurus who walked upon the sea to save a man drowning off the shore.

Partial dematerialization may exhibit itself in a variety of forms, and we have already considered the miraculous event known as the Transfiguration on a prior occasion which falls under the same general category. In that account, we are told that the thinning of Jesus’ body was not only sufficient to cause him to be suspended in the air but was also enough to allow the brightness of his spirit to shine through. However relevant to the discussion at hand, in that narrative we are also told that a cloud surrounded the Savior and his two heavenly friends which ties in directly with our understanding of the Ascension phenomenon.

When a physical form is partially dematerialized as in the instance of the Transfiguration, the portion of the body that is broken down surrounds the person in the form of a cloud of elements swirling around the individual which grows thicker and thicker depending on the extent of the dematerialization. Keeping this in mind, the Ascension involved a process similar to the Transfiguration, but not only involved levitation and the breaking down of the body into its constitutive elements, but ultimately also complete disappearance.

Considering Jesus’ departure from the physical world, when it was time to leave, he would have begun to gradually lighten his body until it appeared to rise in the air. For initially the feet disappear first and the rising is initially little more than an impression.

Eventually though, as the process continued, his body became lighter than air and began to levitate rising high above the heads of the disciples. At that great height most of Christ's material body would have given way to a cloud of elements that obscured the outline of his body until all that was left was a cloud that Luke says "received him out of their sight." Eventually the cloud itself would have dispersed, and so the Savior passed into the higher realms leaving his material body behind as indeed all must do to enter the world of the spirit.

So much for the mechanics of the Ascension! It is probably appropriate at this point to consider why Jesus chose this form of exit from earth life. Why not just disappear instantaneously as he had done on many earlier occasions? Perhaps the answer is obvious; he had been appearing and disappearing many times over the forty days he was with them after the Resurrection and now it was important to communicate with his disciples that this was it – He wasn't coming back again anytime soon. So dematerializing himself slowly and gradually over a period of time he impressed upon his followers in a dramatic way that this was a final goodbye.

But of course it wasn't goodbye forever, only for another age, for a couple millennia, as we well know that the Son of Man promised to return again even as he has for countless ages in the past. It seems quite possible that he will return at the same place that he left, for prophet Zechariah predicted that "on that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives." Although one thing is clear, and that is that he will return in the same way that he left us as the angels told the disciples after the Ascension was completed. They said to them, "This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." In other words they were suggesting that the Savior would rematerialize out of a cloud of elements in the same way he disappeared into one. The apostle John also seemed to intimate this in his Apocalypse when he declared, "Look he is coming with clouds." Ultimately the Jesus that we have never seen will come in the same flesh and blood that he possessed 2000 years ago, and those of us worthy of standing in his presence will also have the privilege of seeing and touching him even as the disciples did long ago.

## Pentecost Sunday

Last week we had a look at the grand finale of Jesus' ministry, his dramatic exit from earth life in the event we know as the Ascension. This week we pick up where we left off considering what happened next in the journey of the Savior back to his celestial home. Though the scriptures are silent on this subject, we understand that after he shed his material body, the Son of God began to rise through the heavenly realms back to the throne room of God. With a trip before him that could be completed as fast or as slow as he desired since no physical distance was involved, Jesus chose to take his time in returning to his Father and Mother as he wished to complete some business among the inhabitants of the celestial spheres. Over the course of ten days, he visited first the saints in the lowest tier of the heavens and then successively he spent one day each on the nine planes of the angels, beginning with the lowest realm of the guardian angels and working his way up to the highest plane of the Seraphim. Thus after ten days, he met with the entire heavenly hierarchy and was at last ready to take his throne once again.

And as we understand from the scriptures, it was on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the summer harvest festival celebrated fifty days after the feast of Unleavened Bread that Jesus finally entered the throne room of God to take his rightful seat. After an absence of 35 years, a glorious reunion took place among all three members of the Trinity who had long been separated from each other while Christ was busy about his work on Earth. At last with all three Divine Persons in warm embrace, a tremendous joy welled up within the Godhead that could not help but ripple forth to the entire creation. The overpowering ecstasy of the moment cascaded through all the angelic realms even into the physical creation itself. In fact, we could say that the joy of the Trinity on this special occasion was the direct cause for the descent of the Holy Spirit who lavished all of Creation with her splendor on that wondrous day. It was a reason to celebrate in the throne room of God, and of course this celebration was too great to be confined to the Godhead itself and so the power, joy, and love of that moment spilled over into the whole created order.

In obedience to the Savior's command, the disciples remained in Jerusalem awaiting this gift of the Holy Spirit, and as it turned out, 120 of them happened to be gathered together in the Upper Room on Sunday morning ten days after the Ascension. More than likely they were celebrating the Eucharist together as very soon after Easter, the first day of the week came to be the new Christian day of worship. Though they were expecting the coming of the Spirit according to the words of Christ, undoubtedly they were caught by surprise when She manifested herself in their presence in the form of a mighty rushing wind and they too became enveloped in the divine ecstasy which was pouring forth from the Divine Reunion.

That the Holy Spirit made herself known in this particular way certainly follows from what we understand of her title, for in three of the ancient Mediterranean languages, spirit is translated as breath or wind. The word in Hebrew is "Ruach," and though we may not be familiar with that term, in Greek it is "Pneuma" from which we get our English word pneumatic which many would identify with air. Of course in Latin the word is "Spiritus" which is the direct ancestor of our own English term and the root of other words like

inspiration and expiration which pertain respectively to breathing in and breathing out. We might remember that Christ personified this representation of the Divine Mother when he breathed on his apostles saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

But there was another manifestation of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost which is probably even more relevant to our discussion today. We can recall the beginning of Jesus' ministry when his cousin John the Baptist declared that though he was baptizing with water, another greater than he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. A second baptism was revealed through the prophet, not one of water but of fire, and on that Sunday morning in the Upper Room, the Divine Mother not only came as a mighty rushing wind but as cloven tongues of fire that came to rest on the heads of all those who were gathered.

The imagery of fire we can associate with a number of things, but there are a couple relevant meanings that we can consider. We remember that with the descent of the Holy Spirit, the formerly sheepish followers of Jesus who hid themselves during his Crucifixion and ran fearing for their lives suddenly became transformed into zealous and bold witnesses for God. No longer remaining in the closet, the disciples came out in the open preaching fearlessly to thousands in Jerusalem without concern of reprisal. The fire baptism that we also know as the baptism of the Spirit has such an effect on an individual inflaming him with great passion and zeal for God, an excitement to do his will and spread his message.

Although it must be said that fire has another important connotation in the context of Pentecost. On prior occasions we have made reference to ancient symbolism associated with gender, and while the male was generally linked with wisdom and the mind, the female was connected with the emotions and the heart. In this way we regard the Holy Spirit, the female member of the Trinity as the embodiment of Divine Love. It is She who inflames the heart of man with this supreme virtue in the baptism of fire so that he receives a share of her holy compassion for others. The one who is the recipient of the fire baptism acquires an infusion of grace that allows him to burn with a portion of the immense conflagration of love that rages within the Godhead.

With this being said, it is important to qualify the effects of this sacrament by recognizing that an infilling of such love for others and zeal to do God's will does not happen overnight in the long journey of a soul on earth, and therefore there is in practice a long gap between the sacraments of water baptism and confirmation in the life of a Christian. The first sacrament is analogous to the beginning of the soul's spiritual journey while the second sacrament is akin to a later more mature stage in the soul's development. Water baptism marks the initial infusion of divine grace into the candidate at the beginning of his Christian faith while Fire baptism signifies a second outpouring of divine power at a later point in time when he is ready to really begin working for God with full devotion.

That fire necessarily follows water in the pilgrimage of a soul can be seen in a number of allegorical patterns within the scriptures which illustrate that man's spirituality is built in stages. Initially we see this image in the Exodus from Egypt in which the Lord

manifested himself to the people as a pillar of cloud during the day only to be followed by a pillar of fire at night. Considering that clouds are of course made up of water droplets, we can glean a veiled allusion to the spiritual principle of water preceding fire.

But perhaps a more graphic illustration of this idea can be seen in the popular account of Elijah's victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Recalling that narrative, we remember that the man of God was involved in a showdown with the pagan prophets in Northern Israel. The challenge was for the true God to manifest himself by fire consuming a sacrifice that had been prepared over wood and stone on top of the mountain. Unfortunately for the prophets of Baal, their deity did not respond to the call to descend upon the offering in fire, but after their failure Elijah took his turn to call upon God to perform the miraculous sign. Although it should be said that the prophet of Yahweh decided to make things a lot harder for the Lord by first drenching the sacrifice with many buckets of water. With a sacrifice sopping wet, Elijah called upon God and in a great wonder fire fell from heaven and not only consumed the offering but licked up all of the water and stones besides leaving not a trace behind. And so we may derive another symbolic example of fire following water.

Yet the illustrations continue and we can see this principle depicted over a much wider time scale in the story of the Earth itself. We remember that toward the beginning of Genesis is recorded the account of the Flood which was said to destroy all flesh from the earth in the early days of mankind. Later biblical commentators, particularly Peter noted that this destruction by water was symbolic of water baptism which man receives at the beginning of his faith journey. Interestingly enough, the same apostle in his epistle predicted that the end of the world would next time be marked by destruction by fire in which the elements will melt and all will disappear in a roar. We could also see this future event as symbolizing the fire baptism which occurs later and towards the end of man's earthly wandering, another allusion to fire following water.

Even the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John tells the same tale, for we note that when he emerged from the water, the Divine Mother, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. Again in that brief narrative we see spirit baptism succeeding water baptism, a pattern well established in the scriptures as well as in the life of Christ himself who sought to illustrate the way of man to God.

## Trinity Sunday

Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday remembering one of the most fundamental teachings of the Christian faith, namely that there are three distinct persons in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A doctrine that many regard as particular and unique to our religion, it might surprise some to learn that the revelation of this truth was not altogether new or radical to the ancient world, for many precedents for the concept of the Trinity existed throughout the religions of the world stretching back thousands of years into an age of polytheism.

Every great civilization had a pantheon of gods but among them were set apart in the minds of the people, the leaders or heads of the deities who had a special place of preeminence among all the others. Often enough the chiefs of the gods were grouped together in triads who commanded the greatest love and devotion from the people. Those who are familiar with religion in India would recall the famous Hindu Trinity. Known among the people of India as the Trimurti, this group of three supreme deities consists of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Sustainer, and Shiva the Destroyer. Moving further to the west, similar clusters of gods could be found in the cultures of the Nile River Valley where Osiris, Isis, and Horus were hailed as the royal family of gods. And not too far away in Mesopotamia the triad consisted of Marduk, Inanna, and Tammuz.

Indeed this plurality of Gods has been the historical basis of our Judeo-Christian heritage as we trace its development out of Mesopotamia a few thousand years ago. In a very familiar story written in ancient Babylon many hundreds of years before Abraham made his way to Canaan, we see how these early concepts of deity influenced and ultimately set a precedent for the Three in One that we acknowledge as the Holy Trinity. In a narrative that comes to us out of the Epic of Gilgamesh we have a tale which opens with the assembly of the gods deciding to destroy mankind because their increasing numbers were making it too noisy for the gods to sleep. The plan was to eliminate the whole lot of them, but one of the deities secretly had pity on a particular man and wishing that he should not be swept away with the rest, instructed him to tear down his house and build a ship upon which he was to take aboard the seed of all living things. Crafting a vessel with multiple levels and compartments, the man and his laborers sealed the whole boat with caulk to make it waterproof.

When it was done, he took all of his family and kin aboard along with the beasts of the field and the wild creatures, not to mention the craftsmen who built the ship. Then he awaited his patron deity who tipped him off to the impending disaster to seal the door of the boat. Finally a fierce south storm blew and raged enough to submerge the mountains. After seven days, the rains subsided. The man then decided to open a hatch in the ship which brought a welcome ray of sunlight into the boat. After some time the vessel came to rest on top of one of the mountains. Desiring to see how much the waters had receded, the man released a dove which went out and came back as it had no place to rest its foot. Sometime later the man sent out a swallow which also turned around, but finally upon sending out a raven the bird returned no more after finding dry land once again.

Then the man opened the boat and let everything out, and taking some animals offered a sacrifice to the gods and poured out a libation. Smelling the sweet savor of the sacrifice, the gods gathered around the man and began to express remorse for their plan to destroy all people and pledged to be more lenient and patient with mankind in the future.

As is probably obvious, this ancient story has many parallels with the Story of the Flood that we find in the Bible. Working with the older account, it was Moses who sought to adapt an old tale from polytheistic Mesopotamia to fit in with the new religious framework he was giving to the people of Israel. He changed some things in keeping with what he desired to communicate to the people, and though he was steering the Israelites in the way of monotheism, it seems that he nonetheless preserved the essential polytheistic elements of the original story though it is not immediately apparent to those of us who read an English translation. While being careful to remove any references to specific gods and goddesses as appears in the Babylonian story, Moses kept intact the concept of God in plurality throughout his own narrative and for that matter the whole Pentateuch.

The prophet chose a word to refer to God that we might find peculiar, especially in light of the fact that he was promoting just one God, and yet it would seem that he deliberately employed this word because of an unwillingness to depart too far from the original story. Whether it was a conscious or subconscious decision on his part is hard to say, but Moses used the word Elohim in the story of the Flood and over and over again throughout his writings. While this might mean little to the Western speaker, to one familiar with the Semitic languages, he would immediately understand it to be a plural noun which literally translates as “gods.” And the same word is used to refer to both Almighty God and the gods of the gentiles throughout the scriptures, and in fact one can only tell the difference through context.

Of course we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians would interpret this word choice as an indirect or veiled allusion not to a plurality of gods but to a plurality of persons within the Godhead. And Moses whether he realized it or not was embedding this concept throughout the pages of the Old Testament. At times he was fairly direct about this plurality keeping a link with his Babylonian forbears, for a few times in the pages of Genesis he used plural pronouns in connection with Elohim. And these are not obscure verses from the Pentateuch but popular sentences that we all remember. Who can forget that at the creation of mankind, God said, “Let us make man in **our** image?” And which Sunday school student would fail to remember that in the Tower of Babel narrative, God said, “Come, let **us** go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other?”

Trinitarian hints of this sort abound throughout the Old Testament, especially in the nuances of the Hebrew language, and we can find another strong suggestion of plurality in the famous Shema of the Jews taken from Deuteronomy 6:4. Every young boy studying for his Bar Mitzvah knows by heart this verse: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” While on the surface we might think that this is stating the obvious monotheistic truth, that there is only one solitary God existing alone, in reality it

doesn't convey that. When in Hebrew numeric oneness is alluded to, one particular word, "yachid" is used like when one might say, "I was alone at home." But when the concept of one as in a unified oneness is sought, another word, "echad" is employed. This term was used by Moses when he wrote about the institution of marriage saying, "The two shall become one flesh." And perhaps surprisingly for some, he also used it in this famous verse we know as the Shema. In other words, the prophet was saying that God is not one indivisible, but rather one made up of parts that are joined together.

And indeed that is exactly what we believe as Trinitarians, that there is but one God who exists in Three Distinct Persons who dwell together in perfect unity. In hindsight we can look back through the pages of the Old Testament and see all three members of the Trinity popping up in veiled and at times fairly direct allusions even in the introductory verses of Genesis.

Specifically reading the first three verses closely we can see that there is a suggestion that all three members of the Trinity were at work in Creation. In the opening line we learn that God created the heavens and the earth and so immediately understand this as a reference to the Father. In the next clause we are told that the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters and so we are introduced right away to the Holy Spirit. And then in the third statement we are acquainted with the Son though perhaps this is not immediately obvious. That verse begins with the phrase "and God said" which is the first of a number to appear in the narrative. Understanding this to be a reference to the spoken word in action we are reminded that Jesus was linked by the Apostle John with the Divine Logos, the Word of God by whom all things were made. This was no doubt an extension of the Old Testament concept that personified the Word of God as an entity more or less of itself, for the Psalmist writes, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made."

Frequent allusions to the Word of God appear throughout the Old Testament as do also references to the Spirit of God and looking back over those writings we can see such veiled hints of the plurality within the Godhead all along. There are even some direct suggestions of community within the Godhead in some verses such as the well known Messianic verse from the Psalms: "The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet," a clear reference to both the Father and the Son. Or we could consider the mysterious words of Isaiah who wrote, "And now the Sovereign Lord sends me with his Spirit," a text incorporating both the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Certainly images of the Trinity abound throughout the Old Testament, but the theology of the Trinity is something that perhaps did not fully develop until the time of the Early Church and is reflected in our creeds. These ancient documents of the Church spell out for us the order of appearance of each member of the Trinity at the dawn of Creation when the infinite and Unmanifested God manifested himself within the temporal and finite creation. Within the first instant of this creation, God who was initially whole divided into both male and female parts which we know as the Father and the Holy Spirit. And this idea was present in the thought of those who drafted the Nicene Creed when they wrote that the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Still within that first instant of

creation, after the One became Two, the Two became Three as the Divine Father and Mother brought forth the Son of God who in the words of Paul is the “firstborn of all creation.” This was captured in the Creed’s recognition that Christ was incarnate of the Holy Spirit, his True Mother. Through the Son of God we believe that the entire creation came into being sired by the Heavenly Father and Mother. It is he who is our Elder Brother for we are all little sons and daughters of God.

Though the concept of God as a family and a community of love is not so hard for us humans to understand, how this Trinity is both One and Three at the same time has baffled some of the greatest minds in history. Saints and Theologians have sought to communicate this reality through various physical illustrations. Some have pointed to the egg with its three constitutive parts of yolk, white, and shell. Others like St. Patrick have considered the three leaf clover and suggested that though it has three distinct segments, it is nonetheless part of just one leaf. Others still have used the illustration of the triangle perhaps with three different colored sides. If you approached God from one point of view you would see Him as the Father, from another as the Son and from a third view you would see the Holy Spirit, yet were all three faces merely different aspects of the same geometrical figure.

We can continue our metaphors by thinking of God as a fire which can be divided up into three individual flames which can then be subsequently merged back again into the same fire. Though sometimes whole and sometimes broken into parts, each individual flame nonetheless still has the same substance and nature of the original fire. Or similarly we can think of the Trinity as a bucket of water that is poured into three smaller vessels. Again, each vessel has within in the same essence and nature of the original bucket even though it is divided.

Suffice it to say, man in his finite limitations can only make crude analogies to the Reality of the Trinity. At best we only grasp a small fraction of the mystery of the Holy Three in One. Nonetheless, the testimony of history long before and now in the Church age has testified to the truth of the Sacred Triad, and so we remember in a special way this, the core teaching of our faith.

## Second Sunday after Pentecost

There is a tradition in the church about the Apostle John in his old age when he used to live in Ephesus. It is said that the evangelist was so enfeebled toward the end of his life that the people had to carry him into the church on a stretcher. And when he was no longer able to preach or deliver a long discourse, his custom was to lean up on one elbow on every occasion and say simply: "Little children, love one another." Then he would lie back down and his friends would carry him back out. Every week, the same thing happened, again and again. And every week it was the same short sermon, exactly the same message: "Little children, love one another." One day, the story goes, someone asked him about it: "John, why is it that every week you say exactly the same thing, 'little children, love one another'?" And John replied: "Because it is all you need to know."

A lot of us might be inclined to accuse St. John of making an oversimplification. How can loving one another be all that is necessary when there are so many other things to know about the Christian life and so many other lessons to learn while in the flesh? Is he saying we don't need to know about obedience or patience or longsuffering? Is he playing down the virtues of humility and slowness to anger? Surely we need to learn all of these virtues, not just love while we make our journey from life to life on this blue-green planet we call home. In all fairness to the Beloved Disciple, John is not forgetting all of these other things but it seems that he views everything else as falling under the umbrella of divine love. For he sees it as the supreme virtue under which all others are just a facet, a piece of the puzzle. And so he is not misleading us by saying that love is all we need. In effect the Apostle is saying that if you can acquire this one virtue then you have in all likelihood mastered them all.

Not just John, but the Lord himself is quoted in today's gospel making generalizations about love as the core of the Christian life. And he did this on a number of occasions even boiling down the whole message of the Old Testament to this one virtue. The teachers of the law had enumerated 613 different laws in the Old Covenant that needed to be followed by a good Jew, but Jesus said that all of these, in fact the entire Law and the message of the Prophets could be neatly encapsulated in two great commandments which we all know well. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and Love your neighbor as yourself. One commandment reflects love in the vertical relationship, that which is directed toward God while the other embodies love in the horizontal relationship, that which is between one another. And it is no surprise that this expression is captured in the very popular Ten Commandments, the first few representing our duty toward God and the others representing our duty toward our neighbor.

In this morning's gospel, the Savior sought to give a further expansion to the command to love than was ever seen in the Old Testament. While the idea was present to a certain degree over the age that preceded his coming, no one had fully lived up to the standard, and consequently no one was available to serve as an example or role model for others to follow. Now Jesus was happy to tell those who gathered around to hear him that the perfect standard of love was now in their midst, and they had a real tangible person to emulate. For this reason, he rephrased the old commandment into a new form bidding his

listeners to “Love one another, as I have loved you.” Up until that point he had demonstrated it through the many acts of compassion that he showed throughout Galilee, Judea, and Samaria. People saw many miraculous healings and exorcisms, even the raising of the dead. But even these works of charity were only a preview for the ultimate standard he wished to communicate to the world. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” But the Savior even surpassed this idea in his death on Calvary.

It might be a stretch to say that humanity was collectively the friend of God at this point in history. Clearly there were both good and bad people alive on the planet, and some very hostile to Jesus. For this reason, St. Paul said that “Christ died for the ungodly” and stated emphatically that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” For Paul, the idea of a person laying down his life for a good man was rare enough, but the idea of doing so for a sinful person was unheard of. So Jesus raised the standard even higher than what we might gather from this gospel passage. The degree that perfected man is called to love is at the point of doing good to one’s enemies, which for most of humanity is very unnatural. Remember that the Salvator had pointed out on another occasion that doing good only to those who love us is of little value for even the pagans are capable of this as well. What must set the Christian apart is striving to show kindness to those are abusive, ugly, and rejected by the world.

Easier said than done! How on earth can man ever achieve such a lofty goal? Sometimes the example and teaching of the saints is a great help to us in this matter. And a well known contemporary saint from India has a few thoughts that we may benefit from. Mother Teresa who has been acclaimed by Christians and non-Christians alike for her work among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta took seriously the words of Jesus when he said, “Whatever you do unto the least of these, you do unto me.” Somehow these famous words of the Savior became a living reality to her, for she asserted that she could see the face of Jesus in the face of every sick and dying person she helped. And she challenged the whole world to look for the Savior’s face among these destitute and forgotten souls. She maintained that “each one of them is Jesus in disguise.” It might very well be that Mother Teresa had some kind of mystical vision to see the face of God in every one she ministered to. Whether this was a reality or some personification of her great love, she saw the value in each human being and perhaps recognized that that value was because a small speck of the divine was really in each of her care recipients. Indeed we are made in the image of God, and our faith recognizes a fragment of the divine fire inside of each creature. The meditation on this reality may very well awaken love in our hearts, for of a truth there is a reflection of God in the face of all men. Indeed when we serve the least of our brethren, we are in fact serving God himself.

The saint from Calcutta had other words of wisdom to share on various subjects, and at times she would give out her spiritual recipes. So many of us often like to be given step by step instructions to achieve some kind of goal rather than doing it the hard way. Rather than groping around in the dark and trying to figure things out by trial and error, it is nice to rely on the words of those who have gone on before us and struggled to find a way. The saints have shared with us their “patented” techniques on the spiritual life to

provide a sure way to gain entry into the realms above. And Teresa gave us one such road to achieve the goal when she described the chain of spiritual development. She said, “The fruit of silence is prayer, the fruit of prayer is faith, the fruit of faith is love, the fruit of love is service, and the fruit of service is peace.” Much can be said about this chain, but the important element that we need to consider is the starting point. Mother Teresa saw the spiritual life as beginning with silence, and for us that might mean the quiet of contemplation when we tune out the outer world and meditate on the life of the Savior. The constant message of the saints is that prayer is the fuel of the spiritual life and ultimately gives birth to a host of virtues including the king of all virtues, love itself. If we are asking ourselves why it is that we cannot show disinterested love toward our fellow man, we may have a number of reasons to explore, but the first one we should entertain must concern the degree to which we are devoted to prayer as the fountain from which the love nature is nourished.

To further drive home this very important point, it might be good to consider another illustration from the scriptures themselves. If we go back to Genesis and focus our attention on the story of the Garden of Eden, we come across the tales of the creation of man and woman. While we know that these are symbolic stories meant to convey some truths about a newly formed human being about to enter its first incarnation, other ideas have been gleaned from the narratives as well that may relate other aspects of truth. We are told that God put Adam into a deep sleep, and while he was slumbering, the Lord opened up his flesh and taking a rib formed his wife Eve. Some have drawn from this account a spiritual idea that supports the same message that has just been shared. In fact, the sleeping Adam may be thought of as a symbol of man who becomes asleep to the outside world which is the time when he quiets his external thoughts and enters into meditation or prayer. It was in this state when Adam effectively tuned out to the outer world and tuned in to the inner world that the woman was formed. And this may make some sense to us if we consider that traditionally the male gender is associated with the mind or the intellect while the female gender is linked with the heart or the emotions. It is she that represents the love nature and the capacity of the human soul to love. And so just as Mother Teresa and the other saints suggested, the quiet of prayer and contemplation will ultimately give birth to love within us if we are willing to persevere in that all important discipline.

Now let me say in closing, though we have a sure recipe to produce within us the fire of God’s love, like most good things, it is not something that happens overnight in any of us. It often takes a lifetime and realistically it has taken us many lifetimes to come to the point of sincerely desiring the acquisition of this highest virtue in our lives. But it would be a mistake for us just to sit back and wait for the feeling of love to come upon us before acting in service to God and our neighbor. While we eagerly anticipate the blossoming of the love nature within our hearts, we will necessarily have to force ourselves to show kindness to others in sacrificial ways long before a burning fire of compassion takes a hold of us. Even if the feeling is not there, we need to act anyway, for God will receive the sacrifice of our wills and our good intentions to serve. He knows that these things take time, and as long as we are making an effort, he will in his good time meet us halfway and bring to fruition what we have greatly desired.

## Third Sunday after Pentecost

Rather than concentrate on the readings as we normally would at a Mass, for this homily I would like to give you a little background on this denomination which is known as the Orthodox Catholic Church. As the name implies it has ties to both the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches and can be thought of as a hybrid of the two. Let me give a sketch of church history to trace out the formation of this particular branch of Christianity.

As most of you know, originally there was just one ancient church comprised of many local churches throughout the Roman Empire that were in full communion with each other. They might have had a little variation in practice and some teaching but they all thought of themselves as part of the one church that Jesus Christ started. Over time the major cities of the Empire developed into important centers of Christianity and became very powerful so much so that all of the local churches in the regions surrounding these cities came under the jurisdiction of the bishop in the major city. Antioch in Syria was one of these great cities and was actually the first important Christian center that Peter set up in his work of evangelization. Then there was Alexandria in Egypt and the holy city of Jerusalem itself. Naturally as the capital of the Empire, Rome became a major force and the bishop of that city was afforded a great honor across the entire Mediterranean.

But by the 4<sup>th</sup> century, instability was arising in the Empire. The Germanic barbarians to the North were posing a greater and greater threat to the Italian peninsula and the Emperor Constantine decided to move the capital to the new city named after himself, Constantinople which was in the northwestern corner of Turkey. Over time the importance of Rome faded while Constantinople grew in power. Ultimately Rome fell to the Goths and became virtually imprisoned by the barbarians. But the local Roman Church did not collapse and despite being now politically weak it continued to have an influence if not for any other reason than because of its traditional place of honor in years past. A rivalry began between the old Roman Church and the relatively younger but powerful Christian center of Constantinople. However because Rome had no political clout and was still subject to the Imperial power in the new capital city, its attempts to assert itself were often hollow. A few times it excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople over minor theological issues and schism existed between East and West. At times the Emperor would kidnap or hold the bishop of Rome against his will in the Imperial city where he attempted to manipulate him for his own agenda. And this only added more fuel to the fire, but Rome was still weak and as a part of the Empire was ultimately subject to Constantinople.

But this was to change when Rome found support from the barbarians to the North. The Latin Church had set its aim on evangelizing the Germans and by the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, it succeeded in converting Clovis the king of the Franks who in turn facilitated the conversion of his subjects and other German tribes. These all gave their support to the bishop of Rome, and a new empire began to grow in the West with allegiance to the Pope, a reality that became solidified especially when Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in the year 800. And this action was seen as an affront to the Emperor in the East who believed himself to be the sole emperor and heir of the Caesars. The

seeds of schism were now firmly planted with both East and West having the military prowess to oppose each other. With relations weakening toward the end of the First Millennium fueled by continuing criticisms and condemnations spewing forth from the Patriarchs of Rome and Constantinople at each other in a sort of Cold War, a permanent schism developed in 1054.

Though there were minor theological differences at the time, the real motivation for the break was clearly political as the power struggle left no other option. The straw that broke the camel's back occurred when Greek Christians celebrating Mass in Southern Italy were strong armed by the Pope who forced them to use unleavened bread rather than leavened bread as employed in the East for the Eucharist. This enraged the Patriarch of Constantinople and the separation between East and West became permanent.

There were a few points early on when the rift might have been healed such as Rome providing common cause against the threat of Islam, but ultimately bad feelings were too strong for East and West to cooperate. If anything the negative feelings were further cemented when during the Crusades the Western soldiers marched through Constantinople and trashed the city and the main church of the Holy Wisdom. From the Great Schism onwards the Christians in the East became known as Orthodox while those in the West were known as Catholic and while doctrinally they were almost identical, politically they remained foes. To this day, the major differences between the two major branches of Christianity lie more in practice rather than theology and one such difference is that the Orthodox allow a married clergy while the Latin Church does not.

After the two branches of Christianity went their several and separate ways, East and West had their own internal fragmentation so that the identity of a monolithic church was not always apparent on either side, particularly among the Orthodox. In the East, Orthodoxy became oriented on ethnic lines so that today each nation has its own national church. We speak of the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox, and the Syrian Orthodox each having its own liturgy in its own tongue and they are ruled by their own respective patriarchs. In the West there was much more unity particularly with the enforcement of Latin as the common liturgical language, but even before the Protestant Reformation parts of the Western Church had functioned independently since the early Middle Ages. The Dutch Church, known as the See of Utrecht elected its own bishops and has been autonomous for nearly a millennium. And this diocese of Dutch Catholics has played a pivotal role in the existence of the numerous independent Catholic Churches that exist today. Many of these independent Catholic Churches are known as "Old Catholics" which is a reference to Catholicism before Vatican I in 1870.

When the decisions of Vatican I were announced to the Western Church, a number of local churches had a hard time with the papal infallibility declaration. Prior to this occasion, all of the bishops of the church shared more or less equal authority and privilege in each of their local dioceses. They were a college of peers all of equivalent status. But the new pronouncement elevated the Bishop of Rome from a position of "first among equals" to a higher rank and it didn't sit well with many. A good segment of the church decided to leave and break away in schism. And of those who stayed, a fair

number of bishops returned to their dioceses and recorded in their church annals that they accepted the ruling of Vatican I under protest, and this included a number of American bishops at the time as well.

But of those who decided to break away, a number of local parishes particularly in Germany and Switzerland appealed to the independent Dutch church for help as they would need bishops to maintain the apostolic succession if they were to survive on their own. The Dutch church provided both bishops and priests for the schismatics who would become known as Old Catholics, independent Catholic bodies theologically the same as the Roman Church in every way except for the issue of the supremacy of the bishop of Rome. It was from these movements that the Orthodox Catholic Church would have its beginnings in the person of Joseph Rene Villatte, a Frenchman and originally a Roman Catholic who journeyed to the New World. He spent much of his earlier years in Canada and then later lived in Wisconsin. It was during the American years that he was ordained as an Old Catholic priest after travelling to Holland to visit the Dutch Church. When he returned to America he began to serve a community of Old Catholics in Wisconsin for a number of years. After a while he felt the need to be made a bishop for practical reasons such as being able to confirm his parishioners and to consecrate holy oils while living in isolation far from the Netherlands. But for certain political reasons he was denied the request by the Dutch Church. Undeterred, he sought to be made a bishop elsewhere and found those willing to help in the Eastern Church. Particularly the Syrian Orthodox Church, the home of the great See of Antioch welcomed him and he was made a bishop in one of that church's missionary outposts on the Malabar Coast of India. Through this ordination, Villatte became a unique man to possess Holy Orders from both the Eastern and the Western churches, and as a result the Independent Catholic Church he formed in North America bears the name Orthodox Catholic because of its ties to both East and West. Villatte was intent on spreading this independent church in North America and through his episcopacy ordained at least a dozen bishops. Many of them remained in North America, but one of his consecrands named Frederick Lloyd ordained a man to take the Orthodox Catholic church into England. Churchill Sibley, the bishop for England set up shop in the 1930s in his native land. And it was through his efforts that another prominent Englishman would be made a bishop and consequently foster what would become the Australian line of the Orthodox Catholic Church.

John Ward, a Cambridge scholar and expert on world religions and secret societies held a high post in the British Government until he and his wife both experienced the same magnificent dream in the late 1920s. Each of them dreamt that they were brought into the presence of Christ on the highest plane of heaven where he is surrounded by the Seraphim who constantly adore him. It was there that they were commissioned by Jesus to prepare the way for his Second Coming. Like modern day "John the Baptists," John and Jessie Ward began a mystical journey at that date and set out to do what they were instructed. Their initial mission was to the British nation who if responsive to the message would have the privilege of being the nation to welcome Jesus Christ upon his return. Unfortunately they were met by hostility at the hands of the Anglican Church in which Ward had been raised and in which both his father and grandfather were priests. John Ward ultimately got kicked out of his own church and desiring to become a priest

himself received ordination instead at the hands of Sibley who was the leader of the Orthodox Catholic Church in England. Things remained hostile for Ward and his small band of followers and they decided to leave England, journeying first to Cyprus and then to Australia where communities now exist scattered around the country.

Following the mystical instructions they were given, it has been the chief focus of the Orthodox Catholic Church in Australia to prepare the way of the Lord. It is their goal to make as much of the world as possible ready to receive her king, for to a large extent the time of his coming depends on how much we want him to return and reign over us. But it cannot be delayed indefinitely and if the Son of Man comes and does not find faith on the earth, it will signal the destruction of many rather than peace for the masses, a situation that we would all like to avoid. Because of its preoccupation with the Second Coming, the Australian branch of the Orthodox Catholic Church has for its emblem the crown in recognition of Jesus the coming King. In a mystical vision, John and Jessie Ward were given a symbol for the Work of Preparing the Way of the Lord in the form of a red and white shield with a Crown on top of it. The shield itself is a red cross symbolizing sacrifice on a field of white representing purity, and it is the banner of the One who will shortly come to us to rule the world from one ocean to the next.

But the job of preparing the world for Christ's return is not the only mission of the Orthodox Catholic Church. Through its mystical contact with the angels and the saints along with its scholarly research, it believes itself to have uncovered a number of teachings of the ancient church that have fallen by the wayside and have perhaps been forgotten, hidden, or just plain lost over the centuries. There are a number of reasons why this might have happened throughout the past age, but suffice it to say, the Orthodox Catholic Church believes that part of the preparation for the Second Coming is reawakening the world to teachings that have largely disappeared since the Savior last walked on earth. This is because such teachings will form the foundation upon which Jesus will build when he delivers a higher revelation to us for the New Age that is now beginning to dawn. The information that this branch of the church has to share constitutes ideas that can broaden man's understanding of reality. With its detailed understanding of the afterlife, the Orthodox Catholic Church can shed light on the journey of man and reveal his ultimate destiny as well as the purpose of his existence. It also has knowledge to share that can effectively demystify many of the spiritual puzzles and paradoxes that have plagued good souls for centuries. It is therefore the mission of this branch of Christianity to teach and provide answers to all earnest seekers after truth.

## Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

This week's epistle comes from the words of Peter in his first general epistle. In the sections prior to this one he spent time spelling out how particular individuals should act. First he dealt with slaves and their masters and then he addressed the behavior of husbands and wives. Now he speaks to all believers encouraging them to develop virtues. He wants the community of faith to learn to live in harmony with each other which he knows is absolutely essential to the survival of the church. Satan's main interest is in creating divisions through badmouthing and feelings of jealousy and hatred for others. Already Paul the fellow apostle of Peter had to deal with such rivalries and problems in the church at Corinth where people were envious of one another's spiritual gifts. And Peter is intent on preventing a similar situation from occurring among his own readers.

Peter urged his listeners to follow the way of love through the virtues of compassion and humility. And the way of love that he fosters entails the turning the other cheek approach that Jesus advocated in the gospel. He reminds his readers that they need to rise above the temptation to retaliate for every slight and offence that comes their way and let them go. His message is that of the Master in which the call is to return a blessing for every evil that is done to us. Far from the natural human response, the Christian way is the higher road and the only path by which we can live in peace and harmony with each other.

Peter seeks to remind his audience that behaving in the Jesus approved way doesn't necessarily leave the individual hung out to dry without any form of compensation. Rather the apostle suggests that by returning good to those who show us evil or by blessing those who abuse us, we ourselves will receive a blessing. It might not be immediate or next week or even next year, but the law of God will ensure that we are repaid for our sacrifice of the desire to get revenge. It may come as a temporal blessing or as a spiritual blessing. But come it will, and Peter quotes Psalm 34 which seems to suggest a temporal blessing for showing goodness to others, even others who do us harm. The promise in that passage is that the one who lives by the way of love will see good days, or by implication many good days. It is similar to the promise of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment which also pledges length of life for honoring one's father and mother.

But perhaps we need to be careful before we take such promises too literally and become resentful when an unrealistic expectation doesn't pan out the way we hope. The Lord himself who epitomized how to love one's enemies was cut off from the land of the living by 35 years old, hardly an old man. It would be inappropriate for us to interpret what happened to him as a failure of some rigid promise. What is true is that we will be repaid by God for the good that we do, but it won't necessarily be in the way we expect or desire and perhaps not even in this life. It may be that we are rewarded with long life and health and other nice temporal things, but this doesn't always happen and it is not a failure of God to remember what we have done.

In any event, Peter quotes Psalm 34 to reiterate that God takes notice of our attempts to practice righteousness and refrain from evil. If we learn to control our tongues from speaking evil of our neighbors and pursue peace, God will certainly see it. The Psalmist writes that “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their prayer.” God is well aware of even our feeble attempts to cooperate with his law and he records it on his scroll. Meanwhile the writer of the Psalm wants to encourage the reader that God also has not forgotten about the workers of iniquity. He knows about their evil deeds and isn’t going to let them slide either. Just like we may not get repaid for a good work until the distant future, in the same way evil deeds may not be repaid for a very long time as well. And part of the reason for that is that God is patient and wants to give us time to amend our ways before he is forced to enact retribution. Additionally because he is merciful, he wants to hold off punishment until the best time for us to deal with it in a situation where we can best cope with its severity. For this reason, Jesus says in today’s gospel that the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous, and the sun rises on both the good and the evil. Though in the short term it may appear that both good and evil are left uncompensated, ultimately we will all be repaid at a later date, for this is the law of God himself.

Wrapping up today’s epistle, Peter makes an attempt to convince his readers to do good by appealing to a little common sense. He suggests that it is unlikely that anyone should receive harm for doing well to others, and so we shouldn’t have a fear of reprisal or persecution for doing what is right. Of course his rhetorical question needs to be qualified and like the idea that we should always be compensated with some form of specific temporal blessing, we should not always expect to be appreciated for the works of righteousness that we do. The testimony of the martyrs is enough for us to know that this is not true. Many a missionary has been persecuted as well at the hands of those they were trying to help often because they were not understood. While the reality of martyrdom may be unrealistic in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, persecution for righteousness is still a possibility and potentially at the hands of those who are envious of our labors for God. It should not come as a complete surprise if we find ourselves slandered as a result of someone else’s jealousy or because we have made them feel guilty by our actions. But if this situation should arise, it is only because God has allowed it in our best interests and compensation will come in the form of the 8<sup>th</sup> beatitude where Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”

Peter’s final words to us today follow his exhortation to not be afraid even if we are persecuted for doing what is right. He anticipates the occasional need to defend our actions and the reasons we are behaving in our uniquely Christian way. He commands his hearers to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.” Peter’s instruction doesn’t mean that we have to be a theologian or top notch apologist in making an explanation for our actions. It might simply be that we are called upon to give a simple testimony of our personal faith in God, and it could be that others will want to follow what we have to say. If we are unprepared to explain ourselves when queried by a well meaning individual, then it is important to

realize that God will hold us responsible for not doing our best to give witness to Jesus Christ. And in the worst cast scenario, an opportunity will be lost to lead someone on the path to God.

Spending a couple minutes on the gospel reading, most of you would know that it comes from the Sermon on the Mount. And in that famous sermon from Matthew's gospel, Jesus made an effort to offer a new interpretation of the Law of Moses. While the concept of love was hinted at in the Old Covenant, for the most part it was veiled, and Moses message was an "eye for an eye" and a "tooth for a tooth." It was a covenant based on retribution and revenge which can never bring peace but only escalating hostility. So entrenched were the Jewish people in the way of retaliation that they even warped what few reference there were to love in the Law of Moses.

Leviticus 19:18 enjoined the Israelites "not to seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." In the gospel reading, Jesus intimates that this original command was perverted to say "love your neighbor, and hate your enemy." Clearly the rank and file Jew at the time had only a limited sense of love, one that could only be shown to those who were worth loving. Jesus went on to say that in truth such love was of little value according to the high standard of God. Even the dregs of society, the tax collectors could show love to those who treated them well, not to mention the Gentile nations that surrounded the people of Israel. If those who were considered "dogs" could love those who were nice and friendly, what credit would it be to an Israelite to do the same? Jesus raised the bar on that day for the world when he announced that the way to perfection was to learn to do the unnatural thing of loving those who hate us and are not nice to us. The sobering reality is that making the quantum leap from easy or convenient love to sacrificial and unselfish love is a necessary requirement to achieving sanctity. It is what it means for a human being to become perfect, and Jesus set perfection as our goal when he said, "Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect."

## **Festival of the Divine Father**

Today we celebrate the feast of the Divine Father within the Orthodox Catholic Church. As with other church calendars, the year is broken up into a number of feasts that commemorate events in the life of Jesus as well as special days that recognize the great saints who have lived during the church age. Perhaps somewhat unique to this denomination there are four major celebrations, one each for the members of the Trinity as well as a special day for all of the angels and saints which we collectively call the Feast of the Heavenly Hierarchy. Each of these four feast days are spaced roughly a quarter apart to break up the church year into seasons like we have in the physical world.

The timing of each feast more or less corresponds with the attributes or characteristics of that member of the Trinity that is being celebrated. The Divine Father or God the Father is commemorated toward the end of June which ties in with the brightness of the sun at that time of year. In ancient Mesopotamian religions, often there were a few principle deities that were worshipped, usually three including a Father God and a Mother Goddess. The Father deity was associated with the sun while the Mother deity was linked with the moon. A number of cultures envisioned the 5 planets that were visible to the naked eye as their children like Venus which we call the Bright Morning Star.

Biblically we follow aspects of these ancient representations and continue the tradition of light being associated with the Divine Father. James the Lord's brother connected the first member of the Trinity with light at the beginning of his epistle when he said, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights." And because of this tradition in the early church, light has always played a prominent part in every Mass that is celebrated. In fact, the whole Trinity is always represented around the altar under their appropriate symbols. God the Father is captured in the light that emanates from the candlesticks burning on the altar while the Holy Spirit (or Divine Mother) is represented by the flowers which are arranged about the altar. Of course the Divine Son is symbolized by the cross which is always displayed on the altar.

Following the ancient precedent we celebrate the feast of the Divine Father at the time of the Summer Solstice when the sun is highest in the sky in the Northern Hemisphere. Even in pre-Christian times, the celebration of Mid-Summer's Day at this time of year was very important and can be thought of as a precursor of celebrating God the Father. In Europe a number of temples bear witness to the premium paid to the solstice including one of the most famous in England which we know as Stonehenge. But in Greece, Egypt and Babylon there were important festivals on this day as well.

Now there are additional connections that we can make after establishing a link between the Divine Father and the sun or source of light, and that is a cardinal direction. Because it is the place of the rising sun, the East is associated with God the Father in a special way. Historically, this direction has been connected with spirituality and has been thought of as the gate of birth. That the ancients thought this way is reflected in a number of texts not the least of which is Genesis in which Adam and Eve are formed in the garden east of Eden. The East then is the symbolic source of light and life, and by

contrast the West as the place where the sun goes down has long been associated with death. And this is particularly true in the Old Norse and Germanic mythologies.

The cardinal directions play an important part in our ritual as employed in the Mass, and this is demonstrated particularly in the censuring rite near the beginning of the service. The incense is directed in all four directions. Initially it is directed toward the East and the rising sun in recognition of God the Father. Historically, the church has recognized the symbolic importance of this cardinal direction, and for many centuries all churches were constructed so that they were facing east. The high altar would always be erected along the eastern wall of the church so that the priest would face east while celebrating the Eucharist. It was even traditional in many church grave yards to bury the dead with their feet facing east because of an expectation that when Christ came again they would arise facing him when he appeared.

If we were to associate a color with God the Father, it should follow that it would be the color of fire or red. And this is significant as well, for red is the symbol of power. It is the high energy color of strength that we well recognize in the world and naturally it epitomizes the Father who we see as the strong member of the Trinity. Though we believe that all three members of the Trinity cooperated in the act of Creation, in a special way we attribute God the Father as the generative source and power from which emanated all that is. For this reason he is rightly recognized as the Creator in the ancient creeds.

Now with the theme of God the Father that we are celebrating today, it is probably appropriate that our epistle reading comes from the Old Testament in the initial encounter of Moses with God in the Burning Bush. In a certain sense, the whole of the Old Testament is the relationship of the Israelites with the Father alone as their strictly monotheistic viewpoints did not yet have room for the Trinity. They only knew that God was One at that point in history. And some have suggested that the age spanning the life of Abraham until the coming of Christ be known as the Age of the Father because it was dominated by Israel's concept of God as Creator and Law Giver. By contrast the age that we are now living in since the appearance of Jesus Christ should be known as the Age of the Son, for God's redemptive plan for man has been revealed to humanity. And we expect the age that is even now dawning at the return of Jesus to signal the Age of the Holy Spirit, because it will be a time dominated by love and peace that the world has not yet known.

But today we are remembering the Divine Father and focusing on the story of Moses and the Burning Bush, much can be said about the prophet's initial encounter with God. We should recall that Moses had spent the first 40 years of his life in Egypt in the royal household when he fled to the wilderness after killing an Egyptian. The next 40 years were spent tending the flock of his father-in-law, and at the end of this period he was to receive the call that would consume the final 40 years of his life, the call to be a prophet for the young nation of Israel.

At first it probably wasn't a very interesting thing to see a brush fire in the desert. After all, such a hot dry place facilitated a lot of little fires which the shepherds usually paid no mind to. But this one was different, and Moses took a closer look because though the shrub appeared on fire it was surprisingly not getting consumed. Of course it was a miraculous event which got the attention of the prophet to be, but there are other nuances to this encounter that have some relevance as well, perhaps in more of an allegorical way.

Two images are in play in this story including the bush and the fire, or perhaps we could say more generically a small tree and the fire. Trees are an ancient symbol and have been interpreted in various ways, though in the bible one meaning is particularly useful to us today. The Psalms speak of a righteous man as a tree planted by a stream of water, and Isaiah uses the metaphor of trees clapping their hands to depict the joy of the righteous. Even Jesus uses the symbol in reference to man when he said, "A tree is known by its fruit." Allegorically then, it wouldn't be inappropriate then for us to suggest that the bush that was on fire is a symbol of each and every human being. But we could rightly ask why it should be burning.

To answer this question, we should consider the symbolism of the fire itself which was engulfing the bush. The scripture passage itself suggests that it was God himself who had appeared in the fire that was enveloping the shrub without consuming it. Indeed it was a fitting manifestation for him, because the bible often likes to refer to God as a fire because of the particular attributes of the flame. He is compared to a consuming fire that burns up everything in its path. St. Francis extended this concept in a way that is relevant to our reading today, for he said that "our God is a consuming fire; he burns and we burn with him." The message that is being delivered through this imagery is that God is a refiner's fire always seeking to purify us and burn away all sin and evil that clings to our souls. When we come in contact with God we are going to feel the heat as his presence begins to melt away the dross in our hearts. But it is not a destructive fire that is set on eliminating us. Rather it is a friendly fire that only seeks to purify us, and for this reason the bush burns without becoming consumed.

Though the fire will necessarily be painful at first as it does its work of cleansing, eventually the flames will accomplish their task and we will burn with God in a way that we had not expected. We will be set ablaze with the fire of love which is the true nature of God and be consumed with passion and zeal for the One who has engulfed us in his holy conflagration. It is God the Father, the Divine Fire who we are remembering today that will accomplish this task in his beloved children. As we enter this summer season and feel the heat of the sun upon us, let us celebrate the Father who has not only created us but has lavished us with his divine light and filled us with his love.

## First Sunday after the Festival of the Divine Father

In the epistle that we read today, we continue the narrative of Moses when he was called to lead the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. At first God appeared to him in the Burning Bush to get his attention, and then he spoke to him about his plans to rescue the Israelites. Moses was a bit taken aback that God wanted him to do this job, for he undoubtedly considered it nearly impossible. He wondered how he could simply walk into Pharaoh's court and request that he release the Hebrews. On top of this he questioned how he could acquire the trust and confidence of the Israelites in the first place. How would they know that he wasn't some charlatan?

Perhaps Moses underestimated his unique qualifications for the job that God was calling him to. He of all people could march into the hall of the king and have an audience with Pharaoh as he had been raised in the royal court himself as the adopted son of an earlier Pharaoh's daughter (Queen Hatshepsut.) Because he was known to the government officials, he was probably just about the only Hebrew who could get a word in with the king. But Moses' concern about gaining the faith of the Israelites was another story, and he worried about what he would tell them if the people asked the name of the God he was representing.

This might seem a bit strange to us, as we would presume that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was well etched in the minds of the Hebrews, but this was not necessarily so. The Israelites had been deeply submerged in the polytheistic religion of the Egyptians for over 400 years and to many of them, the God of the Israelites was just one of many deities. There were many prominent gods of Egypt in that day, and not least among them was the bull-god Apis and the cow-goddess Hathor. For this reason we shouldn't be surprised that a short time after liberation from Egypt, the Hebrews constructed the Golden Calf to worship and prominently displayed horns on their various altars.

When Moses asked God how he should answer the people's expected question about his deity, he said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." His response to the prophet reminds most of us of the famous spinach loving strong armed cartoon character that we know as Popeye who always said this about himself. But I am sure that God's description of himself is more profound. After saying this to Moses, God repeated that he should tell the Hebrews that "I AM" has sent you to them. That response also may seem a bit cryptic but is best understood in conjunction with the next sentence in which God tells Moses to say to the elders of Israel that the LORD the God of your fathers has sent me to you.

The word LORD that is used here and throughout the rest of the Old Testament is not the same as our English word meaning master or a person in authority. In the original Hebrew language, the name is something very different and is known to scholars as the Tetragrammaton implying that it is a word made up of four consonants, YHWH. In ancient written Hebrew, there were only consonants and no vowels to form the words.

Because many different words had the same spelling, readers would have to be able to decipher the correct word in a passage by its context.

Unfortunately, though there is no clue from the written language on how the word should be pronounced, there is also no oral tradition either. This is because the ancient Jews greatly revered the holy name of God and were afraid to speak it out loud. So instead of using the special name YHWH, they would generally refer to their deity generically as “God” to avoid potentially blaspheming or being disrespectful. Perhaps Jews living 2000 years ago knew the correct pronunciation of the special name of God, but it has now been long lost to history.

To complicate matters more, two of the consonants in the Tetragrammaton can be pronounced differently. The Y can be pronounced as a J and the W as a V. Scholars have speculated about potential pronunciations, and the most popular pronunciation that is given today is YAHWEH but admittedly this is only a best guess. The other popular rendition that was used for centuries by the English people was JEHOVAH, but this also was speculation. Suffice it to say, we really don’t know how to pronounce the name of God but we more importantly know what it means and can derive other significant information from it.

Essentially YHWH is related to the Hebrew for life (“Havah”) and has been defined by a number of scholars as simply the “Everliving One” or the “Self-Existing One.” This special name that God has revealed to us is at once simple and greatly profound, for it echoes the very essence of God’s nature. Within this sublime name is the most basic definition for God that mankind can grasp. It is the idea that God is life and the source of all life. His exists without a beginning and without an end, and he is Eternity itself. From God’s perspective there is no past or future, there is no “was” or “will be” for all is in the eternal present to the One who is always living. And this meaning ties in with the other sublime name that God gave Moses when he said, “I AM.” It is basically a shorted form of YHWH and also expresses that God is the Eternally Present One, simply existing as life itself.

All of creation derives its life from the Everliving One, and for this reason the bible uses many images which seek to connect the Source with those who have been created. Frequent allusions are made in the scriptures to the “water of life,” or the “river of life,” or the “tree of life” all of which are metaphors that form a link between the Eternal One and the creation he has spawned, an extension of his own being. The scriptures often seek to drive home the idea that creation is alive only to the degree that its vital link with God is kept healthy. While this is true of physical life, it is certainly true of spiritual life as well and man must continually make an effort to keep the river of life flowing freely between the throne of God in heaven and himself here on earth.

There are other implications to the name YAHWEH, some connected to the concept of God as life and others hinting at God as Trinity. We mentioned at the beginning of this sermon that there are four primary consonants in the Old Testament name of God, YHWH, and if we consider that each consonant has a gender delineation it can shed some

more light on the nature of God. Unlike English, words and letters frequently have a gender associated with them in other languages like the ancient languages of Greek and Hebrew. Within Hebrew particularly each letter of the alphabet is treated as being masculine, feminine, or neuter. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the word YHWH has all three of these genders present in the divine name. The first letter Y (Yowd) is masculine while the second letter H (He) is feminine. The third letter W (Vav) happens to be neutral while the fourth letter H (He) is once again feminine.

Concentrating on the first three consonants, we see a masculine, feminine, neuter sequence which hints at our ancient understanding of the Trinity with God the Father as the male figure and God the Mother (which we also call the Holy Spirit) as the female figure. The neuter third consonant might seem inappropriate when referring to the Divine Son, but from a mystical perspective this is not necessarily so. Who we call the Divine Son is the product of both the Father and the Holy Spirit and integrates within himself the divine attributes of both so that he can be viewed as neutral from a spiritual perspective. It is Christ who brought forth all creation and all creation is held together within him as we are told in the epistle to the Colossians. In this sense, it is both the male and female qualities of God that are made manifest in the Creation and they are directly linked with Christ whose job it was to bring forth through himself these attributes in the visible world.

In any event, beyond the Trinitarian implications, the name YAHWEH suggests both the male and female qualities of the Deity and once again this ties back to the idea of God as life and the source of all life. The masculine and feminine principles within God are complementary spiritual natures, opposite forces that may be said to sustain not only life within the creation but life within God himself. Within the creation the interplay of male and female is necessary for the propagation of life and so in a spiritual way it is also true of the intrinsic life within God the source of all. In the East the tradition has been called Yin and Yang with the former being associated with the feminine while the latter is linked with the masculine. One is the universal passive principle while the other is the universal active principle. One is the cosmic receiving principle and the other is the cosmic giving principle. And it is the interaction of these two opposites which sustains all life. One is analogous to breathing in and the other to breathing out, and were we to lack either one life would cease.

## Second Sunday after the Festival of the Divine Father

The focus of today's first reading is the Creation of all things and is relevant to us particularly because of the mention of light in the first act. This of course ties in with the theme of the Divine Father whose season we continue to celebrate for some weeks this summer. And while we will revisit the theme of light a little later in this sermon with some symbolic interpretations of this part of Genesis, it might be good to share an overview of the Creation story itself since a lot of things are jam packed into those introductory verses of the book.

What may be useful is offering an explanation of how the biblical story reconciles with the scientific account of creation, which after making some allowances for the limited perspective of the biblical author can be shown to harmonize fairly well. It is not clear if Moses himself was the visionary who saw the past history of the universe or if he had adapted the work of a prior seer, but the first thing that jumps out at us from the Genesis account is the framework of the story which is broken into 7 days. It seems likely that part of the reason for doing this was to justify the seven day week which was in competition with other cycles like the 10 day week in China and Egypt and the 8 day week of the Romans, and many other variations. Ultimately the 7 day week which had its origins in Mesopotamia honoring the Sun, Moon, and five visible planets has left its legacy in the Western World particularly in Latin language countries where all the original names are still preserved.

That the 7 days of Creation were not a literal reality but only a literary construct is fully in harmony with the Hebrew language in which the word for day (Yowm) is used acceptably in either a literal or figurative way just as we would use it today in modern English. And then if we interpret a day as a long epoch period in the Creation saga, we are well on our way to harmonizing with the scientific account which has placed the origin of the universe at between 13 and 14 billion years ago. According to the scientific view, in the beginning there existed an infinitely dense point (like a black hole) that suddenly exploded and thrust out from itself light and matter at an incredible velocity and which continues to expand to this day filling up what we know as the universe. Perhaps it is the light that broke forth in this one momentous event at the dawn of the universe that the biblical visionary has in view when on the first day God was said to create the light.

After what is probably an enormous period of time, roughly 8 billion years, the Genesis author begins focusing on the earth itself in the second day. Since the start of the universe many stars have been born and died but one is of interest to the visionary for it is the one that has nurtured mankind, and so the story of the sun and this solar system unfolds beginning around 4.5 billion years ago. It was then that a great gas cloud began to collapse upon itself and in the generation of the enormous heat involved, the sun was born and from the fiery molten mass that was ejected from the sun, the earth and the other planets formed. Initially our planet was just a liquid sea of molten metal spinning around the new-born sun. On this the second day of Creation, God was said to separate water from water. He made an expanse to separate the water above from the water below. And

if this sounds a little cryptic, we have to remember the terminology of the prophet who lived 3500 years ago. In the Hebrew, water is generic for what we might call juices or fluids, and in all likelihood what the seer envisioned was the formation of the earth's crust from the molten metal liquid as the planet cooled down sufficiently. This solid layer or expanse would divide the still molten inner earth from the sky or newly formed atmosphere above it.

More effects of the cooling earth are in view on the third and fourth days of Creation. As just mentioned, the planet was initially molten and even after it cooled enough for the top layer to solidify, it was still way too hot to allow any liquid water to collect on the surface without immediately boiling away. As a result for millions of years, the abundant water that we associate with the earth was forced to remain as vapor in the atmosphere. Eventually though, the ground cooled enough to start allowing the water to condense in low lying areas and the rains began to gradually form oceans and other bodies of water. The author of the Genesis account depicted this when on the third day he saw a division between the dry land and the seas.

Ultimately, with the bulk of the water vapor condensed upon the planet and the cloud cover finally breaking up, the biblical visionary was able to see beyond earth's atmosphere for the first time. No longer obscured by the dense water vapor saturating the heavens above, the sun, moon, and stars appeared through the clear skies. From the limited perspective of the prophet, it would have seemed as if God suddenly made all of these heavenly bodies and placed them in the sky to look at, but this was clearly not so, for in the birth of any solar system, its sun is formed first and then the planets that surround it.

But now we can ask about the development of life on planet earth. It would not have been until the surface of the earth cooled enough to allow bodies of water to form before the first primitive forms of life began to emerge in the oceans. Science tells us that life started in the water, and it took the form of very elementary single celled organisms like various forms of bacteria. This probably occurred during the Genesis writer's third and fourth days of creation but not having a microscope he would have been unaware of what was beginning to stir in the oceans that formed. Not until the fifth day of Creation was the visionary able to actually see life moving about in the seas, and from that point we see the author's attempt to make a rough explanation of the evolutionary process.

Initially according to the fossil record, those primitive single celled organisms evolved into fish of various sorts, and this reconciles with the visionary's observation that at the beginning of the fifth day the water was teeming with living creatures. Fish seem to dominate the activities of the fifth day as we would expect early in the process of evolution, but by the sixth day the focus seems to shift to the land which we would also presume according to the scientific theory. Perhaps seeking to escape predators in the seas, some fish worked their ways up the rivers and spending a life half in the water and half in the mud along the shoreline developed into amphibians similar to the frog-like creatures we have today. After awhile these early amphibians eventually proceeded to

live permanently on the land and became known as reptiles, the most famous of which in the early history of the earth were the huge dinosaurs that roamed the planet.

From the reptilian stage, mammals began to develop which is what the visionary of Genesis is talking about when he mentions livestock and wild animals. Of course as we would anticipate from evolutionary theory, the biblical seer offers as his final commentary that man was created last of all the creatures. As the last link in a long chain of evolution in which primitive mammals developed into ape-like creatures and finally into the human family, mankind is presented by the author of Genesis as the pinnacle of God's creation.

Thus after 6 very long days and eons upon eons of time, Creation has progressed to this point long after the spark that set it all in motion. While the bible may corroborate the scientific story of the evolution of the universe and our planet in a crude format, we don't look to the scriptures as a science textbook per se' but as a spiritual resource. And while there may be some objective facts about the story of our world in the opening verses of Genesis, there are spiritual ideas present as well on a higher level.

What the bible often depicts through various forms of symbolism is the story of the human soul from its infant stages to the heights of its development. At the beginning of its earthly journey, the soul is clouded in a spiritual darkness without any knowledge of God shining within it. For this reason, we read in the first few verses of Genesis that darkness was upon the face of the deep, and allegorically this may represent the darkness of man's spiritual mind in the very beginning of his human existence. The remedy for this situation is depicted in the next verse where the Spirit of God was said to move over the dark waters. We can understand from this that it isn't until God begins to work on man's soul that the seed of light begins to germinate within him and he begins to develop a steady and growing belief in God dispelling his natural darkness.

When God's spirit moves on the waters of man's mind, there is an ignition of the light within to grow into a flame of fire. When God said, "Let there be light," the light exploded from deep within the primordial darkness. Out of pitch black and nothingness the light emerged to flood the universe, and so it is with mankind that within the utter spiritual darkness that engulfs him, the light breaks forth from the inner recesses of his being. We might ask how something can come out of nothing, which is perhaps a valid philosophical question. In reality we can think of everyone as having a very small pilot light hidden within themselves which is virtually undetectable, a small flicker of the divine nature. It would be analogous to the small point that seeded the entire universe in the original massive explosion. It is this embryonic light that has the potential to be fanned into a massive flame and become a great beacon of light to all those around.

Many natural processes portray this reality. Not only did the light shine out of the darkness at the dawn of Creation, but it continues to do so every day on our planet in an event that we are all too familiar with. Each morning the sun rises up out of the dark night sky to illuminate the earth. God is telling us with every sunrise that the light needs to break forth from the heart of man where it is hidden in latent form. God gives a

similar message at the end of every day when the sun is swallowed up by the darkness of the night. The sunset teaches us that this potential light is concealed within each man like a pilot light in a dark oven only needing some fuel to burst into a flame. The daily retreat of the sun into the blackness is God's reminder to us that within man the light is in embryo waiting in the wings to germinate and develop. It is up to us to respond to God when he moves on the waters and let the light illuminate us from the inside out. It is then that we can follow Jesus' commandment in the Gospels to let our light shine before men and help others to ignite their own internal fires.

### Third Sunday after the Festival of the Divine Father

When Paul was on one of his missionary journeys in Athens, he began to speak to the learned men of the city in the place where all of the new religious ideas were exchanged. In this meeting of the city's elite, he sought for a way to get his message across in a way that the people could relate to. He pointed out to them that among all of the many altars he had seen in the city dedicated to various gods, there was one "open-ended" altar, an altar inscribed with the words, "To an Unknown God."

And so Paul began to tell the people that the One he wanted to speak to them about that day was this Unknown God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Maker of all the nations and the people of the earth. He proceeded to speak of this God as very intimate and very close to each one of us recognizing that in God we each draw life, movement, and our very being. As a means of appeal to his Greek audience, he decided to quote one of their poets who spoke of humanity as the offspring of God, and Paul built on this idea further giving his full approval to whichever Greek sage uttered those words.

Paul found a point of contact with his hearers in the idea that each and every one of us is a child of God, a son or a daughter sprung from the loins of God himself. Not that this was a new notion at the time, even among the writings of David in the Psalms there is a reference to the intimate connection between Creator and created. The prophet wrote in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, "You are gods. You are all sons of the Most High." And the immediate idea that is conveyed in that passage is that each human being so intimately shares kinship with the Divine Family, that men and women can be referred to as "gods" (little "g.") Like chips off the old block, all people are by virtue of their birth "sons of the Most High" for each was created out of the divine substance of the Father.

But even though this might be an objective reality, it is hardly the case that many have recognized the fact that humanity through sheer birthright is privileged to carry the title "sons of God." Throughout the ages some have considered the concept simply untrue while others have been downright hostile to it. Even in the modern age, a major world religion is very averse to the idea that people are rightly "sons of God." In recent times, a debate took place between a Christian scholar and a Muslim scholar and during the exchange, the Christian apologist kept referring to God as his Father. After awhile, the Muslim debater grew increasingly more and more agitated whenever his opponent would refer to God in this fashion. Finally the Christian asked why he was getting so upset to which the Muslim responded emphatically that God is not Father to us and we have no right to address him in that way. The Christian then asked the Muslim that if the relationship between God and man is not Father and son then what would he envision it to be. The indignant response of the representative of Islam portrayed a very different relationship, that of master and dog. He viewed God as the Divine order giver and man as the subservient one to carry out the orders. Not a particularly intimate relationship to say the least!

But we shouldn't think that the followers of Islam were the first to envision the association between God and man in this way. In a tradition very familiar to us, and one

from which we trace our own religious heritage there are similar sentiments. Perhaps surprisingly to those of us in the Christian faith, the idea of God as Father was just about a non-existent concept among the Jews of the Old Testament. The idea embodied on most of the pages of the Old Covenant scriptures was that God was the great Law-giver while man was his dutiful subject. Instead of the notion that God was their Father, the ancient Israelites by and large viewed him as a harsh taskmaster who was very demanding and not very lenient, easily provoked to anger and fast to display wrath.

We see this kind of perception of God early in the story of the Israelites, not long after they first emerged from captivity in Egypt. It was a short time after their exodus from slavery that the whole assembly came before Mount Sinai where Moses was to receive the Law of God. The Lord descended upon the mountain in fire and smoke, thunder and lightning and the people were so terrified that they trembled. They begged Moses that God should not speak to them directly but that Moses would be the intermediary to relay messages to them from the Almighty. They pleaded, "Do not have God speak to us or we will die."

And this wasn't the first time that the people of Israel corporately or on a smaller basis had fearful encounters with the Almighty. Throughout their time in the desert, they witnessed the hand of God against them on a number of occasions. On one occasion the ground opened up and swallowed several hundred of them alive. On another snakes appeared in the camp and killed a good number with their venomous bites. And yet another time, a plague suddenly broke out against them taking out 15,000 in one fell swoop. It is no wonder that the Pharisees were offended when Jesus referred to God as Father when he was preaching among the people. For the Jews, their relationship with Yahweh was stormy at best and far from what could ever be called a father/son association.

The God who is chronicled in the story of the Jewish people has caused many a thoughtful Christian to take pause when considering the rather brutal interaction between the Israelites and their God. Many have struggled to reconcile the seemingly docile God of the New Testament with the God who is depicted in the pages of the Old Testament. And some shrugging their shoulders have concluded that they must be two separate Gods. The God of love and peace that we meet through Jesus seems to be a far cry from Yahweh the warrior God of Moses, and we have to ask how can this be? Certainly God doesn't have a split personality as some unfortunate people do. What then can be the explanation for the very different representations of God between the two testaments?

As with many problems this paradox is more apparent than real. In actuality it is not that God's nature has varied one iota from the Old to the New Covenants much to our relief, for the prophet Malachi speaking for God attests, "I the Lord do not change." Rather it is more correct to say that the human perception of God has changed from the Old to the New Testament. The reality is that we each view God according to our own perception and not necessarily according to what is true. Depending on our own nature and disposition we will project an image of God which may or may not correspond to reality. In general, the more loving and selfless we are the more we will see God as kind and

merciful just as Jesus spoke of him. By contrast, the more sinful and selfish we are, the more we will view God as angry and full of wrath and punishment.

Though God is in truth the essence of love, if our perception of him is as the angry taskmaster, we will in fact get from him what we expect according to the distortion of our sin and the self-condemnation it deserves. For this reason, the Lord speaks of how he manifests himself to mortals according to what their dispositions call for. In the Book of 2 Samuel, he says, “To the faithful I show myself faithful, to the blameless I show myself blameless, the pure I show myself pure, but to the crooked I show myself shrewd.”

And it is the last item in that list that characterizes his relationship with ancient Israel, and that this was the case we shouldn't be surprised. A brutal and bloodthirsty people, the Israelites of old were collectively a far cry from benevolent and merciful souls. They were rather a crude, rough, and sinful people from the get-go. The stage was set right from the very beginning when Jacob's sons exhibited their barbaric tendencies when their jealousy led them to sell their brother into slavery. Later when the sister of the twelve brothers hooked up with a Canaanite, the clan was incensed and in cold-blood murdered her husband and entire family. In many ways the nation of Israel exhibited their cruelty not the least of which was their treatment of civilians in warfare, for they were not averse to ripping open pregnant women killing both the mother and child. Among their leaders were to be found murderers and adulterers which would make some of our own nation's officials appear rather saintly. But their failure to protect the young and vulnerable was even more deplorable, for they would willingly subject their daughters to the men of the street to suffer rape and death. Some of their activities might have even made Jeffrey Dahmer blush, as some among the ancient Jews were known to cut up the bodies of the deceased into multiple pieces and send them throughout the country.

The moral of the story is that a harsh people needs to be dealt with harshly, and this is exactly what the Israelites got on a regular basis. The only face of God they were used to seeing was the one of anger and wrath by their own choice. And so engrained was this distorted view of God in the people, that by the time Jesus came on the scene, many were not ready to hear what he had to say about a loving God that we should call Father. It was Jesus' mission to refresh the truth about God and man for those who were able to accept it, and so from the very beginning of his ministry he aimed at setting the record straight to let people know that it is really about God as Father in a loving relationship with his sons and daughters rather than as God the insensitive master and his subservient slaves. And he spelled this out very boldly in the Sermon on the Mount where he gave us the special prayer that begins with “Our Father” for he wished to reinstate the truth about our sonship which for long had been forgotten.

Jesus used intimate language to describe our relationship with the Father, for he referred to God in Aramaic as “Abba” a word that just doesn't mean father but something much more intimate. Jesus' choice of words expressed a real familial bond for Abba means “Daddy” as a child would fondly call his loving parent. This is the reality of mankind's relationship with God despite the fact that it is very often denied, repudiated, or just plain forgotten through the distortion of sin. Jesus came to remind us of the truth, that we are

all part of the family of God, true sons and daughters of the Most High as the Psalmist says. Let us remember in the words of Paul that we are the genuine offspring of God and seek to live up to that high position that our birth has afforded us.

## Fourth Sunday after the Festival of the Divine Father

Today's gospel reading is all about prayer as Jesus taught it in the Sermon on the Mount, and beginning with some basic instructions before he would reveal the special prayer we all know very well, he told the disciples to pray in secret as if they were squirreled up in a closet at home. And the reason he said this was to emphasize that we need to make every effort to avoid displaying our religious acts and good works for public view. The Pharisees used to make long flowery prayers in the marketplace to show their piety even though their hearts were far from God, and the Lord suggested that such people have no reward from God but have received what they really sought for, the praise of men. The truth is that God pays special attention to those who express their faith in secret taking as many pains as possible to avoid others knowing about the good that they are doing. The motto of the ancient Jews was to say "let your left hand not know what your right hand is doing," and so we should be as subtle as possible, doing acts of kindness for others anonymously if it is at all feasible. In such gestures of hidden piety, God will be pleased with the faith that one has to know that all that is important is that God notices what he has been doing rather than all of his friends. So we should make every effort to conceal our works of love from the notice of the public being satisfied that God alone recognizes our efforts, and we will be repaid at the right time according to how he sees fit.

After this preliminary remark, Jesus instructed that his followers should not speak too much as the heathens. The pagan peoples who surrounded the people of Israel were often inclined to offer prayers in a way as if they were beating a dead horse. Maybe their thought was that by babbling on and on they could convince God to answer their plea and get his attention. A good example of this behavior is actually attested right in the bible when Elijah had his contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. The showdown involved the bona fide God revealing himself, whether he be Baal or Yahweh, consuming a sacrifice on an altar with fire from heaven. The followers of Baal were up first and they pretty much tried to stand on their head to get their god's attention. They shouted aloud for hours and then danced around the altar. Then they began to mutilate themselves cutting themselves with swords and spears hoping that Baal would notice the sacrifice of their own blood. Finally they worked themselves up into an ecstatic frenzy, but nothing happened. Then it was Elijah's turn and after offering a short prayer, fire fell from heaven and engulfed the sacrifice leaving not even a trace of the altar itself.

The message here is that we do not have to jump up and down for God to notice us and take action. He knows what we are going to ask even before we do, and he knows what is in our hearts much better than we do ourselves. He surely will notice a short simple prayer that is offered in a genuine way. While this is the point that Jesus is driving home, it should be made clear that it is in no way a negation of the idea that we need to be persistent in prayer. Like the widow who badgered the judge repeatedly until she got justice from her enemy, we need to keep bringing our requests to God on a routine basis, perhaps every day which not only shows him our faith but teaches us the lesson of persistence whereby through repetition we can acquire this important virtue not only of value in this life but in the life to come.

And while on this subject, it is perhaps important to say that Jesus' words are not at all a repudiation of the idea that we may offer God repetitive prayers such as has been part of the Christian tradition for nearly 2000 years. In the Eastern Church, it was the monks' frequent style of prayer to say what is known as the Jesus prayer over and over again. They would recite, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner" sometimes hundreds of times in a row. Mantric prayers like this have proven themselves to be a wonderful way to follow the words of Paul to "pray without ceasing." It should be said, that such repetitive prayers like this one and the rosary are not so much about trying to get God's attention in case he didn't hear us the first time. Rather they are more about our own personal transformation and our efforts to draw near to God. One of the early fathers of the church said that such simple repetitive prayers lead to an inner stillness. In effect saying the same words over and over again has much spiritual power accompanying it to make a positive change in us rather than doing anything for God's benefit. And so we do well in offering chain prayers throughout the day whether it be the Jesus prayer, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and more recently the Divine Mercy prayer of St. Faustina all of which help us draw near to God.

After offering all of these introductory words, Jesus taught his disciples to pray that prayer that has become the staple of the Christian church for two millennia. Whether interpreted as the perfect prayer in and of itself or the ideal model of prayer, the Lord's Prayer pretty much outlines for us in what way our requests should be presented before God. And whether we are in the habit of praying it word for word or as the structure of our daily prayers, we can be sure we are aligning ourselves with what God wants.

The prayer begins with the words "Our Father" which is appropriate for us in this season of the "Divine Father" which we began to celebrate with the beginning of summer. As we have discussed earlier, part of Jesus' mission was to reintroduce to his fellow Jews the idea that God is in fact an intimate family relation and not an aloof master of many slaves. It was his purpose to rekindle the notion that we are all in fact sons and daughters of God, part of the divine family, and so the perfect prayer begins by addressing the one who has made us of his very substance and has showered his love upon us, for this is the highest way we can address God.

We are instructed in the perfect prayer to acknowledge that this God our Father dwells in heaven, and there are a number of things which can be said about this. Perhaps first off it is important to say that it is not a denial of the idea that God is everywhere, for in the words of Solomon, the highest heavens cannot even contain God. His presence abides in the heights above as well as in the netherworld for the Psalmist recognized that God would still be with him in Sheol. He is in fact everywhere and in everything, but in a special way he makes a tangible appearance in the highest tier of heaven where only the greatest Seraphim behold him face to face where he is seated on a throne in their midst. That we recognize that God is in heaven is an acknowledgement that he is far above us establishing that he is in control of the universe while we are merely his humble servants here below.

We then pray “hallowed be thy name” which is to say “may your name be honored and revered.” It is a recognition that God is lofty and sublime and is worthy of our utmost respect. We pay homage to the name that is above every other name which our Jewish predecessors so revered that they wouldn’t even dare to pronounce it. Rather than utter the ineffable name of the Most High, they chose instead to refer to him by other veiled references and generic words lest they should offend and blaspheme his holiness.

After we acknowledge our relationship to God and his indescribable greatness, we begin making our requests to him. The series of petitions begins with an appeal to his kingdom and to the carrying out of his will which are more or less ideas that are tied together. We ask that the kingdom of God should come meaning that it should appear on earth. In the ultimate sense we expect this at the Second Coming when the Savior will extend his benevolent reign from ocean to ocean and rule the entire planet. But this is only the greatest sense of the petition. When we ask “thy kingdom come” we are also asking that Jesus come to reign in the hearts of all the living, for as he told his disciples, “The kingdom of heaven is within you.”

The kingdom of God on earth is therefore a work in progress starting now in the hearts of his subjects and it is intimately linked with obeying God’s will as we infer from the next petition. God’s will is always done in heaven, for the angels and the saints obey his every instruction without hesitation. Whatever he wants they do gladly for it is their constant desire to please him however he wishes. On the other hand, we on earth are inconsistent and sometimes completely averse to following his instructions. The coming of the kingdom to earth will mean that we mortals learn to cooperate and carry out his will like our friends in the celestial spheres above. In fact Jesus can only reign over those who choose to follow his commands, and so when we pray that his kingdom come to earth we are asking that the hearts of as much of humanity as possible will be accepting of his reign when he brings peace on earth. The alternative is very unpleasant and a situation that we would like to avoid.

Moving on to the next petition we find a few meanings embedded in the request to “give us this day our daily bread.” We are encouraged to ask God for bread, the staple of life which metaphorically represents not only what we need to eat but whatever we have need of. It may of course pertain to physical needs but also to emotional and spiritual needs. However we need to be careful because what we think we need is often different from what God knows we need. The reality is that sometimes we need to suffer which can mean deprivation of food, clothing, or shelter as many people especially in foreign nations experience. It is not that God has failed them, but he is giving them what they require for their own spiritual progress, and so it is important that we avoid deciding what constitutes our bread and leave that to God.

But whatever needs he provides for us, we have to remember that he does so on a daily basis. In our human frailty we would like to stockpile a great supply of things we view as essential to our subsistence and survival, but this is not usually in our best interest. Because God wishes us to learn dependence on him, the goal is to live in the moment, on a day by day basis not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. We need to

only ask him for what is essential to us for the day, and this idea is probably no better illustrated than in the story of the manna on which the people of Israel subsisted for 40 years in the desert. We understand that it fell from the sky on a daily basis and the Israelites gathered it to make bread each morning. They were told to collect just enough for the family's meals for the day, and those who took more learned a quick lesson, for by the morrow whatever was left over became full of maggots and began to rot.

Now the translation used today for the reading of the gospel is known as the Douay-Rheims version, a highly accurate English translation which substitutes a different word for "daily" in this supplication. "Supersubstantial" is used instead and this choice of words alludes to another important application and that is to the very special "Bread from Heaven" that we know as the Eucharist. The Body of Christ is the true bread on which we feed for our spiritual sustenance. And for this reason many Christians choose to receive the Eucharist every day or a few times per week. In any event, regular reception of the Blessed Sacrament is of inestimable value to us for spiritual strength as we march through life.

Continuing with the next petition, we are instructed to pray for the forgiveness of our sins which Jesus somehow links to our practice of forgiving others. And this is a very important concept which is perhaps forgotten by many when they walk into the confessional. It would be a bit presumptuous of us to expect that the total penalty associated with each of our sins should necessarily be wiped out through absolution. The effects of this sacrament are not black and white but are contingent on a number of factors including our own degree of sorrow for what we have done and whether or not we have learned our lesson. But just as importantly the degree to which God is able to forgive our sins is directly linked with how well we are forgiving others who have offended us. Jesus tells us plainly after giving us the Lord's Prayer that this is so, for he says, that unless we forgive men when they sin against us, our heavenly father will not forgive our own sins. And the reason for this is simple and is connected to the spiritual principle of sow and reap. If a man shows love and mercy to others on a regular basis, he earns the right to receive love and mercy in return. What has not been planted cannot be harvested and this applies in all physical things as well as spiritual, especially in terms of forgiveness.

Focusing now on the last couple of petitions, we are told to pray "lead us not into temptation" which may be a little misleading. God continually authorizes the forces of darkness to test us and tempt us along the path of life, as this work is necessary for our training and development. Without exercising resistance against temptation, our spiritual muscles would become very weak and atrophied and there would be no growth. The struggle is what makes us stronger and this is in fact part of God's plan. Bearing all of this in mind, the best English translation of this petition is to say "let us not be overcome by temptation" which again is offered by the Douay-Rheims translation. Testing will surely come our way, and our prayer needs to be the request to withstand it successfully. We are promised that we will not be given any more than we can bear, and while this is indeed true, we need to ask God for the strength to accept whatever comes our way which in his design is never more than we can handle.

Finally, the closing supplication of the Lord's Prayer is a petition to "deliver us from evil." This sobering close to the perfect prayer is clearly directly linked with not being overcome by temptation. It is simply a plea not to give in to the way of evil which constantly beckons us in very subtle ways. But it is equally a request to be guarded from the forces of darkness who at times like to gang up on us and desire to inflict trouble. For this reason it is always important to be in the habit of making the sign of the cross, especially before bedtime for protection in the night from unseen evil as we sleep. We also do well to pray regularly to our guardian angel whose job it is not only to lead us through life but to guard us from the forces of darkness who would do us harm.

## Festival of Peace

Today marks the celebration of another feast within the Orthodox Catholic Church. Since the beginning of summer we have been celebrating the season of the Divine Father, and now we are going to take a break from it to celebrate what is called the Festival of Peace. Always commemorated around August 4<sup>th</sup>, it marks the day that England entered World War I which was originally considered the “war to end all wars.” Unfortunately this was not so, but the founders of this particular branch of the church thought it important to remember the tragedy of war and to rouse in the hearts of men the desire for world wide peace. Because it is clear that such peace cannot come before the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ in his Second Coming, we pause today to reflect on what his return will mean for us and humanity as a whole. And hopefully through reflecting on the great hope for peace we will long for it and pray earnestly for Jesus’ soon return to earth.

However, although peace will certainly come as it has been promised, it is unfortunately the case that there must be much trouble in the world before it does. As a mother must travail through labor before having the joy of holding her child or like a disease that has to get worse before it starts getting better, unrest and conflict must increase in the world before peace dawns on the horizon. Jesus spoke of this in the letter to the church of the Philadelphians that we read today when he said that an hour of trouble is going to come upon the whole world. In fact, the Savior was even more descriptive of this difficult time in Matthews’s gospel when he prophesied that “there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now – and never to be equaled again.” And on a sobering note he continued to say that if he should come back to earth just a little later than anticipated no one would survive for man’s inhumanity to man would have wiped out everyone.

We may ask why this has to be so. Why can’t he just come back on a day where things are happening as business as usual where the world is sort of status quo. Indeed that is still something that we can hope for, but there is a spiritual reality attached to the Second Coming that more or less dictates that things have to get worse before getting better. Whenever the Son of God comes to earth, he slowly descends through the heavenly spheres from his throne, passing first through the ranks of the great angels and then through the abode of the saints before finally approaching the realm of men. In a journey that often spans many decades, the forces of darkness launch an all out attack to stop him or at least to delay his planned return to earth, for they know that he brings much good with him to benefit humanity when he enters the world. As Jesus gets closer and closer to earth, the fighting intensifies and the conflict in the heavens spills over into the domain of man. Eventually when he is very near to the planet, the forces of evil manage to stir up a hornet’s nest inciting much evil on the surface of the earth as a final act of resistance and the conflict isn’t resolved until a momentous battle takes place which we have called Armageddon.

But when the Son of Man appears the world will at last be free of those who practice evil and who have opposed his return. The calamities that immediately precede his coming

will have ensured that such workers of iniquity will be banished to hell, for Jesus can only reign over those who are willing to accept his benevolent rule. For the first time in the history of the world, the righteous will be unshackled from the wicked in a comprehensive way, the wheat finally separated from the tares, and this reality will allow for the commencement of the glorious age of peace which will dawn in not too many years to come.

As the Old Testament tells us, the Son of God will rule the world from one ocean to the next spreading peace and justice from one corner of the earth to the other. But he will be no benevolent dictator; rather his goal will be to teach men how to rule themselves by spiritual principles rather than by the material interests that have driven war for long ages past. In this period man will learn to sublimate his animal instincts of territorialism, dominance, and jealousy that have fomented warfare for many thousands of years. With the tendency toward conflict and strife more or less conquered, men will “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” to quote the words of Isaiah.

The prophet also spoke of the “wolf and the lamb feeding together”, and “the lion eating straw with the ox.” While we don’t necessarily take such metaphors literally, what is implied is that the extent of peace in the earth will be great and pervasive and unlike anything the world has ever known until then. The peace that the earth will enjoy will apparently reach even beyond the cessation of war, for according to the prophet it will seemingly be the norm to live to a very old age. Presumably, with a genuine cooperative spirit among men, much disease will be conquered and abundant food will be available to all. But we can only imagine the quality of life in that day that is coming.

But while a near utopia approaches in the distance, we are left in the present longing for such a reality to come, and to a fair extent the timing of that age of peace that will come is in our own hands. If we greatly desire Jesus to come, this will accelerate his appearing, but if the majority of mankind opposes his return, it will be all the more delayed. This is because the Son of God wishes to bring peace to the world and not destroy it, for if he comes to an earth that is largely resistant to him, many more will be banished from his kingdom than he otherwise desires. Jesus comes to mend and not to rend, but eventually he will appear, and our prayer should be that he will find many ready to receive him. Jesus once posed a rhetorical question in a discourse to the disciples. He queried, “But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” In large part the answer to that question belongs to us whose job it is to get the world ready to receive her king, and indeed much suffering can be avoided if mankind will even now embrace its Savior.

Now we’ve been focusing on a specific kind of peace up to this point, one that will affect the world in the age to come in terms of freedom from war and potentially disease and natural catastrophes as well, but that is not the only peace that is in view as we celebrate this feast. While the one we have been describing is the mark of a golden age to come, it is only a shadow of a much deeper peace, one that can be understood in a mystical and ultimate sense.

What we are speaking about now is the peace that can only be found within the bosom of the Godhead, a perfect state of contentment and profound sense of rest that is beyond human comprehension. At times men may receive a sample of this peace, a teaser of this great attribute of God, but it is only a fleeting experience for mortals and even for the higher angelic beings. We may occasionally receive it in a time of great need, a sense that all is well despite the fact that the world is falling apart around us. Once in awhile we may partake of this inner quiet that keeps us still and undisturbed regardless of what is assailing us. Such godly peace is the type that allows men to endure great trials. It is the serenity that allowed the martyrs to go to their deaths without losing their minds, a composure that permitted them to be willingly fed to the lions and the bears, beheaded, or burned at the stake.

We may think of peace as freedom from conflict or easy living, a predictable life without problems or headaches to deal with, but that is not the peace that we ultimately find within God. For the Almighty this state of being is best imagined as a condition of pervasive and utter satisfaction which imperfect man cannot know. On earth the closest we can come to experience this divine quality is in the Eucharist, particularly when we visit Jesus when he is exposed before us on the altar. It is in this circumstance that we can feel the profound peace radiating from the Blessed Sacrament enveloping and silencing our anxious thoughts into a deep calm. The power of this peace is so great to relax us that it can put us to sleep in his presence as we are saturated in the sense that all is well. Indeed it is like the contentment of a well fed baby sleeping in a crib.

Such complete contentment is other worldly and has no parallel in our earth experience. No matter how easy life is or how tranquil things might be, man is by nature never quite satisfied with his condition and easily bored. Always seeking new experiences and new adventures, there is never a time in a person's life in which he feels that he has done everything and can now rest from his activity. Always restless, we fill our lives with things to do keeping ourselves busy, working or playing, learning or sharing our knowledge but there is no time that we are ever completely satisfied along the road of life. And indeed it is like that by design and by definition, for separation from God always produces a level of discontent, not in a bad sense but in a way in which the soul yearns for more. And it is the quest for more that is God himself whether the creature realizes it or not.

That there is a chasm between man and God is by definition the source of all discontent, struggle, and pain in life, for these undesirable conditions are by design the driving forces to propel the soul toward God where it can ultimately only find the rest and complacency it yearns for. The restlessness that man feels his whole life can only be remedied by what the saints have long called a mystical union with God. It is not until the soul becomes joined to the One who made it that it can ever experience the deep peace that it longs for, and in the language of the saints we call this the mystical marriage between God and the soul.

In the Book of Revelation it is called the Wedding of the Lamb, the great marriage feast that symbolizes this soul union between the Creator and the created. The ultimate goal of

mankind, this special bond between God and a soul can only be best described in human terms as the intimate relationship between a man and a wife. And if we can conceive of how close that feels, it is still but a poor representation of this blessed connection between man and the Almighty. Nonetheless the marriage motif runs throughout the bible to communicate to us the union we are called to, and even in today's epistle reading images of that idea are communicated in the letter to the Philadelphians.

Toward the end of that passage, Jesus promises that to the one who overcomes he will give his new name, and if we reflect on this we can see nuptial imagery that is part of our own Western tradition, for when a woman gets married she usually takes the name of her husband abandoning her own. In this cloaked language we can imagine the soul as the bride and God as the groom who bestows on his beloved his own name as if giving her a new identity. And we not only have this symbolism among these epistles to the seven churches but another Western wedding image hidden within Christ's letter to the church at Pergamum. In that passage, Jesus promises to the one who overcomes he will give a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. If we stretch our minds a little bit, we can conceive of this white stone as a diamond ring which a man gives to his betrothed as a symbol of their soon to be union.

Summing up our celebration of the Festival of Peace, we understand that humanity will receive this blessed gift in a temporal sense when Jesus comes to reign on the earth in the near future. But more importantly we recognize it in an ultimate sense when the soul enters into final union with its Creator and ceases from its labors. It is this peace that every soul craves in the deepest part of its being and it is a peace that can only be obtained by a person drawing steadily nearer and nearer to God until he has reached the goal. May a holy discontent rise up within us to swiftly drive us to that blessed place for which we are all called.

## First Sunday after the Festival of Peace

Today's gospel reading records the miraculous healing of a man born blind, one of many miracles that Jesus performed during his three year ministry. The narrative begins with an interesting question posed by the disciples about this blind man. Fairly sure that they were on the right track, they asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" A question clearly betraying the ancient Jewish belief in reincarnation, they assumed the man was born with his disability as a result of something bad he had done in a past life. In fact this was the Pharisee's accusation of the beggar toward the end of the story where they charged him with being born steeped in many sins to account for his congenital blindness. The disciples figured that the affliction was either the fault of the man who had sinned before birth or the fault of his parents who might have done something to deserve this punishment. And while their logic wasn't that bad, we learn that there was something else that accounted for the man's blindness. Without suggesting a flaw in the disciple's reasoning, Jesus suggested another possibility that they had not considered and for that matter something that Jews in general tended to disregard.

Jesus pointed out that sometimes disability and suffering are not the result of past sins but are instead sent as a test or opportunity for spiritual growth. In fact this was the whole purpose of the Book of Job to suggest that a flawless man could suffer tremendously, for in ancient times the prevailing train of thought was that trouble only came upon those who committed sins. While we are plainly told that Job was a very righteous man, the entire story illustrates how the men of past ages felt strongly that all suffering was the result of doing evil, and Job's "friends" constantly reminded him of their erroneous conviction much to his chagrin.

Jesus indicates in the narrative that rather than as a result of someone's sin, this disability from the man's very birth was for another reason and that was for the purpose of displaying the work of God in his life. Rather than as a lifelong punishment, the man's blindness would serve as a platform for many people to believe including himself, for we understand toward the end of the chapter that having believed in him, the formerly blind man was invited to become a follower of Jesus and presumably travel the countryside with him. Indeed through suffering, the blind man had earned the right to an opportunity for a wonderful situation that he hadn't before imagined. And that opportunity might not have materialized were it not for his disability and a miraculous cure that healed it. Perhaps nothing less than this work would have gotten the man's attention as it did many others. And of course this is the whole reason for performing miracles – so that people might believe the messenger and the message.

Focusing now on the healing itself, Jesus' cure seems unorthodox. While he could have just placed his hands on the man's eyes or even just simply said the word like he did with the servant of the centurion, he chose to make a paste of mud by spitting on the ground and mixing it with the dirt. This salve he applied to the man's eyes and after the blind man washed in the pool of Siloam he was cured. Other strange cures were effected by Jesus in the gospel of Mark using saliva alone, but another interesting miracle comes to

mind through the use of mud in the apocryphal infancy gospels that describe a number of events from Jesus' childhood.

In one such narrative, Jesus had been playing with the other Hebrew children after a rainstorm, and near the banks of a stream, puddles of water had formed. Jesus was said to have sat near one of these puddles and began to form with his hands twelve little sparrows out of the mud, shaping them perhaps with some artistic ability. When he was done he clapped his hands and the sparrows took flight much to the astonishment of the onlookers.

Whether the infancy story is accurate or not, this account together with the healing of the blind man may exploit some ancient symbolism tied to both water and earth as important components in these miraculous events. Particularly in the arid Middle East, water has long been a hot commodity and much harder to find than in the lush hills of the Northeast. Those who dwelt in the arid land east of the Mediterranean were undoubtedly amazed whenever an infrequent shower falling upon the parched landscape seemed to bring the dead countryside alive with vegetation. For this reason water was seen as the life-force, the substance that brought vitality to what was inert and dormant.

Spiritually, water was envisioned as the substance flowing from the throne of God to irrigate the land and bring life to all creation. A theme that is constant throughout the bible, it is envisioned in the garden of Eden where a river was present to water the garden and proceeded to break into multiple streams running throughout the earth. At the end of the scriptures, the life giving river is seen again flowing from the throne of God to irrigate the trees along the bank which produced leaves for the healing of the nations. And in fact this divine life-force that is symbolized by water not only brings vitality to everything in creation but also healing, restoration, and wholeness when there is injury or disability.

In both stories under consideration, the life giving water is mingled with dry earth to produce in one case healing and in another the spontaneous creation of life. And it is probably clear that the earth represents the physical or material body from which every living thing is made. Like the story of Adam, man is fashioned from the dust and returns to it again after death, but the inert pile of earth that we are has no vitality in it unless the life-force of God is poured into it, and that is signified by the water that makes up roughly 60% of the human body. In the miracles that Jesus performed he deliberately mixed water with soil to show how the divine life-force is responsible for making inert substance alive as well as for restoring physical health to its optimum. In fact, these strange miracles might have been done deliberately to convey this spiritual message.

Now after Jesus performed his miraculous act for the blind man, unfortunately not every one was happy with what he had done. Some were skeptical about it questioning if a miracle had really transpired, but others who we know as the Pharisees were somewhat indignant about the alleged miracle. For them, it was inconceivable that a man sent from God would attempt to heal on the Sabbath day which apparently it was. In their minds, no godly person would dare perform a healing on what was to be a day of complete rest,

for healing implied work. Originally, the concept of refraining from labor on the Sabbath day entailed a broad outline of activities having to do with farming and animal husbandry, but the legalistic teachers of the law had extrapolated the general sense of not working on the Sabbath to almost ridiculous applications that they bound on the people. One was permitted to walk no more than about 6/10ths of a mile, anything more than which was considered work. Such scrupulosity extended itself into the modern age where very observant Jews following the same tradition of their ancient predecessors will not even turn on a light switch, drive a car, or cook on a stove.

Their preoccupation with following the letter of the law led to a complete abandonment of the spirit of the law which in this case was the idea that rest should dominate the Sabbath day. In spelling out a formula for what that entailed, what to us would seem like a good activity such as healing was thrown out the door as a forbidden task. And for this reason the Pharisees could not reconcile the idea that a true servant of God would actually make someone well on their holy day. They became torn between what to them was a contradiction, that a man can produce miraculous signs from God while not observing the Sabbath in the way they interpreted it.

Rather than be forced into this dilemma, they looked for a way to discredit that a miracle ever happened, hoping that it could be shown to be a fraud. But when the man's parents were brought to give testimony, the teachers of the law could not escape the fact that a genuine miracle had happened. Interrogating the one who was cured once again, they hoped he would speak badly about Jesus vouching that he was a sinner, but the once blind man convicted them with the truth that they were unwilling to face, namely that only those who are from God can really perform miracles. And of course this logic coming from an unlearned beggar on the street was enough to silence any rebuttal from the Pharisees. Having been outwitted they still refused to acknowledge what was obvious and instead flexed their own muscles pulling rank on him as if he were some sort of imbecile. In their frustration, they threw him out of the synagogue at which point he had a second encounter with Jesus.

The Master met the one who was excommunicated from the synagogue and asked him what probably to the one who was healed was a bizarre question. Jesus queried, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" a title which is certainly a bit strange to even the Christian ear and one that may in fact have a few connotations. In its original sense and spanning back into ancient Mesopotamia, "Son of Man" meant no more than an allusion to one's humanity, a child of the human race, and almost all Old Testament references have this implication. Psalm 144 for example muses on how God takes an interest in the lowly human race asking, "What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you take care of him?"

Clearly this is the most basic meaning of the phrase, but after the Jews returned from exile, another meaning became attached to the term. Particularly as described in the apocryphal Book of Enoch, the "Son of Man" took on the significance of an apocalyptic figure, a Chosen One or Messianic personage who would preside in judgment over men.

This larger than life being was given an ancient origin suggesting that he was hidden with the Most High from the beginning of time.

In modern Christian circles, the title is often regarded with more than human significance according to this later Jewish tradition, but it is hard to say exactly how Jesus applied it. But every time he made mention of it in the gospels, he always did so in reference to himself. Perhaps we can interpret Son of Man in both senses of the word, for clearly both pertain to Jesus in his work among us 2000 years ago. That he was truly a man was extremely important to the work of salvation, since only a real man tested and tried could really represent the human race. And it seems that Jesus wanted to emphasize that he was real flesh and blood just like the rest of us. But it is also possible that his use of the phrase was to let people know that he was human and then at the same time much more, in fact worthy of worship and adoration as deity as well.

However the formerly blind man understood the term, when Jesus said that he was the Son of Man, the one who was healed affirmed his belief in him and joined his band of faithful followers, ousted from the temple but now a part of a much bigger movement which would reach far beyond the confines of Palestine and cover the face of the globe.

## Second Sunday after the Festival of Peace

In last week's epistle, Peter had gone up onto a rooftop at the middle of the day when he became hungry, and he fell into a trance. A vision appeared to him of a sheet coming down out of heaven filled with unclean animals that were forbidden to eat through the Mosaic Law. Presumably birds of prey as well as non-cud chewing animals and beasts without a cloven hoof were among the creatures that Peter saw. Peter was told to kill and to eat, but he refused protesting that all were prohibited by his long standing Jewish tradition, and he never dared eat anything unclean. A voice however instructed him, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

The immediate implication of the vision was to communicate to the chief of the apostles that major religious changes were at hand and that a new order of things had now dawned on the earth. The message was that it was no longer necessary to continue to follow the old Jewish Law with its various dietary restrictions, rituals, and sacrifices because something new had transcended them. For around 1400 years, the pious Jews observed a ceremonial law that in and of itself had no moral weight but only served as a form of symbolism for deeper spiritual concepts, many of which were revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Epistle of Barnabas, an apocryphal Jewish-Christian work of the 1<sup>st</sup> century sought to explain the significance of many of the old rules which up until that point in time might have been hidden from general understanding. The author commented on how Jews were prohibited to eat the flesh of animals without a cloven hoof and also from non-ruminants (and that is to say creatures that did not chew the cud.) The writer of this epistle suggested that the cloven hoof was permitted because it symbolized how the righteous live in this world but have their hope and expectation in another. The split hoof was then a representation of those people who are spiritually minded and not just wholly focused on life in this world alone. And regarding the idea of eating only animals that chew the cud or regurgitate up half-digested food to chew it some more, the author communicated the idea that masticating over and over again on the food the beast consumes is symbolic of meditating constantly on the words and commands of God. The idea conveyed is that by continually thinking about the righteous statutes of God they become integrated into the fabric of our beings and take a firm hold in our hearts.

But not only does the Epistle of Barnabas offer these allegorical ideas to explain some of the old dietary laws, it links other ritual sacrifices specifically with the death of Jesus Christ. Most of us are familiar with how the Passover Lamb sacrifice foreshadowed the atoning death of the Savior which we call the Lamb of God, but there were a number of other ritual sacrifices that typified the death of Christ including that which was associated with the Day of Atonement. The author of this epistle elaborated on how one of the goats of the ritual, the scape-goat received a treatment that mirrored very closely what was received by Jesus. In that ceremony, the priest would lay his hands on the head of the goat and confess all of the sins of the Israelites over it symbolically transferring the people's guilt to the animal. Then the people would spit on the animal and prick it. And afterwards scarlet wool was wrapped around its head at which point it was sent out into

the wilderness. Once in the heart of the desert, the one assigned to carry the animal into isolation would remove the scarlet wool and place it on a thorn bush.

Clearly this ritual included many elements that we know to be part of the Passion of Christ, and with the actual sacrifice of the Lamb of God completed, this ancient ceremony along with all of the other rituals and specific laws of the Jewish dispensation no longer had relevance. Because of this fact, it was necessary that the chief apostle receive a vision declaring that the special ceremonial laws of the Jews were now obsolete and essentially the people of God were free to eat whatever they pleased.. Certainly this revelation was a shock to Peter a good Jew who couldn't imagine that the Mosaic Law that he had lived all of his life was now no longer of any value. And in fact it took the church a few generations to finally come to terms with the idea that it had graduated from its Jewish roots into something more transcendent in the person of Jesus.

But much more than just communicating the idea that old laws and rules were no longer necessary the vision said a lot more to Peter to tie in to today's epistle reading. Essentially the heavenly declaration that all things were now clean was a symbolic revelation that somehow those people groups which we know as the vast hordes of Gentiles and that were traditionally considered unclean were now considered acceptable in the eyes of God. Again, this idea was probably very surprising to Peter if not initially revolting, for the Jews were trained from birth to regard the Gentiles with disrespect. The Talmud reflects such ancient sentiments toward the other nations which it in no uncertain terms referred to as "dogs." While not necessarily supporting this derogatory sentiment, Jesus alluded to the popular Jewish opinion of Gentiles in his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. In testing her faith, he told her that it was not right to give the children's bread to their dogs, implying that his ministry was geared principally toward the Jews and not the Gentiles.

In the wisdom of God, he thought it all important to begin breaking Peter of this old mentality by "greasing the skids" with this special vision that revealed that God didn't look down on the Gentiles the way that the Jews did. The reality was that God thought no less of the foreigner than he did the Jew. Far from showing favoritism, Peter was later to acknowledge that God approves of all men irrespective of race, sex, or religion as long as they are doing right in his eyes. And this revelation paved the way for Peter to do what God was asking him to do next, to enter the house of a Gentile and share with him and his family the good news. Cornelius, a god-fearing man and one that God approved of was to receive knowledge of the Christian faith and baptism at Peter's hands. But before this special vision, the apostle would never have dared to sit down to a meal let alone enter the house of a Gentile for it was perceived that a Jew would become unclean through that action. The chief priests illustrated this conviction when they refused to enter the palace of Pilate to press their case against Jesus on the day of his death. Though purely based on their prejudiced tradition, the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles that was a mile high was now about to break down.

Had the apostles better remembered their Hebrew scriptures, they might have anticipated this, for not a few passages foretell how the Gentiles would also be admitted into God's

great salvation plan, one that was not just for the Jews but for all humanity. The prophet Isaiah was one of the most prolific writers in speaking of other nations, and a few times he spoke of the nation of Israel as being a “light for the Gentiles to bring God’s salvation to the ends of the earth.” He also foresaw that there would come a time when all nations would ascend the mountain of the Lord to learn the ways of God. With the appearance of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, a new age had begun in which the artificial separation between Jew and Gentile was to come down. Paul envisioned it as a time in which the divisions between Gentile and Jew, slave and free, and woman and man would be trumped by the new religious institution of the church which is open to all without discrimination.

Unfortunately, whereas the original plan was that the Jewish people should welcome their Messiah and spread the good news of his coming to all of the Gentiles becoming one people of common faith, this was not to be. In today’s gospel, we read a parable that Jesus spoke in the presence of the Pharisees about a man who rented out a vineyard to some farmers and then went away leaving it in their care to produce fruit. And we understand symbolically that Jesus was speaking about how God had called the Jewish people in a special way to be entrusted with the oracles of salvation in preparation for the coming of the Son of God. We are told that while the owner was away he sent a representative to collect the harvest that the farmers were working for and when he arrived they beat him and sent him away. When the owner sent more of his men, the farmers got hostile enough to even kill some of them. And this part of the parable signifies how when God failed to receive a return on investment with his contract with the Jewish people, so he sent prophets to speak to the Israelites encouraging them to turn away from their rebellion and do what they were supposed to do. But the prophets were routinely abused and even killed, and tradition has it that Isaiah was sawed in half while Jeremiah was confined to a water cistern for speaking words the people didn’t want to hear.

The parable continues suggesting that the owner decided that the best solution to get the unruly farmers to cooperate would be to send his own son whom they would certainly respect. But the farmers seeing their opportunity to claim the property as their own murdered the son of the owner. Of course we interpret this part of the parable to mean that God in his final appeal to the Jewish people sent his own Son to get them on the right path again, but ultimately he too was rejected and killed off. The story concludes with the implication that the owner will come himself and kill all of the rebellious tenants that he had rented his vineyard to and rent it out to others. And we understand from this sobering conclusion that God took the kingdom away from the Jews and gave it to the Gentiles instead.

Indeed because the people of Israel failed to recognize their Messiah after a long tenure of rebellion against God, they received a severe punishment with the destruction of many when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70 and war with Rome inflicted great pain on the people. And while we might be tempted to say that God forever rejected the Jews in what happened not long after the Crucifixion, it is only true that the Chosen People received what we should call a temporary chastisement, for God never rejects

anyone forever but punishes them until they come to their senses and repent. According to Paul, the Jews will eventually come to embrace their Messiah and join the Gentiles in the faith of Jesus when the age of the Gentiles is completed. In fact it is at this time in history that the Jewish people are returning to their homeland as a sign that the Messiah will shortly return, and this time Jesus of Nazareth will find faith among both Jew and Gentile alike. In the end, the church which was supposed to be comprised of Jew and Gentile will be realized when the original people of the kingdom return to the fold.

## Feast of the Assumption

In today's gospel reading, we are present at the scene of the Crucifixion, and Jesus is speaking from the cross. During the three short hours that the Savior hung on the tree, the gospels record only seven words that Jesus spoke, and in this excerpt from John we encounter the third word that Christ spoke. Undoubtedly while he hung in agony on the altar of our salvation, there were many things running through his mind. He must have been thinking about any unfinished business he had to deal with before he gave up the ghost, and before he could say "it is finished" there was one duty that he needed to discharge and that was his obligation to his mother Mary. Joseph had been dead many years, and none of his stepbrothers were responsible for her welfare. Since she left the home in Nazareth and followed her son throughout his three year ministry, looking out for Mary was Jesus' own personal responsibility. But now that his time on earth was coming to an end, this duty needed to be transferred to another.

Considering the disciple that he loved very dearly whom we know as John the son of Zebedee, the Savior expressed that it was his desire that Mary look to John as her own son while John would from that point forward treat Mary as his own mother. While John might have been a favorite choice of the Lord's to discharge this duty, he might have been the only one that he could count on at the time, for all of the other disciples abandoned him fleeing for their lives to hide from the Jewish authorities. John was the only one with the courage to stand at the foot of the cross and so Jesus gave him that responsibility. And in fact the choice would prove to be a good one, for John came from a well-to-do family that certainly had the financial means to care for Mary. Zebedee was a wealthy fisherman with many hired servants and apparently supplied fish all over the countryside in Galilee and in Jerusalem. The gospels tell us that John had been known to the high priest and it is possible that at some point he was a delivery boy or salesman for fresh fish orders to the clerics.

In any event, the family seems to have had a home in Jerusalem in addition to the main base of operations in Galilee, and John took Mary to this house after the events of the Passion. Probably for the next 15-20 years the two lived together in the holy city until John moved to Ephesus in Asia Minor. More than likely this happened sometime after his own brother James was martyred or a little later after the great Council of Jerusalem. But in any event, John would spend more than half of his life among the Gentiles in this foreign city and Mary was with him in his new home until the time of her passing.

And it is the subject of Mary's departure from life on earth that we are celebrating today in this feast we call the Assumption. Sometime when Mary was in her late 70's, tradition holds that the mother of the Lord went to heaven without leaving a body behind. Though the details regarding her transition from the physical to the spiritual world are not clear, the most likely scenario is that while still alive, Mary's body was dematerialized, dispersing the elements that made up her frame to the wind and liberating her spirit to ascend into her new celestial home. Usually it is only through death that the connection between the spirit and the physical body is severed allowing the spirit to move on, and so

what apparently happened to Mary was very unusual, though not unique and not without precedent.

While the bible does not tell the story of Mary's miraculous departure from earth life, it does speak of others who passed out of physical existence without tasting death, namely the great prophet Elijah and the patriarch Enoch. The former was said to ascend into heaven in a fiery chariot when his time in this world was over, disappearing from the face of the earth without a trace. But regarding the latter, we are simply told that after 365 years of life "he was no more for God took him away." Both of these individuals apparently experienced the same kind of transition from this world to the next that Mary did when her years were over. In theological terms, the phenomenon is known as translation, a miracle in which the body is dematerialized allowing the spirit to travel unencumbered and almost instantaneously from one point to another. Like the depictions in Star Trek in which people got beamed from one locale to another, various biblical characters have disappeared at one location only to appear somewhere else including the deacon Philip in the Book of Acts. Technically the process involves breaking down the body into its constitutive elements, beaming the spirit from one location to another, and then reassembling the body at a new location. A well documented phenomenon that some highly skilled Yogis can perform in the Far East, this miracle is not scientifically inexplicable.

But we must ask the question why just a small handful of people have received the grace to avoid death in this way, and there may be a couple reasons why. Certainly it is conceivable that as a reward for a very holy life, God may mercifully allow some individuals to bypass the pain and anxiety of physical death and allow them to enter seamlessly into the heavenly realms. But God's motivation for translating some souls from earth to the hereafter may be even more practical than that. When Moses died on top of Mt. Nebo, we are told that the Israelites couldn't find him as God buried him in a secret location. Presumably he did this because of a concern about his body becoming an idol among the Jewish people who thought of him second only to God himself. Potentially the people could have treated his remains as an object of worship, a great snare to their spirituality, and certainly it could have sparked some fighting between various groups seeking custody of the empty shell of the great prophet. More than likely this was the reason for cleanly eliminating the body of the great prophet Elijah without a trace, for in the history of Israel, he was no less than the equivalent of Moses. And if Moses and Elijah were highly venerated figures of the Old Testament, how much more was Mary who bore the Son of God in her womb. Undoubtedly the early Church would have been tempted to treat her remains as an idol which God in his wisdom prevented through this extremely rare miracle.

While of course the bible doesn't address the story of Mary's departure from life, the Church's conviction that she did indeed pass to heaven without experiencing death comes through quite a few writings of the early church which narrate the events of her last days. While they do not agree on all of the details, they are consistent in the idea that Mary's body miraculously disappeared at the close of her life as if assumed into heaven. With prominent names like Joseph of Arimathea, Cyril of Jerusalem, and John of Damascus

giving accounts of the Blessed Virgin's passing, the idea of Mary's translation to heaven has more substance than just a legend and is considered a reliable tradition of the ancient church.

In all of the narratives, we have some common elements including the notion that at the time of her exit from mortal existence, all of the apostles were summoned to her bedside. While they were all scattered around the known world in their missionary work, the accounts suggest that each of the living disciples came and gathered around her in her final hours perhaps to witness the miracle that would take place. Then the various texts speak of Christ himself coming to receive the soul of his mother accompanied by much splendor, the sweet smell of perfume, and the chanting of angels.

Where the various stories differ is on the sequence of events that follow. Some suggest that Mary actually died with her soul initially leaving her dead body behind, and these narratives imply that her body was brought to heaven a short time later. Another account suggests that Mary died and then was resurrected three days later and assumed body and soul together into heaven. The Catholic Church has traditionally understood that all of these various attempts to describe the phenomenon of translation really depict the assumption of a living Mary into heaven before experiencing death even as we know to be the case with Elijah.

Despite the testimony of many church fathers corroborating the miraculous disposition of Mary's earthly body, understandably some may remain skeptical that such a great thing happened to the mother of the Lord. But probably the most convincing evidence to offer those who are unsure is actually what we might call an argument from silence. In an age in which the relics of the saints were highly coveted for veneration and entombment within the altars of the many churches within Christendom, not one has ever boasted to possess the remains of the Blessed Mother. The bones of the apostles are preserved in many cathedrals as well as a host of other saints and martyrs, but no one has ever claimed to have the bones of Mary. And undoubtedly this is because the early church knew for a fact that she left this world without leaving a body behind, so there is not a trace of her physical frame available for veneration.

Now all of this theological stuff about people disappearing into thin air is very interesting, but in concluding this message, perhaps we need to ask what the Assumption means to us practically in our spiritual lives. And in addressing that question we need to consider what is significant about a saint passing from this life into heaven. The very popular St. Therese who died at a very young age cloistered away in a convent in France told her fellow sisters that she would be of much more use to them in heaven than she ever could on earth. And she said this to console them when it became clear that death was imminent wanting to convey how beneficial her passing would be to all of them.

Indeed this is true of all saints who cross over to the other side for a number of reasons. When a man or woman achieves perfection and rises to the heavenly ranks, they become the equivalent of a superhuman with much higher intelligence and consciousness than was ever possible on earth. With their superior intellect and spiritual experience, they are

able to help us mortals in a much greater way than we can even imagine. Unbound by the restraints and concerns of the physical body, they can dedicate themselves to aiding us in our struggle of life, and not just one mortal at a time but many for they have the power to hear and answer many prayers simultaneously. St. Therese made it clear before her death that she intended to spend her heaven doing good on earth, and that is exactly the job of the saints who have passed on to the other side. With very pure souls, they offer to God a very potent intercession on our behalf, much greater than any imperfect human for in the words of James, “the prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

The truth be told, none of us can make it to heaven without their help for the law of God is that all spiritual progress is achieved through helping those who are behind us with assistance from those who are ahead. In an unbroken chain of love spanning from heaven to earth, the angels and saints constantly offer their assistance to humanity to propel them toward perfection. Paul envisioned this reality in his letter to the Hebrews where he spoke of us on earth being surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses.” A myriad of invisible beings of light encamp about us continually offering us encouragement and pushing us forward. They are like a sea of fans along the path of a long race cheering us on and driving us to the finish line. And we do well to recognize their efforts and solicit their special help whenever we need it.

And of all those perfect souls who have gone on before us, there is no one more powerful than the Blessed Virgin whom the Catholic Church appropriately calls the Queen of the Angels. For fairly obvious reasons the mother of Jesus has merited a high status in heaven and is perhaps best equipped of all the saints to intercede for humanity as it trudges through the valley of tears. Primarily as a result of sacrificing her own agenda and spiritual progress in agreeing to bear the Savior, she was rewarded with a particularly lofty position in the celestial spheres.

With her special relationship to her Divine Son she obtains great benefits for mankind. Many a soul has petitioned Mary for help counting on the idea that her Son would never refuse a request of his mother, and for nearly 2000 years, not a soul has gone wrong in developing a friendship with this the Queen of Saints. Particularly through the great chain prayer we know as the Rosary, many people have received an abundant downpouring of God’s grace to help them along the journey of life. Through a revelation to those who popularized this great prayer in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Mary unveiled 15 promises to those who faithfully recite her Rosary, all promises which she won for humanity through her special connection to God. Among the many beautiful benefits that the Blessed Virgin spoke of, we have her sworn protection as we make our way through life along with the promise that the power of sin will be weakened within us. Mary has promised that those who are devoted to her Rosary will never be conquered by misfortune and will not die without access to the Sacraments of the Church. Additionally those who commit themselves to this special prayer are assured of the intercession of the entire court of heaven throughout their entire lives and at the hour of death. And these are just a few of the privileges extended to those who make a friend in Mary the mother of our Lord.

On this feast of the Assumption, more than just being impressed with how the Virgin got to heaven, we should be delighted to know that her presence there means so much to humanity in its struggle toward holiness and everlasting life. Let us remember that rather than being out of sight and out of mind, she and all the saints are always with us ready to offer assistance in a way full of love and compassion and through a power beyond our comprehension.

### Third Sunday after the Festival of Peace

Today's epistle focuses on the story of Elijah, the great prophet of God after his encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. After the major victory for Yahweh, Jezebel the staunch supporter of Baal, the god of her native Phoenicia was furious. Elijah had slaughtered 400 of her prophets upon their defeat in the great contest of fire upon the mountain and now the queen was enraged. Sending a message to the prophet of the Lord, Jezebel promised to kill Elijah in revenge. Fearing for his life, he fled deep into the southern desert of Judah to escape her wrath.

We might ask what happened to Elijah that he responded in terror to the threats of Jezebel. Just a short time earlier, he was very courageous to defend the God of Israel in a land dominated by Baal worship and now like a dog with its tail between its legs, he is running like a fugitive from the powers that be. Somehow or other he let fear get the better of him and seeking shelter under a tree from the desert heat he fell into a depression. He prayed that he might die recognizing his own personal failure. On the surface it might have seemed like a normal and acceptable response for anyone to run from danger, but for Elijah this was not so. A very accomplished mystic used to hearing the voice of God, Elijah did something that was forbidden to men of his caliber. He took action without divine instruction, and in this he realized that he had sinned. He failed to trust that God would deal with Jezebel, especially after the great sign he had just witnessed on Mount Carmel and now he asked that his life be taken from him for he had become a disappointment to himself and to God.

But though having sinned through his capitulation to fear, God was not about to give up on him the same way he was giving up on himself. An angel was sent to the prophet to rouse him from his sleep and then get him up to eat. But having taken some bread and water, he lay down to sleep again, and then the angel had to attempt to rouse him again to eat more for his long journey to Mount Horeb, the same mountain where God spoke to Moses and which we know as Sinai. And in keeping with the theme of today's readings, it is this passage relating Elijah's contact with the angel that is relevant to what was alluded to in the opening prayer.

It is the work of the angels that we are considering, at least that part of their work that concerns mankind that we are interested in looking at. This story from Elijah's life communicates to us that angels play a very important though mainly unseen role in the lives of men. Specifically in this context, we see an angel coming to the rescue of a man who has fallen into despair and given up on life. More than just offering the prophet some food for his physical needs, the message conveyed in this passage is that angels constantly seek to encourage us to keep going, especially when we have stumbled by the wayside and have fallen. They are the unseen force that prods us to get up and start going again when we feel like giving up and throwing in the towel. And like with Elijah if we briefly respond to their urgings and then decide to lay down again wallowing in our sullenness, they will give us another tap on the shoulder to rouse us from our self-pity and continue on the journey.

Unlike people who try to help other people, our angelic friends never give up on us when we are unresponsive but will continue to goad us forward no matter how much resistance and lack of cooperation we demonstrate. This is not only because their capacity to love is much higher than that of men, but because they as the servants of God are entrusted with the care of human souls until they have successfully brought them to salvation. For as long as we continue in mortal existence, the angels of light are in charge of our well being and our advancement toward perfection and holiness.

This work that they perform on behalf of mankind has been delegated to them by God. In fact they function as his messengers carrying out all sorts of duties in the name of the One who sends them. And for this reason, the Hebrew word for angel is simply “messenger,” a term that is linked with someone who has been dispatched by a king or royal figure to send a message or do his bidding. These messengers of the Almighty are constantly involved with the affairs of men, much more so than actually God himself. As his representatives, it is the angels who interact with people directly while God only does so indirectly, for such work has been delegated to the celestial servants. It is not that God is incapable of dealing one on one with people, but he chooses to mainly give that duty to the angelic hosts whose own personal spiritual development depends on helping those beneath them.

The evidence for their involvement with men is extremely pervasive throughout both Old and New Testaments with hundreds of references to their encounters with humanity. Far from just playing harps in the clouds above, these spiritual beings are busy at work labouring for God toward the benefit of mankind in many ways. Primarily it is these creatures that are responsible for communicating to us what God wants us to do through many different means. The voice of conscience that we hear is none other than the prompting of our guardian angel attempting to push in a certain direction for our own good. Whether it is an inner feeling that we feel compelled to comply with or a voice that tells us what to do, we are hearing from the angels who are in charge of us and are doing the best they can to lead us to God. They will attempt to influence us for the better in whatever ways they feel will best get our attention sometimes even giving us unmistakable signs in the events of ordinary life to communicate what they want us to do or to simply give encouragement to keep persevering.

People may be inclined to say from tradition and force of habit that God is speaking to them, but in fact it is usually God’s representatives that are speaking to people on his behalf. We often imagine that God came down to Mount Sinai and delivered the law directly to the prophet atop the smoke covered mountain, but this was not so. A number of times in the New Testament we are told that the law was put into effect through the mediation of angels. The Book of Acts tells us that an angel spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai and the letter to the Hebrews indicates that the content of the Mosaic Law was spoken by angels rather than God himself. Along these lines, the words of the scriptures that we hold very dearly are the words of the angelic hosts who inspired men to write down spiritual ideas that they wished to convey to humanity. The voice of prophecy is none other than the voice of the celestial army that through their great intelligence and knowledge of the laws of God are able to predict very accurately what shall come to pass.

Our angelic helpers are the chief voice of the divine in the lives of men, and if not through telepathic messages or inspiration or signs they also communicate to people while they sleep at night. It is the domain of the dream world that has traditionally been the main channel through which the angels get their instructions across to the great mystics. The patriarch Jacob was told by an angel in a dream to leave his father-in-law at once and return to the land of Canaan, for he was in danger because of his great prosperity. In the New Testament, we have several cases of angels speaking to people in their dreams including the famous stories of Joseph who learned that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit in one vision of the night and at a later date was warned through a dream to leave Palestine to escape from Herod in Egypt.

In addition to their work in inspiring and guiding mankind toward good, there are obviously many more tasks that the army of heaven is entrusted with. We should not forget that these invisible “behind the scenes” celestial beings have been charged with protecting us from harm in many arenas. Particularly it is the job of the guardian angel to protect the one he continually watches from physical and spiritual danger that is always lurking. There is no way of telling exactly how many times each of us has been spared from a mishap, whether it be spraining an ankle or slipping on the ice were it not for the intervention of our angelic helpers.

We can ask how many times we have been kept from car accidents whether through no fault of our own or through our own errors by these powerful beings who can manipulate the laws of nature for our well being. But even more than the physical harm that they prevent on untold numbers of occasions, it is the spiritual danger that they ward away that is probably most significant to our well being. The forces of darkness frequently like to gang up on us inciting us toward evil, and were it not for the presence of our angelic guardians we would be quickly overcome. These beings of light who watch over us sometimes have to call down for reinforcements when a soul is under attack, and they will do everything within their power to make sure we are not overwhelmed by the enemy.

But briefly tying in with today’s gospel, among the various tasks that are assigned to the angels, not all are pleasant and perhaps the most unsavory job of theirs is to be the instruments of God’s judgment. When souls persist in evil, God has no choice but to implement corrective measures to put people on the right path again. Judgment is the means by which remediation can begin, and there are numerous examples in the bible where angels inflict punishment on people. One of the most famous judgments carried out by angels early in the scriptures is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah where it seems that our celestial friends caused an earthquake which in turn released flammable gases that were stored under pressure in the ground. Once released into the atmosphere, this material ignited and fell upon the cities in what we call “fire and brimstone.”

As God’s messengers of judgment, the angels were active at another time rather directly after David sinned against the Lord. Though not the only time he committed a grievous sin, on one occasion the famous King began to trust in his own army of men rather than

in God and decided to count how many troops he had in the land of Israel. Greatly angered by this activity, the Lord sent an angel to cut down the people of Israel in a plague lasting three days. With drawn sword, this angel of death cut down 70,000 men before the carnage was ended.

But whether the angels work judgment directly such as in these cases or bring it forth indirectly through human agents, these celestial beings are responsible for meting out punishment to humanity in one form or another, ultimately for our own good, for like everything springing from the divine nature, judgment comes from love and not hatred. In today's gospel reading we read about the angel's involvement with the judgment that is coming very soon as we now approach the end of the age. It is in this season that they are preparing to separate the wheat from the chaff, the good from the bad to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth. Only those willing to obey Jesus when he comes again will be permitted to remain on earth for the glorious age that is dawning. Unfortunately the angels must see to it that the rebellious are removed from mortal life as there is no place for them in that era of peace.

## Fourth Sunday after the Festival of Peace

The epistle reading today comes from Genesis and focuses on a story from the life of Jacob the patriarch who would become the progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel. The narrative begins with the man en route from his father's household in Canaan up into the North Country, the home of his uncle. More than just taking a leisurely trip from his home, Jacob was more or less running for his life having become a fugitive of sorts after some recent events within his family.

Many of us are familiar with the story of what precipitated Jacob's exodus from the land of Palestine. Some time earlier, the shrewd Jacob had taken advantage of his brother Esau's hunger, and finding the older brother famished after being in the field all day, he offered to feed him in exchange for the coveted birthright, the blessing of their father that could only be bestowed on the firstborn. A solemn benediction, the prayer for the firstborn would ensure great physical and spiritual blessings on the recipient. Unlike in modern society where all the offspring receive an equal share of the temporal wealth of the parents, ancient Semitic culture was run by the concept of primogeniture meaning that the oldest took a double portion of the estate over the other siblings upon the death of the father. Jacob might have been interested to a certain degree in the wealth of his father, but more importantly he was eager for the spiritual blessing that belonged to the firstborn which in this case also entailed the fulfilment of God's promise to his grandfather Abraham.

Apparently the spiritual aspect of the birthright held little interest for the elder Esau and he flippantly sold it to his younger brother for a bowl of stew. However as there were no witnesses of this transaction, it seems likely that the men's father Isaac would have recognized the deal. The Genesis narratives indicate that Isaac was preferential toward Esau while the mother Rebekah was partial to Jacob, so we could assume that Isaac would never have accepted any arrangement between the brothers to change their legal status. But undeterred by this obstacle, Jacob and his mother conspired to trick the blind Isaac into giving the blessing to the younger son, and when they succeeded, Esau was enraged and vowed to kill his brother in revenge. We might also suppose that Isaac was fairly angry as well, for his favorite son was robbed of the blessing he intended to give him.

In this context, today's epistle begins with Jacob in flight from the family home, the enemy of Esau and a disgrace to his father. Ostensibly sent away by his father to get a wife from Rebekah's clan up north, we infer that the miffed Jacob did not offer his son any help in this endeavor for we gather that Jacob was banished from the family home without servants and without money. In those days, a man would pay the bride price to the father of a prospective wife in exchange for taking her in marriage. But it would seem that Jacob probably showed up penniless to his uncle having nothing to offer him in exchange for one of his daughters. As a result he was forced to work for his father-in-law for seven years to pay for his bride.

In the narrative we are considering today, Jacob the fugitive is on the road after becoming the enemy of his swindled brother and somewhat estranged from his father. No doubt as he wandered along the trail to the North Country he had remorse about what he had done. He had deceived his way into the birthright and gotten what he greatly sought for, but there was a price to be paid for it. His spiritual ambition wound up getting him into trouble, and certainly he recognized that his scheme had backfired on him. Out of the good graces of his father and hated by his brother, perhaps he wondered what God now thought about him after working such a crafty deception. Sure, he had obtained the birthright, but did God still recognize it as valid after the way he went about obtaining it? These questions must have plagued him as he journeyed in solitude on the north road bringing about a degree of depression and confusion that he had to deal with.

After travelling all day the sun was setting and so he stopped for the night to sleep, and putting a stone underneath his head for a pillow he fell off to sleep and had a special dream. Not just an ordinary dream in which the jumbled thoughts of the past day get rehashed and worked out in strange ways, Jacob experienced a spiritual dream, a vision of the night in which he saw the angels of God ascending and descending a stairway to heaven. At the top of this stairway was God himself who spoke to Jacob with reassuring words. The Lord confirmed to the young patriarch that he would indeed be the man through which the promise to Abraham would be fulfilled, a promise that spoke of his descendants being as great as the sand on the seashore and a pledge that all of the nations would be blessed through them. On top of this God affirmed to Jacob that he was with him and would continue to be wherever he went.

Apparently God had taken notice of young Jacob and the state of distress he was in being sent away from home and initiated this dream to communicate to him that all was well. Often times it is through dreams that God speaks to people, for when we are asleep we become quiet to the outside world and all of its distractions and God is able to get through to us without the clamor of the day creating a barrier to what he wants to say to us. Whether through deep meditation, trances, or dreams the Lord finds it easiest to get through to us in the quiet that such states entail. And in the midst of dream God came to reassure Jacob that all was well.

We might ask how it is that God did not reprimand this deceiver for the trickery he pulled off on his own family. Surely God's voice of consolation to Jacob was not in any way condoning what he had done, but perhaps God did not view Jacob's actions in the same way that his father and brother had. With God, our motivation for doing something is much more important than the action itself. One who steals to feed his family is much better regarded by God than one who steals out of jealousy or for some other materialistic or selfish motivation. Concerning Jacob's deception of his father, while clearly he was in the wrong for pulling the wool over his father's eyes, God did not fail to consider why Jacob resorted to trickery. Were it for purely materialistic gain, the Lord most certainly would have condemned the deceiver, but the younger born son had a high spiritual aspiration that was driving him, and God recognized that this was the case. And so the dream was sent to let Jacob know that he had not been abandoned by God but was still on the right track. Though estranged from his own family, he was not alienated from God

and the promise would still bear fruit through the younger son. For Jacob, the pledge to Abraham had perhaps been just second hand information until this night when he conceivably for the first time heard God's voice reiterating what was told to his grandfather.

Certainly these words of God were a great consolation to young Jacob, but the contents of the dream itself had a strong impact on the patriarch that would spur him on to keep going despite the adversity he was then encountering. Attempting to change Jacob's focus from his own limited scope of earthly life and its problems, God gave the patriarch a glimpse of the greater reality that we often lose sight of. In the dream, Jacob was shown the "big picture," the enormous realm of angels and saints who inhabit the invisible world above us and on top of which God himself dwells on a lofty throne. Like the iceberg which has 90% of its mass hidden from view under the surface of the water, the hierarchy of heaven makes up the lion's share of existence. The young deceiver was shown the glorious reality that we are called to that is generally out of sight and out of mind. And perhaps by having this vision of grandeur he was able to see his own circumstances in proper perspective, insignificant compared with the glory of the celestial beings. The words of Paul probably would have made sense to him at that moment where the apostle said, "These present sufferings are not worth comparing the glory that shall be revealed in us." As the angels ascend this stairway or ladder toward God, so it is man's destiny to do the same. Spurred on by a glimpse of ultimate reality, Isaac's younger son would find the courage to keep going with his eyes fixed on the goal despite the adversity and backlash he had received.

A transformation happened to this fugitive that night which may be further evidenced by a little imagery in the narrative to illustrate Jacob's change in perspective and attitude. We read how when Jacob went to sleep for the night, he put a stone under his head for a pillow. Probably not an unusual thing to do for the ancients sleeping out under the stars, nonetheless the stone is one of those symbols with a double meaning. In one sense when we are feeling pessimistic and dealing negatively with adversity in our lives, the stone represents an obstacle on the path, something blocking our progress and keeping us from travelling down the road. On the other hand, with a good attitude and a positive perspective, the same rock can be viewed as a stepping stone to better things, the willingness to turn weakness into strength. Indeed this is the general purpose behind all adversity that comes to us, and the more we realize it, the better we will respond to difficulty in life.

When Jacob woke up in the morning, he took that stone which had been lying flat prostrated on the ground and turned it upright. The rock which had been oriented in the earth plane was now adjusted to point upward toward heaven, and symbolically this suggests that Jacob changed his focus from despair of his earthly problems to a new spiritual perspective. He saw the big picture and was now ready live according to that reality. Taking the stone he slept on, he turned it upright and poured oil on it to consecrate it. And this is to say that rather than whining about the obstacles he currently faced, he blessed them instead turning them into a pillar of strength or what we have also called a stepping stone.

As a final note on Jacob's momentous dream on the road up north, we note the significance of the location he was sleeping in that night. Originally a place called Luz when the land was under Canaanite control, Jacob changed the name of the site to Bethel. Usually whenever a name change happens in the bible to a person, place, or thing it indicates that a spiritual transformation has occurred of one kind or another, and in this story the change appropriately marks the migration from the Luz mentality to the Bethel frame of mind. Not surprisingly, for former place name Luz means "separation" and characterized Jacob's distress and depression before he went to sleep for the night. Considering that he felt estranged from his family, he was all the more concerned that he was also cut off from God. But after the dream of reassurance, he understood that that was not true, and so called the place Bethel meaning "house of God" for he had glimpsed the vast expanse of the heavenly realms to which he knew he was called, the place of endless bliss and pleasures beyond our wildest imagination.

## Fifth Sunday after the Festival of Peace

Today's epistle reading draws our attention to the nation of Ethiopia, an ancient land below Egypt that in the bible is sometimes referred to as Cush, the home of a Black race of people. The history of the Jewish people has been intertwined with many countries, but from its earliest days there had been a number of interactions between the Israelites and this African nation. We learn from the Pentateuch that Moses had taken a wife from among this people, perhaps a second wife either after his first wife had died or possibly in addition to her. But then the scriptures record no more history of dealings between the two peoples until the time of Solomon.

In the first book of Kings, we have the record of an encounter between this very famous and wealthy king of Israel with the Queen of Sheba who came from a land that has historical connections with southwestern Arabia and northeastern Africa. We are told that she had heard of the fame of Solomon and came to him from the south country for the purpose of testing him with hard questions, probing the depths of his wisdom. Every question she asked of him, he explained to her, and nothing that she queried was too difficult for him to answer. The passage from the book of Kings indicates that Solomon gave the queen all that she desired and asked for, and then she left to return with her large caravan to her own country.

But we may not know all of the details about the relationship between the King of Israel and the Queen of Sheba from the biblical account. The records of the Ethiopians suggest that there might have been more happening in her six month stay in Canaan than we would otherwise assume. The virgin queen who was known as Makeda to her own people had desired to have a purely platonic relationship with Solomon during her visit, but the Ethiopian historical document intimates that Solomon was enamored of her and seduced her through a trick. Perhaps this shouldn't surprise us as we know the king had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and it is reported that the king targeted Makeda as a new addition by setting a feast with foods that would make her very thirsty. He then made her promise that she would take nothing that belonged to him, but then during the night when she was dying of thirst she reached for a cup of water. Solomon quickly discovered this and charged her with breaching their agreement and subsequently lay with the queen.

From their union, there is a tradition that a son was conceived who was known as Menelik I. After being raised in his mother's home country, it is purported that he returned to his father only to take back with him members of the Israelite tribes including priests and Levites thereby introducing the Jewish religion to the Ethiopians. Though no one knows what happened to the Ark of the Covenant, it is also claimed through the Ethiopian records that Solomon entrusted it to his son Menelik to take back with him to his country for safe keeping, and to this day the clerics of Ethiopia affirm that they have the real ark in their possession.

Whether or not Judaism became directly introduced to Ethiopia at this time through the son of Solomon is unclear. However in the centuries that would follow, there is strong evidence for migrations of significant numbers of Israelites from Palestine into southern

Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Shortly after Solomon's death, tensions arose between the tribe of Judah and the other eleven northern tribes. Choosing not to become a part of the ensuing civil war that split Israel into two kingdoms, tradition holds that the tribe of Dan decided to uproot itself from Canaan and resettle in lower Egypt. From there they worked their way up the Nile into the land of Cush comprising modern day Sudan and Ethiopia.

A few centuries later the people of Israel would be scattered among the nations through exile when their rebellion against God reached its climax in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. At that time, some of the people of Judah whom the Babylonians left behind in their own land decided to head for what they considered a politically safer country. Along with the prophet Jeremiah, they descended into Egypt building what would become a strong Jewish presence in that land. The only country outside of Israel in which a temple was constructed, the Jews of Egypt built two where they offered regular sacrifices, one in the north of Egypt and the other in the South bordering on the Sudan and Ethiopia. The southern house of worship was unfortunately destroyed by a mob in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., but the northern temple actually survived longer than the temple at Jerusalem and was only closed by the Romans because of the Jewish revolts following the time of Jesus.

Other traditions exist in addition to these various historical accounts of the people of Israel migrating into Northeastern Africa, and suffice it to say, that the eunuch we meet in the narrative we are considering from the book of Acts was one of the many descendants of the Jewish people in the land of Ethiopia. He might have been what is known as a Falasha or a Black Jew, many of which have resettled in Palestine in the last 50 years as part of the Zionist movement in Israel. More than just a commoner, this Jew was an important official in the Ethiopian government in charge of all the wealth in the nation's treasury.

That he was said to be a eunuch in this role is not surprising, for castrated men were considered as highly trustworthy individuals in ancient times. Frequently they would be entrusted with the care of the royal harem or to guard the young virgins as it was clear that without any personal sexual interest they could be counted on not to prey on the women themselves. Without his own offspring or spouses and in-laws, the eunuch was not subject to any political influences from his family but could be wholly devoted to the interests of his master. For this reason, eunuchs were seen as less easy to bribe and therefore they were often employed in positions of trust and at times rose to great power.

Apparently, Queen Candace had enlisted the services of this man to be in charge of the treasury of her nation. According to Roman history, there was in fact a Candace who had lived fifty years earlier. Known as a warrior queen, she was depicted as a very masculine sort of woman with one eye who invaded Egypt and incited a war with the Romans. Beaten back to her own imperial city, the Romans eventually left her and her country alone after her brash assault on the Roman army. It is doubtful that this Candace is the same one as is mentioned in the Book of Acts. More than likely, the woman the eunuch worked for was one of her descendants, for rather than being a specific given name, Candace is actually a title as is Pharaoh in Egypt. Translated as queen or queen mother,

Candace was the title given to such female royalty in the land of Cush, and it was for one such Candace that the eunuch was employed.

Apparently as a devout Jew, the eunuch had been in Jerusalem to worship probably for the Passover, a time when the holy city would sometimes swell to ten times its population to accommodate all of the out of town visitors. The official command in the Law of Moses was that a man would be required to make a pilgrimage to the temple three times per year for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, but considering the distance that some out of country Jews had to travel, making it just once per year seemed admirable. For whatever feast the eunuch had come, it should be said that he made a long trip despite the fact that he would be restricted in the worship he could offer. The legal code of Deuteronomy forbade any castrated man from entering the assembly of the Lord which we would understand as a reference to the temple court. More than likely this was a source of anguish to this devout Jew, but apparently he would have respected the ordinance.

Perhaps the eunuch had made this long journey from Ethiopia to Palestine many times in the past only to participate in the festivities in a restricted way, but this particular trip God seemingly took notice of the piety of the Ethiopian and sought to reward him in a special way. The prophecies of Isaiah record a particular promise to eunuchs “who keep God’s Sabbaths, who choose what pleases him, and hold fast to his covenant.” To them the Lord promised to “give a memorial and a name within his temple and its walls better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that would not be cut off.” In fulfillment of this pledge to God-fearing eunuchs, it seems that Philip was sent to intercept the Ethiopian on his way home.

One of the seven original deacons ordained by the apostles, Philip had been very successful in preaching in Samaria and had worked many miracles in that region. But on this occasion, he was instructed by an angel to leave his current duties behind and start walking south from Jerusalem to Gaza. It was there that he came across the eunuch in his chariot on the way home. The devout Ethiopian had been reading the prophecy of Isaiah about how the Messiah would be a suffering servant who would die a humiliating death and didn’t understand what he was reading. It was Philip’s privilege to explain to this pious African Jew that the passage was in fact a reference to Jesus who was only recently crucified in the city that he had just visited.

Being compelled by this truth, the eunuch asked for baptism which Philip happily obliged, and the Ethiopian Jew became what in the first few centuries was known as a Judeo-Christian. Seemingly baptism was the only sacrament imparted on the new convert that day, as being only a deacon, Philip could only baptize but not confirm. And as there is no record of any meeting with the apostles after the eunuch was baptized, he certainly would not have received any form of holy orders to return to his country as a cleric of any sorts. Not that this would have been possible anyway, for probably in following the Law of Moses, the Church has always refused to make a man a deacon, priest, or bishop who has been previously emasculated.

More than likely we can assume that the Ethiopian joyfully returned to his country as a layman spreading the good news to his fellow Jews and Gentiles alike. If nothing else, his teaching that Jesus was the Messiah was a preparation for the official missionaries who would begin to come into the country heralding Christianity. No doubt, the Ethiopian made things a little easier for the apostles who travelled into Africa. According to legend, both Bartholomew and Matthew evangelized Ethiopia in addition to other countries before they each suffered martyrdom. But to whatever extent Christianity had taken a foothold in northeastern Africa in the early days, a missionary named Frumentius is credited with officially establishing the faith in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century when he successfully converted the Ethiopian emperor.

Not unlike the Christianity that originally emerged in Palestine in the first century, the Christianity of Ethiopia would also have a very strong Jewish character which it retains to this day. No doubt stemming from the strong Jewish presence in the country from ancient times, the Christianity of this northeast African country would exhibit a strong Old Testament emphasis, perhaps more than any other Christian group. Circumcision is still universally practiced as is also cliterodectomy which is the ritual equivalent for females. In addition to Sunday, some believers observe the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, and not unlike a modern synagogue, no church is without its ark or ornamented closet for storing scrolls of the Holy Scriptures. Even rigorous ritual fasting is part of the staple of the Ethiopian faith.

With its ties to Arabia in the first millennium, many might not realize that the Christian Ethiopian army nearly succeeded in preventing the emergence of Islam. In the sixth century, in addition to Judaism and the indigenous polytheistic religions, Christianity was no small movement in Arabia. At one point there developed some jealousy on the part of the polytheistic Meccans toward a large Cathedral Church on the southern end of the peninsula which was drawing many visitors. A resident of Mecca snuck into this church and desecrated it smearing filth on the altar and other furnishings. In anger, the Ethiopian army retaliated and marched on Mecca. But as it turned out, the road into the city was narrow flanked on both sides by steep slopes making the military operation a bit risky for the Christian army. Not failing to capitalize on this, the residents of Mecca took to the hills and hurled down large rocks and boulders on the army forcing them to retreat. And probably this one defeat determined that Mohammad would later be born a polytheist rather than a Christian ensuring the birth of Islam.

But though the Ethiopian Christians experienced a defeat that day, after the birth of Islam they would successfully manage to preserve their faith despite the fact that all the other North African nations around them succumbed to the Islamic onslaught. Perhaps as a tribute to that first Ethiopian convert on the road from Jerusalem, the nation has weathered many storms and has preserved its apostolic faith to the present day.

## Sixth Sunday after the Festival of Peace

In today's epistle, Paul is addressing Timothy the young man he had made bishop of Ephesus and in whom he had the greatest confidence. He offered his protégé some words of advice and encouragement warning him of a rough road ahead with the potential for apostasy and turning away from the truth in the ensuing years. The tone of this particular passage we are considering as well as the whole letter that Paul wrote Timothy is fairly sober, and probably this was because Paul realized it may very well be his last communication with his prized student and he desired to impart whatever important words of wisdom he had left to share with the man.

Paul seemed to realize at the writing of this letter that his days on this earth were numbered. More than likely he had received a divine communication from heaven saying this was the case, and so he told Timothy, "I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure." Using imagery from the Old Testament worship system, Paul described himself as if he were the wine that the Israelites would pour out upon the ground near the altar as an offering to God. Using this language, Paul probably anticipated that he was to finish his days in martyrdom as indeed he did. The tradition of the church understands that this famous saint to the Gentiles was beheaded in Rome on the same day that Peter was executed on a cross upside down, an event that happened only a few short years after penning this letter to Timothy.

And keeping with the common theme in both of today's readings, Paul anticipated that upon his death he would receive a crown or righteousness. An image that Paul was very fond of using in all of his letters was the idea that the journey of life is like a race that each man is on in which he must run hard to win the prize. Many times he compares our earthly tenure to an athletic competition like a footrace in which men must give it their all if they are to have a victory. He probably liked this simile because the Greeks that he dialogued with were very familiar with races, especially the Olympic Games in which the 26 mile long haul marathon would have been prominent in their minds.

Traditionally, the winner of such ancient races would receive as his prize a wreath to place upon his head. Perhaps just an elaborate garland of plants or flowers to adorn one's hair, it was nonetheless not a reward of any lasting value, for like all vegetation, it would rot away and fade into nothing over time. But Paul making a contrast suggested that the crown that he would win upon finishing the race of life would be an everlasting and incorruptible crown that would not be subject to material decay. Of course what he was referring to was achieving the goal of everlasting life and joining the angels and the saints in the heavenly kingdom up above. Putting away this mortal life forever, he anticipated entering the ranks of the immortals, the destiny of not just Paul but of all men on the earthly plane.

Not that Paul was always confident that he would win his way to heaven at the end of his life, on a few earlier occasions he wrote in his letters about his fear of being disqualified from the race, perhaps through a major sin or other mishap that would take him out of the competition. Writing about five years earlier than this his final letter to Timothy, Paul

expressed this concern in his first letter to the Corinthians. And later in the letter to the Colossians he warned the church of that city to be careful lest any of them be disqualified from getting the prize.

We may be surprised to know that Paul was unsure some years earlier if he was going to achieve the goal of everlasting life. However his uncertainty was far from unusual; not knowing if one will win the crown is the norm for us mortals who struggle through life here on earth. Very few people have ever been told ahead of time that they were going to make it, and usually those who did receive the blessed promise were informed of it toward the end of their lives when they had just about faithfully completed the work God had for them to do. And the reason why God keeps the vast majority of humanity in the dark about this lofty matter is because he doesn't want such knowledge to interfere with running the race. With human nature as it is, there would be little incentive to give it one's all in a sporting competition let alone watch an athletic event in which one knew the outcome ahead of time. In God's wisdom such information is veiled from us so that we will continue to labor hard.

And certainly Paul worked very hard for God ever since his conversion on the road to Damascus, and while for most of his life it was unclear whether he would win the crown, it apparently was made known to him toward the very end of his life when he was writing to Timothy. To the young bishop he wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Paul acknowledged that he had been faithful to stay on course to successfully make it to the finish line, no small achievement for any of us seeking to enter the kingdom of heaven.

If any of us hope to cross the finish line like Paul, the other apostles, and the many saints who have made it to heaven over the last couple thousand years, we are indeed going to have to run a race that will take all we've got and a little more to win the prize. The reality is that relatively few make it for in the words of Jesus, the gate is small and the road is narrow that leads to life and only a few find it. So it is perhaps appropriate to ask what it takes to win the crown that Paul so coveted and urged others to strive for very earnestly.

Though a very complicated subject involving many factors, we couldn't hope to give anymore than a brief sketch of what might be entailed for a man to enter everlasting life at the close of his years. A number of things come into play in determining if a soul has won the race, but perhaps one of the greatest indicators that one is on course to achieve the goal is an intense devotion to follow the path that God has laid out for a person. Jesus spoke of those who were completely focused on the prize in the Parable of the Pearl. The merchant having found the one pearl of great value sold all he had to purchase that one gem. In the same way, those who would merit the kingdom of heaven must be sold out to work for God, completely dedicated to do his will no matter what the cost to themselves.

Paul along with the other apostles were wholly intent on doing what God wanted them to do and were so absorbed in that purpose that the price they had to pay to keep going meant little to them. Enduring shipwreck, stoning, imprisonment, beatings, and periods

of starvation, the apostles weathered everything that came at them just as long as they remained on course.

No personal sacrifice was too great for these men as they knew that it was essential to winning the crown, and Jesus made this clear a number of times in the gospels. He indicated that just as he had no place to lay his head, so his followers would also at times suffer similar deprivation. And not just the luxury of a bed to sleep in, the Savior told his disciples that often times much more would be required of them including the loss of money, family, and friends. Particularly he emphasized that the cost of staying in the race involved firm detachment from materialism, wealth, and pleasure seeking, for man cannot simultaneously serve God and mammon.

To keep in the race, a man must learn to abandon his own interests and agenda to follow the road that God has laid out for him, no matter how difficult or unpleasant it appears. Service to God and one's fellow man must become the chief focus in one's life, if a man is to win the prize, and this is only appropriate, for the main occupation of the citizens of heaven is to continually work in the service of God on behalf of mortals here on earth. If we have not learned to routinely do this here, we would be unfit for that job in the heavenly kingdom.

Not only a steadfast disposition of service is required to function properly in heaven, but a whole slough of virtues must be acquired before one can expect to work in the celestial realms above. Of course chief among these is love which man must fan into a flame before he leaves earth life behind. But many others including obedience, patience, perseverance, and humility are also essential prerequisites to entering eternal life. The well trained athlete that Paul envisions in his letters will develop all of these virtues in the school of life which through adversity and trial is designed to build these important character traits within us. But without cooperation with the training program and the strict routine of daily exercises, the athlete can never hope to acquire these qualities, and while running the race he may easily be tempted to quit the long marathon or get disqualified for some other reason before crossing the finish line.

And those other disqualifications may involve stumbling into serious sin that inflicts on us a major injury forcing us out of the race. For this reason, achieving eternal life involves a steadfast will intent on the work of God, the acquisition of many virtues, and the overcoming of the sinful nature. Paul wrote to the Hebrews that "without holiness no one will see the Lord." In fact it is the case that all who hope to walk through the pearly gates will need to successfully sublimate their worst vices and faults to be fit for the kingdom of God. Jesus put such a premium on overcoming sin, that he even drew the gross analogy of cutting off one's hand if it causes a person to sin or plucking out one's eye if leads one toward iniquity. In his words it was a small price to pay to lose these parts of the body now and enter heaven later than remaining physically whole and missing the goal.

With such a difficult standard set to win the race of eternal life, no wonder the Lord indicated that few achieve it in this life. As we have seen, only those with complete

dedication can ever hope to reach the finish line, but then we can ask what happens to the rest of humanity that doesn't quite reach the mark whether missing it by a small distance or by a mile. Rather than feeling depressed that we might not make it, it is important to remember the words of Paul in his first letter to Timothy some years before. In a passage from that epistle the apostle emphasized that God wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. If we do not achieve salvation at the end of this life, our hope of dwelling in the celestial courts is certainly not dashed to pieces. Through God's love, at that point in time we will be given another opportunity to do better perhaps after a period of further refinement and purification of our nature. In the end all will achieve the goal even if it takes some a lot longer than others, for God is not willing that one should perish but that all should obtain everlasting life.

## Feast of All Souls

In most all of the ancient churches of Christendom there is a feast day that commemorates the dead and although the various branches of the faith celebrate this feast at different times, they all dedicate at least one day to remember those who have gone on before us to the other side. Within the Roman Catholic Church, November 2<sup>nd</sup> is traditionally the date on which the faithful call to mind their beloved dead while within the Orthodox Church several days a year are allocated to this purpose. And having a liturgical calendar of its own, the Orthodox Catholic Church celebrates the Feast of All Souls now at the end of September.

As should be somewhat obvious from today's readings, those who have left mortal life behind and crossed over to the spirit realm are the focus of our attention on this day. Some of our theology and church practice regarding the dead comes to us from these various passages, and considering first what is written in the Book of Maccabees we see the precedent for long standing traditions regarding the deceased. Many may not be familiar with the story of the Maccabees which takes place roughly 200 years before the time of Christ, but not unlike the Book of Esther, it is a series of narratives describing the triumph of the Jewish people when their existence and religious identity were threatened as has happened so many times in history.

After returning from Babylonian Exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the Jews resettled in their land and were granted their religious freedom by the Persians who then controlled the entire Middle East. But a couple centuries later, Alexander the Great would conquer the known world and his successors would impose Greek domination on Palestine. At the time of the Maccabees, the Greek rulers known as the Seleucids based in Syria were particularly cruel towards the Jews as they demanded them to assimilate to Greek culture and religion. Desiring one people with one identity under the Seleucid Empire, they forbade the Jews to practice their religion and attempted to force them to observe the religious traditions of the Greeks. Boys were not allowed to be circumcised and burnt offerings and sacrifices were prohibited. The Sabbath was to be defiled along with the temple sanctuary and all particular Jewish traditions were forbidden. In their place, the people of Israel were told to begin doing things that were detestable to them including building altars to idols and sacrificing unclean animals such as pigs.

Perhaps out of fear, many of the Jews cooperated with their Gentile overlords, but a good number resisted even to the point of death. The Books of Maccabees chronicle several heroes who defied their Greek oppressors. An old scribe who was well loved by his people was forced to eat pork, and rather than submit to this religious violation which would have been an abomination to his ancestors, he courageously went to the rack for torture and death. But a sadder story involves a woman and her seven sons who were likewise forced to eat swine flesh on pain of death, and in a long narrative the mother watched each of her children one by one heroically defy the Seleucids standing up for their faith only to die an agonizing death. To counter their defiance, the king ordered their tongues to be cut out in addition to severing their hands and feet. Helpless, they

were thrown onto a searing hot pan where they were fried until death released them from their agony.

In the midst of this resistance there rose up a valiant man named Judas Maccabeus, a priest who rallying all of the faithful Jews together revolted against the Greek tyrants in a war that would last seven years. He and his army eventually threw off the yoke of foreign rule and won their independence allowing the Jews to live autonomously for a short span of one hundred years before the Romans took over. However in this time the Jews were able to reinstate their religion and follow the traditions of their ancestors without hindrance.

The story that comes to us in today's reading from Maccabees is a short excerpt detailing one of the many battles that Judas Maccabeus was involved with in the war of independence and is significant to us as we celebrate the Feast of All Souls. The narrative begins in the aftermath of a skirmish with the Greek forces in which the Jews had burnt the port city of Jamnia. Some of the Israelite forces had died and Judas was preparing to bury the men who had fallen in battle when he made a discovery of something unexpected. Under the coats of each man who had been slain was something of a value, an offering that had been made to the idols of Jamnia which the deceased were intending to take away for themselves. A complete breach of the Law of Moses, no Israelite was to take the spoils of war for himself but was to take any gold, silver, and precious stone into the treasury of the Lord. Many centuries earlier, an Israelite named Achan was stoned to death for confiscating a gold bar and two hundred shekels of silver after the overthrow of Jericho. And now Judas Maccabeus recognized that some of his warriors had been killed in battle as a result of the same kind of sin. In an act of divine retribution, justice was meted out to these lawbreakers.

But rather than reviling his fellow Jews who had seriously sinned against God, Judas had compassion on them and setting a precedent for Jews and Christians alike down until the present time, he offered prayers for his deceased countrymen that God would forgive their sins and help them where they now dwelt in the afterlife. Not only through prayers, but also through a large sum of money which he sent to Jerusalem to make a sacrificial sin offering on behalf of the dead, Judas attempted to benefit his fellow warriors who had stumbled into sin before their demise. In keeping with the Jewish faith of his day, Judas Maccabeus recognized that not only prayers and sacrifices were beneficial for the living but also for those who had gone on before us to the other side, irrespective of how badly they had acted in life.

Within the Jewish tradition that exists today is the custom of praying for the dead which consists of several practices including the recitation of the psalms on behalf of the deceased or saying a prayer known as the "Kaddish" which translates as the prayer of sanctification or making holy. It is common to offer special prayers for a loved one who has passed away on the anniversary of their death as well as on special Jewish feast days. Following the Jewish tradition that stems from Old Testament times, Christians have prayed for the dead since the beginning offering not only their prayers for them but also their own personal good works. And most importantly, the Christian church has sought

to benefit their departed loved ones in the most powerful way possible through the Sacrifice of the Mass where Jesus' offering of himself is applied to the benefit of a soul in the afterlife.

Of course, that we pray for those who have gone on to the other side is because of a recognition that our prayers are a help to those who are no longer living. Far from being forever stuck in the torments of hell or even stagnating in the glories of paradise, the deceased have much opportunity to improve their spiritual condition just as we do on earth. Just as there is a vast range of living conditions on earth spanning from utter poverty to great affluence with everything in between, so too is there a wide spectrum of spiritual conditions on the other side. As we are able to better ourselves within the land of the living, so too can the dead improve their own lots. And just as we can offer help to our living neighbors to ameliorate their suffering and help them progress, so also can we assist our non-living friends as they continue their journey on the other side.

But whatever good the assistance that one human can give another, it pales in comparison with the help that the Savior himself can bring, and in today's epistle we read about how Jesus helped the souls languishing low in the depths of hell. In the Apostle's Creed we acknowledge his descent to the underworld where after his death he visited many souls in the afterlife starting first with the thief in the heights of paradise and working his way down to the depths of hell. In that dark place the brightness that shone from his spirit was of such greatness that it enabled many a soul trying to better itself to take a step up.

Often called the harrowing of hell, Christ came into the depths of the abyss as if with a plow stirring up the entire spirit world and allowing many a soul to break free from the place where they were and make some progress. Peter speaks of this event which transpired during the three days that Jesus lay in the tomb as the time when the Savior preached to the souls in prison. Undoubtedly many souls stuck in the mire of their sins and its effects didn't know that they could work their way out of such desperate conditions, and the great light that entered the domain of great sinners was a major shot in the arm to help all those who were willing to make a little advancement. A little later in the same chapter, Peter mentions that the gospel was preached even to the dead, for just like us, the souls on the other side need to hear the good news and know that redemption and forgiveness of sins is possible.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians was aware of the same missionary work of Christ in the spirit world when he quoted the contents of Psalm 68 to his audience. The Psalmist had prophetically written a thousand years earlier about the Messiah announcing, "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." Paul mentions that Jesus had ascended from the deepest lower regions of the spirit realm traversing the entire abode of the dead from the depths of hell to the heights of paradise. It was in his ascent from the gloomy darkness that he led captives in his train pulling many souls behind him in his wake assisted by his power as far as they were able to go with him at the time. The Psalmist wrote that in so doing he gave gifts to men, so we see that not only the living but the huge realm of the dead was also to benefit from the

sacrifice of Christ, for its effects were for all humanity whether on earth or in the afterlife.

On this day when we call to mind all of the departed, let us not fail to remember our Judeo-Christian tradition in which the dead are not forgotten but constantly brought before the throne of God for his assistance to improve their spiritual condition. As the Jews even now pray for their departed loved ones, let us ask God to make them holy even as we are trying to become holy. The truth be told, it is those who are living beyond the grave who are much more aware of us than we are of them, and as they do not fail to intercede for us, neither should we be negligent in that duty for them.

## Feast of All Saints

While last week we celebrated the feast of All Soul's which commemorates all of the dead, this week we remember those special departed people who lived exemplary lives of holiness. Today we observe the feast of All Saint's, a church holy day that goes back to the first Millennium and has become a great tradition within Christendom. Originally it sprang up in the Western church at Rome when in 609 the pope converted a former pagan temple into a church. The Pantheon at Rome had been a place of worship in pre-Christian times dedicated to all of the gods, and with its conversion into a church it was rededicated to Mary and all the martyrs. This led to a feast celebrating all of the saints on May 13<sup>th</sup>, a day chosen because of its connection with an old Pagan holiday known as Lemuria. It was on that day that the Romans would perform exorcisms and carry out rituals to appease the restless and the malevolent dead who were haunting the living. Often it was the case that former pagan holidays were remolded to take on Christian significance and this feast of All Saint's was just one of several like Christmas and Easter that was redesigned to help make a smoother transition from paganism to the new faith.

In the Eastern Church, a holiday commemorating all of the saints arose a couple centuries later when the Byzantine Emperor Leo built a church that he wanted to dedicate to his deceased wife who had lived a very devout life. But when he was forbidden to do so, he instead dedicated the church to all of the saints hoping that his wife would be honored indirectly by consecrating the church to the memory of all the holy men and women of God. The tradition that Emperor Leo began caught on and within the Orthodox Churches that exist today usually the first Sunday after Pentecost is dedicated to all of the Saints. By contrast, in modern times the Roman Catholic Church now celebrates the feast of All Saint's on November 1<sup>st</sup> which most would associate with Halloween on the day before. And we in the Orthodox Catholic Church have our own day to recognize the heroes of faith who have gone before us now at the end of September.

But we've said enough about the history of this church holiday for now. On this day that we observe the great men and women of faith who have gone on before us, it is appropriate to consider questions about the saints. We may wonder what life is like for them now and what kind of work they do in their new home. Though before addressing those points of interest, we may want to touch on the more fundamental question of how these blessed people became saints. In a recent sermon this subject was dealt with in outline form and to reiterate the gist of it, ordinary mortals are worthy of becoming saints when they have achieved holiness. The apostle Paul tells us that without holiness no flesh shall see God, and indeed without mastering sin in our lives we will not be able to cross the threshold into the land of the saints.

But not only is it necessary to conquer our sinful natures, in order to become a saint one must acquire many virtues in life particularly those highlighted in the Beatitudes that were read in today's gospel. Additionally one must pay off any remaining debts that are outstanding toward God and successfully learn all the lessons of life that are presented to us through trial and tribulation. In particular it is the ability to persevere through the hardships that life throws our way that is in view in today's epistle reading from

Revelation. The apostle John saw a great multitude dressed in white robes, and he was told that they came out of the great tribulation. Certainly it is true that many who will live through the great tribulation that is now on our doorstep will merit sainthood through weathering that storm, but it is tribulation in general that marks the life of those who are about to become saints. After being nearly stoned to death in the city of Lystra, Paul encouraged those with whom he spoke that “we must go through many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God.” In fact this is because as a rule, those who are close to becoming saints and are working hard for God attract the forces of darkness who oppose them and make the road very hard. If we are enduring severe hardship, it is often a sign that we are on the right track toward finishing the race. And focusing on the last Beatitude, the trial would-be saints are often called on to endure involves persecution in an ugly form in which the servant of God can expect to be slandered, maligned, insulted, and hated. A study of the lives of many of the saints will show that not a few were rejected during their lifetimes often by church authorities, and it wasn't until centuries later that they were recognized as true saints.

Becoming a saint is difficult, but it is not nearly as hard now as it was in Old Testament times before the coming of Christ. The apostle John was told that the great multitude that he saw had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. By this we can understand that the saints of the current age have made full use of the benefits that come through the sacrifice of Jesus to achieve salvation. This means that they have taken advantage of the sacraments, especially Penance by which we can unload our sins and their punishments simply through an honest and sincere confession. And additionally the heroes of faith from our current age have not failed to regularly receive the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ by which they receive supernatural strength to keep persevering through life's struggles.

Though it is difficult to become a saint, it is ultimately not beyond the ability of any of us, and the epistle from Revelation illustrates that those who will don the white robe encompass an enormous number of people. Not just a few scattered souls from one particular church and ethnic group, the apostle saw a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne of God. As God promised Abraham that his descendants would be like the number of grains on the seashore, so too will be the number of saints of God. The number of holy ones will be like the quantity of stars in the sky, myriads upon myriads beyond our ability to count. We understand from this description that salvation is for all humanity without exception, though it will clearly take some much longer than others to achieve. The apostle Paul makes an analogy in the epistle to the Romans that just as death came to all men through the sin of one person, so likewise life will come to all men through the righteousness of one person. By this we infer that the sacrifice of Christ was so powerful that collectively it has ensured that the whole human race will be made holy and blameless before God.

It is the destiny of man to have victory over sin and leave this mortal life behind, and this concept is captured in the symbol of the palm branches which the great multitude clothed in white bears in their hands. While today the palm tree is the symbol of a tropical vacation paradise, in ancient times, it was the symbol of triumph and victory. In the

Roman world, the champions of games and military campaigns were often rewarded with palm branches, and the early Christians as part of this culture came to adopt the palm as a symbol of victory over sin and the triumphal entry into eternal life. As such, palm fronds were often painted on the tombs of the martyrs as it was generally believed that all those who died for their faith merited sainthood upon their death.

Now once a man or woman dies and is found worthy to become a saint, he or she undergoes a process that for lack of a better word turns him or her into a superhuman. No longer limited by physical limitations, the new saint acquires a greatly expanded mind that is capable of much more than one would ever dream possible on earth. While we live in the physical world, much of our thoughts and experiences become submerged in our vast subconscious brain and remain inaccessible to our conscious mind, but when a person becomes a saint, all of the experiences and thoughts of mortal life, the majority of which have been long forgotten become available to him once again. In addition to this superior knowledge and wisdom base that the new saint receives, he also comes into a higher consciousness and awareness which will allow him to potentially hear the prayers of a number of people at once along with helping many with their requests. These new skills become critical in carrying out the new work they have to do for God in the land of eternal day.

No longer hampered by mortal life with its difficulties and sorrows, the saints dwell in a land of pure spirit. Without physical bodies there is no more need to eat, drink, or sleep which was envisioned by John in this epistle from Revelation, for the apostle wrote about those who wear the white robes saying, “Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them or any scorching heat.” Nor will they have the sorrows of the physical world for “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” In the words of the apostle Paul, rather than eating and drinking, the kingdom of God is about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, and so rather than being preoccupied with the material burdens and responsibilities that plague us mortals every day, the saints are free to live a life of the spirit which is in essence a life of the mind. The saints live in a world where thought is the only reality that exists, and together through the power of their imaginations they create a beautiful land in which to dwell with a lush countryside dotted with cities of gold that by comparison would make the best parts of our earth look like something out of the Third World.

Traditionally the Christian Church has recognized that there are three ranks of Saints which have more to do with time on the job than anything else. New saints are just beginners in the Kingdom of Heaven and as a class they are known as the Venerables. For them much of their time is spent in learning how to function with their new skills. Like a new sailor who needs to get his “sea legs,” the Venerables need to be taught about the work of a saint while at the same they undergo a little polishing of any residual rough spots in their character.

After spending some time in the realm of the Venerables and completing the necessary training for the work of a saint, the new initiates will be promoted to the rank of the Blessed. And it is at this point in their careers as saints that the holy ones actually begin

their work. However at this point they are not experienced enough to go it alone. They come under the wing of the most experienced saints as their apprentices. Like a skilled craftsman who takes a boy into his woodworking shop to learn the trade, the greatest saints take on those from the rank of the Blessed as their assistants. It is at this point that they begin to answer the prayers of the living and help mortals with their needs here below. But hardly limited to assisting those in the land of the living, one from the rank of the Blessed will routinely undertake missionary trips with his mentor into hell where like Christ a couple thousand years ago, they will preach to the souls who are in darkness attempting to persuade them to repent and better themselves. Of course as with any missionary, they are often ridiculed and insulted, and indeed it requires the patience of a saint to get through to lost souls who are often very set in their ways.

After significant time being an apprentice, the Blessed saint himself becomes a master and enters the rank of the Fully Sanctified Saints or perhaps what we might call the Full Fledged Saints. It is these who are capable of acting independently in their work which we have outlined. In the words of the book of Revelation, their prayers constantly rise to God like incense on behalf of those who solicit their help. Traditionally we understand that each full fledged saint develops an expertise of sorts or takes on a special interest among mortals that is near to his heart. The Book of Maccabees records how in a vision seen by a Jewish priest, the prophet Jeremiah was seen making intercession for the Jews and the Holy City of Jerusalem which he loved. Whole classes of people are near and dear to the heart of some saints like Gerard who prays for pregnant mothers. Musicians find a ready source of inspiration in St. Cecilia, and those who wish to travel in safety do well to invoke the help of St. Christopher. And of course we can all use the help of St. Anthony when on occasion we misplace something and need help in finding it.

There is a whole army of saints in the celestial realms who are more than eager to help us whenever we have need. Not just for spiritual problems but for all sorts of things from the mundane to the sophisticated they are available to assist us. If we need a little inspiration in our work or recreation, they are there to bring a flood of thoughts our way whether it be in the arts, music, science, or architecture. In fact, the truth be told, all of the major innovations and accomplishments of mortal man are due to the inspiration of those who dwell in the celestial spheres above who by nature and experience are much more creative than we are. Today we recognize them, these often invisible and unsung heroes for the work that they do and upon which we rely much more than we are aware.

## Feast of St. Michael and all the Angels

Over the past few weeks we have been focusing on the beings that invisibly surround us, the “great cloud of witnesses” that the apostle Paul spoke of in reference to all those creatures who inhabit the spiritual world. One particular feast was dedicated to all the departed souls who once lived among us. Another festival commemorated all of those people who have achieved holiness whom we recognize as the saints, and today we set aside another celebration to remember the greatest beings in God’s kingdom whom we know as the angels.

We have considered these celestial servants of God on several occasions illustrating their work among us through various biblical stories. We got a general idea about how they labor on behalf of men to guide and protect them. Through a continual flurry of inspiration, these great beings were shown to be busy steering men in the right direction through encouragement and instruction while keeping them shielded from the constant assault of unseen evil. However while we painted a picture of the general activities of the angelic hosts, no attempt was made to say anything about how the hosts of heaven are organized, nor was anything said about any specific jobs held by particular groups of angels. That subject is appropriately the focus of today’s feast where we commemorate the entire angelic community in a special way.

Far from being a disjointed band of God’s loyal servants, the kingdom of heaven is structured very much like the military with many ranks of command making up what we can really call the army of God. With just about the same number of tiers that officers fill in the U.S. army, the hosts of heaven are organized with a supreme command at the top with rank upon rank of subordinates carrying out its instructions below. Through biblical references as well as apocryphal writings and tradition, the church has generally recognized that there are nine different classes of angels that occupy the heavenlies. Ignatius, the great bishop of Antioch who lived in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century listed all of the ranks known to the early church in his Epistle to the Trallians. In agreement with the categories he specified, we understand the various levels in ascending order to consist of angels, archangels, thrones, dominions, principalities, powers, virtues, cherubim, and seraphim. While just about all nine groupings appear in different places in the bible, there is no place where they are mentioned all together. But as many as four of these ranks appear in a number of verses from the apostle Paul’s letters, and perhaps the best known of these is from his epistle to the Colossians where the four intermediate ranks of thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers are all listed in order.

In the Eucharistic liturgy that we celebrate from week to week we always remember all nine ranks in the prayers that we say, for they have an important role in the Sacrifice of the Mass. Just before the time of the consecration we invoke each choir of angels in ascending order linking up with each tier as we proceed to make a connection to the throne room of God. Through the network of the angelic hosts positioned between God and us here on the physical earth, the power of transubstantiation descends upon the bread and wine to turn them into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. In this way the

angels of God serve as intermediaries to communicate to us the power that is needed to bring the Blessed Sacrament into our presence.

Considering now the jobs of each tier of angels, again we derive our knowledge of their functions partly through the bible and to various extents through other early church writings and mysticism. Briefly sketching each choir and its main scope of activity, we begin with the lowest two ranks which include the angels and the archangels who supervise them. The lowest tier of angel or guardian angel as we also call it is responsible for many processes in the physical world. Besides controlling the weather and the forces of nature that are continually influencing us, it is the job of the guardian angel to watch over all of the lesser creation including the plants and animals.

Those who have the most experience with guiding God's smaller creatures receive the great responsibility of being the guardian angel for a human being and are entrusted with the job of leading him or her successfully to holiness. The base class of angels in their job as guardians of men is seen in a couple of places in the New Testament including one from the gospel of Matthew where Jesus speaks of the angels of the little children who frequently were invited to come to him. The other reference comes from the Acts of the Apostles when Peter was in prison. After he had escaped he knocked on the door where the disciples were gathered, but disbelieving it was really the apostle himself, they decided it was probably the angel who was in charge of his welfare.

While guardian angels and archangels are primarily occupied with dealing with individuals, it is the task of the intermediate tiers of angels to oversee groups of people, and while we don't know too much about the intricate details of their work, at least in outline we know what each of the middle choirs focuses on. The third rank from the bottom known as the thrones can be said to watch over churches or religious organizations, perhaps a local parish in a particular town. The biblical evidence for their function is found particularly in John's Revelation where an angel is described as being the guardian of each of the seven churches in the opening chapters of the book. The next class above the thrones are known as the dominions and they have an even greater responsibility as the supervisors of entire nations or ethnic groups. While the bible doesn't allude to this job per se', another early church writing known as the Recognitions of Clement alludes to it their role. In that document the apostle Peter is said to have told Simon Magus in a debate that "every nation has an angel, to whom God has committed the government of that nation." Above the dominions exist a yet loftier class of angels known as principalities and these are in charge of entire races of people so that in effect they are the guardians practically of entire continents. And ascending one more rank above the principalities we have the powers whose task it is to supervise entire planets. With billions of planets throughout the universe that support life in one form or another, there are no lack of these great angels to govern whole worlds. With their great intelligence and predictive power, these high beings have the task of determining our destinies and mapping out our lives even before we are born.

Moving on to the upper echelon of the angelic hierarchy we meet with classes of angels who no longer work with particular planets but whose job it is to deal with the entire

universe. The virtues who are that level of angel third from the top are as their name implies responsible for spreading the virtues of God throughout the whole cosmos. Patience, perseverance, humility, kindness, and a litany of other godly qualities are disseminated by this high grade of angel to the inhabitants of the universe. While we do not have mention of this particular rank of heavenly creature in the bible, the next tier up known as the cherubim have quite a few references particularly in the Old Testament. Such angels appear initially in the Garden of Eden barring Adam and Eve from reentering Paradise. Later Moses was to see to it that they should be cast in gold and mounted on top of the Ark of the Covenant at the command of Moses. Centuries later Ezekiel the prophet would speak of them prominently in his celestial visions. While it is the task of the virtues to spread wide the many attributes of God to all of creation, it is the job of the cherubim to spread the supreme virtue which we know as love to the entire universe.

Climbing one more rank of the angelic hosts, we come to the greatest of all the angels known as the seraphim, and their existence is supported through the visions of the prophet Isaiah who saw them surrounding the throne of God. Depicted as beings with three pairs of wings, with one pair to fly and the others to cover face and feet, Isaiah saw them crying out, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” And these words which have come to us from this Old Testament prophet have also found their way into our liturgy and all the ancient liturgies at the time that we spiritually ascend into the throne room of God right before the consecration. These lofty beings dwell in the highest tier of heaven where God himself resides, and we echo their praises as we enter into the presence of God at the high point of the Mass. It is one of the main tasks of the seraphim to spread the knowledge of God throughout the cosmos, and perhaps this is why the name seraph or serpent is used to describe these great beings, for the serpent is symbolically the wisest of God’s creatures and appropriately it is the task of the seraph to disseminate the wisdom and knowledge of God to the universe.

Of all of the myriads of angels that serve God, we perhaps only know the names of a handful of them through both biblical and extra-biblical sources. The angels that have revealed their names to us appear to come from an inner circle of ten seraphim that are collectively known as the sephiroth. With the great privilege of seeing God face to face, the sephiroth come to man as special messengers of the Almighty at pivotal points in history. The angel Gabriel who we are all familiar is employed by God as the “Lord of Birth” and it is his job to oversee the time when every living creature is born wherever it is in the universe. Because of this role, it was his task to appear to Zechariah to herald the birth of John the Baptist and then a little while later to bring the great news to the Virgin Mary that she would bear the Son of God in her womb. In addition to Gabriel, the mystics tell us of Raphael, the “Lord of Life” and Azrael, the “Lord of Death” of which less is written in ancient writings. But their fellow sephiroth Michael has a long tradition both within the bible and without and of these four great angels he is undoubtedly the most celebrated and indeed on this the Feast of Michael and all the Angels we remember him specifically.

The name Michael means in Hebrew “who is like God” which is appropriate when we consider that this elite guard known as the Sephiroth resemble God in their natures more

than any of the lower angels. They stand continually in his presence and see him face to face reflecting his majesty. This great being that we know as Michael has the title “Lord of Judgment and of the ten sephiroth, it is his job to function as the captain of the entire angelic army which wages war on the forces of darkness in high places. His presence is first known in the bible in the Book of Joshua just before the fall of Jericho when appearing to Joshua with a drawn sword in his hand he announced that he was the “commander of the army of the Lord.” Later in the Book of Daniel, Michael is called one of the chief princes assisting subordinate angels in their work of supporting the Jewish exiles far away from home in the Persian Empire. In the short epistle of Jude in the New Testament, the great angel Michael was said to have engaged in a dispute with the devil over the body of Moses. Based on an older apocryphal work of the Jews, it was a reference to Satan’s attempts to unearth the remains of Moses to tempt the Jewish people into worshipping it. Michael was depicted as working against this to keep the body of Moses concealed and avoid it becoming a snare of veneration for the Israelites. And probably more than any biblical reference, it is the numerous apocryphal references to Michael in the spiritual writings of the Jews that have popularized this great seraph who commands the entire celestial hierarchy. For them, Michael was described as the prince of light leading the forces of God against the darkness of evil. Corroborating the prophecies of Daniel, the Jewish religious leaders viewed this great angel as the special protector of the Jewish nation and as such he came to feature in the liturgical prayers of the Israelites. Several rabbis wrote prayers to Michael referring to him as the prince of mercy and requesting that he intercede in favor of Israel. Even the prophet Jeremiah was said to have composed a prayer to this captain of God’s army during the exilic period in which he lived.

The Jewish tradition about Michael ultimately spilled over into the Christian Church and from the earliest times this elite seraph has been celebrated in our faith. Often portrayed in religious art, Michael is often depicted as an angelic warrior fully armed with helmet, sword, and shield standing over the dragon which he pierces with a lance. And it is this image that was probably inspired by the gospel reading today from Revelation. But more than his function as the leader of the forces of light waging war on Satan and his minions, sometimes Michael is represented holding a pair of scales in his hands, an image that is painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel which undoubtedly is a reference to his role as “Lord of Judgment.”

With such high esteem for the captain of the Lord’s army, a special Mass was created for Michael in the earlier days of the church which was simply known as Michaelmas. Celebrated on September 29<sup>th</sup> around the time we now observe the feast of Michael and all the angels, it was a holy day of obligation in Middle Ages. But by the 18<sup>th</sup> century that tradition became abolished, and apparently devotion to Michael waned among the faithful. However a resurgence in piety toward Michael would come at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the efforts of Pope Leo XIII. There are several versions of the story that describe the circumstances by which Leo wrote a special prayer to Michael to be said at the end of every Mass, but one suggests that “the pope had a prophetic vision of the coming century of sorrow and war. After celebrating Mass, the Holy Father was conferring with his cardinals. Suddenly, he fell to the floor. The cardinals immediately

called for a doctor. No pulse was detected, and the Holy Father was feared dead. Just as suddenly, Pope Leo awoke and said, 'What a horrible picture I was permitted to see!' In this vision, God gave Satan the choice of one century in which to do his worst work against the Church. The devil chose the 20th century. So moved was the Holy Father from this vision that he composed the prayer to St. Michael the Archangel."

That prayer which was very popular especially before the advent of Vatican II went like this:

Saint Michael the Archangel,  
defend us in battle;  
be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil.  
May God rebuke him, we humbly pray:  
and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host,  
by the power of God,  
thrust into hell Satan and all the evil spirits  
who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls.  
Amen

On this feast of Michael and all the angels under his command, let us remember that like the saints, the angels are also interceding for us continually before the throne of God, and it is our privilege to ask their help in life's struggles which like the saints they are more than happy to oblige.

## **First Sunday after the Feast of St. Michael and all the Angels**

Probably from the time that man first learned to use fire he discovered that burning different kinds of plants and trees produced some strong scents that were very pleasant to his sense of smell. Undoubtedly local tribes came to appreciate the fragrance of a sap laden pine log thrown on the fire or the rich smell of a maple branch immersed in the flames. Early man quickly acquired knowledge about which organic substances released wonderful aromas that were very intoxicating to the senses, and surely as a community gathered around the fire at night they would enjoy this simple olfactory pleasure.

Particularly in the Middle East where resin filled shrubs were plentiful throughout the Arabian Peninsula, primitive man would come to discover that burning the hardened sap from these trees produced a titillating aroma that would heighten the senses of sight and smell. This wonderful substance we would come to know as incense, a material burned by many people groups for thousands of years. Though originally it might have served only as a form of simple pleasure for the ancients, over time it was realized to be much more than that. Eventually it was recognized for its medicinal qualities and we can say with confidence that it was the first form of aromatherapy. With the potential to calm the nerves and reduce anxiety, burning incense was viewed as a healing agent with the added benefits of renewing energy and revitalizing the body.

Because of the powerful scent emitted when burned, various peoples began to use incense as a cleansing agent to purify the air when it had become stale or polluted, and this was done particularly after death or illness had occurred in a locale. The Pharaohs of Egypt would employ it to purge away bad odors from their palaces, but eventually they came to use it to rid their dwelling places of other bad influences. Not surprisingly, such a treasured substance as incense would ultimately take on religious meaning, and in this vain the Egyptians saw it as a way to drive away demons while at the same time gratifying the gods they worshipped.

The practitioners of different faiths from Rome all the way to India began to use incense for religious purposes among other reasons because it facilitated a spirit of prayer and meditation. With its mood altering effects, the burning of this fragrant material had the power to put someone in the right frame of mind for spiritual thought, and so incense came to be burned in temples and other religious houses throughout early civilization. Because of its great value to humanity, it came to be used as an offering to the many gods throughout the world. It was believed that the sweet-smelling fragrance was pleasing to the deities above who accepted these rich aromas as tokens of love and gratitude from their followers.

While the Greeks felt that the scent of incense was simply a refreshing fragrance for the gods, other people like the Egyptians came to believe that the rising smoke carried with it the prayers of the faithful as well as the souls of the departed into heaven. But whatever, the belief attached to the burning of this aromatic substance, the offering of incense became for the ancients the main form of bloodless sacrifice to the gods. For the Romans

no religious ritual was viewed to be complete without it and in their ancient religion homage to the gods was integrally attached to the burning of these rich gums and resins.

Like the many nations that surrounded it, Israel was also keen on the use of incense in religious worship and for the Jewish people like the rest of the world it became their primary non-animal sacrifice to God. The various peoples of the Middle East had their own recipes to blend the ideal mixture of sweet smelling gums and resins. No doubt each tribe came to develop its concoction through trial and error, though it seems that the Jews were given a recipe directly by God. The formula called for four components all in equal measure including a gum resin called stacte along with three other plant based substances known as onycha, galbanum, and frankincense. With the exception of the first the other three were known to have medicinal properties and it would seem that like the other surrounding nations, they were used for that purpose.

Within the tabernacle that was fashioned according to what was revealed to Moses were several pieces of religious furniture including an altar overlaid with gold upon which incense alone could be offered. It was the duty of the priest to burn the aromatic material twice per day at morning and evening. In addition to these regular rituals, the high priest who officiated at the annual Day of Atonement would burn a lot of incense producing heavy smoke on the Day of Atonement before he would enter the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant resided. It was necessary for him to do so, because the glorious presence of God hovered above the Ark and to see it would kill a man. With a thick cloud of incense in the air, the ministering priest could be sure that the glory of God would be veiled from his mortal eyes so that he could perform his duty without fear.

Because the offering of incense constituted a sacrifice to God, it was the prerogative of the priest alone to offer it on behalf of the people. In antiquity just as it is today, the job of a priest is to offer sacrifice and intercede on behalf of the people to God, and those who attempt to do so without being authorized run the risk of God's displeasure. Such was the case several times in the Old Testament when men became jealous of the special role of the priesthood in service to God and attempted to perform those duties as layman. In the Book of Numbers, 250 good standing men of the community took it upon themselves to offer incense to God and as a severe punishment the ground opened up and swallowed all of them alive. Later in the history of Israel, the good king Uzziah also tried to usurp the role of a priest and after burning incense became leprous until the day of his death.

With the dawning of the Christian era, the new priesthood of the early church continuing the tradition of their predecessors burned incense in the Eucharistic celebrations that they held. For reasons not unlike the pagan nations who used these aromatic gums and resins for thousands of years earlier, the church saw fit to maintain the fragrance of incense in its religious rituals. Exploiting its ability to heighten the senses, the sweet smelling material has been employed to increase our spiritual awareness during the Mass and help direct our thoughts towards God and spiritual things. For this reason it is offered at every service particularly in the Orthodox Churches as we do here, and the clergy are careful to keep it steadily wafting through the air until the gathering is completed.

That the church has offered incense on a regular basis since the birth of Christianity is the fulfillment of a little known prophecy of Malachi a few centuries before Christ. He foretold, "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. The pure offering that he alludes to is that perfect sacrifice that we know very well as the Eucharist, the unblemished offering of Jesus that is celebrated almost continually around the globe. The prophet foresaw that this holy oblation would come to spread through all of the nations and with it the offering of incense which for the Jews had been restricted to the temple worship but now could be performed at all times and all places.

Turning now to the symbolism of incense, there are a number of different interpretations and allegorical meanings that have been attached to its usage since ancient times. Considering the thoughts of the Jews on the subject, we have the biblical testimony which mirrored that of other nearby cultures. David captured the link between prayer and incense in the 141<sup>st</sup> Psalm when he petitioned the Lord, "May my prayer be set before you as incense." Building on this ancient tradition, the church continued to see the rising of incense as the ascension of one's prayers into the throne room of God. Particularly in the Apostle John's Revelation we have a couple references to this notion including the one mentioned in the gospel reading today in which the angel offered incense with the prayers of the saints.

While linking burning incense as a symbol of rising prayer is probably the most popular idea across a number religions, it is certainly not the only meaning that has been derived from this aromatic substance. As with any sacrifice that is offered to a deity, incense is burned so that the solid substance is converted into a gas or smoke that rises. Within the Jewish tradition, most all of the animal carcasses were incinerated upon the altar, and presumably this was so that the vapors given off by the fire could ascend into the presence of God to receive them. While it is obvious that any deity would appreciate the fragrance of rising incense, it is hard to imagine that it would enjoy the smell of burning flesh. Yet that is what the Books of Moses suggest. In a few passages, it is written that the smoldering hide of an animal is a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

While we would hardly imagine that God would like the odor of burning animal tissue, in an allegorical sense we can perhaps appreciate the meaning. While God is of course pleased with any well intentioned sacrifice, the idea of burning carries with it a connotation of what we can call transmutation, the conversion of one substance into another. With such offerings, it is outwardly a conversion from the solid to the vapor phase, but symbolically it represents the changeover from the physical to the spiritual or from the earthly to the heavenly. The incineration of a sacrifice may serve as a figure of sublimating one's earthly nature into a spiritual nature, and particularly in the case of animal sacrifice, it signifies the sublimation of man's animal nature into the spiritual nature that he is called to assume. It is this transformation of man's character that is pleasing to God and what he is ultimately looking for.

Other interpretations for the burning of incense are equally valuable, and a few of them see the incense as a symbol of Jesus himself. Partly this is because as mentioned earlier many of the gums and resins that are used in incense recipes have medicinal purposes and typify Jesus the healer, but even more than this is the meaning we can extract from the harvesting of incense. The trees from which it is ultimately produced in Arabia are initially cut to allow the sap to ooze out. After several months what has seeped from the incisions in the bark hardens over and is ready to be gathered. Many have seen this is a symbol of how in his passion Christ was scourged and pierced and from his wounds blood flowed just like the oozing sap that constitutes this aromatic material.

Others see frankincense which is the core ingredient of most incense recipes as a symbol of Christ's priesthood or his divinity as it was one of the three gifts presented to him by the wise men. Along with the gold to symbolize his kingship and the myrrh to foreshadow the bitterness of his death, it would represent his purpose in offering the perfect sacrifice of himself to God.

The sweet perfume of incense has also appropriately been understood as a symbol of Jesus whose goodness exudes from his pores like a fragrance to all those around. Paul spoke of him this way in his letter to the Corinthians referring to the aroma of Christ as did the Song of Solomon which depicted the Lover as wafting pleasant perfumes into the air. The Coptic Church has built on this concept in its liturgy which interprets the censor as a symbol of the Virgin Mary and the incense which is placed within it as a symbol of Jesus who was conceived within her. Appropriately when the priest recites that part of the creed that speaks of Christ being incarnate of the Virgin, he places a spoonful of incense in the censor to be burned.

Yet others see the incense as typifying the church itself also building upon the words of the Song of Solomon. The Beloved who is the bride of the Lover has historically been understood to represent the church who is mystically married to Christ. In one verse from this Old Testament book, the Lover remarks, "Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the serpent?" Likewise Paul in his letter to the Corinthians speaks of the Church as the one who transmits the aroma of Christ to the world as his representatives. Along these lines, some have seen the fire consuming the incense as a symbol of the zeal and fervor that the church is called to have in carrying out its mission.

Finally, we may interpret the cloud of smoke that is produced by the incense as a symbol of God who very often in the bible appeared to the people in this way. In the Old Testament a cloud led the people through the desert by day when they were fleeing from Egypt. Later it was a cloud that settled on the Tent of Meeting that Moses built in the desert that indicated that the Lord had descended in their midst. And when Solomon erected his magnificent temple, God's presence flooded the entire building in the form of a dense cloud through which the priests could not even do their work.

It is this cloud of smoke that we produce through burning incense that reminds us that we have entered the very throne room of God. It is at the consecration that we are truly in

his midst, for Jesus appears to us under the cover of bread and wine. For this reason, the incense among many other things is a sign of our belief in the Real Presence of Christ among us in the Eucharist, the greatest treasure of the church which we continually offer every day until he comes again.

## Second Sunday after the Feast of St. Michael and all the Angels

In today's readings we are presented with two fairly familiar bible characters who were selected by God to do a special work for him. The first one that we meet is Jeremiah who would become known to history as the weeping prophet. A priest with a mission to proclaim judgment and imminent disaster on Judah and the surrounding nations shortly before the Babylonian Exile, this prophet had few friends and was not surprisingly poorly received by his audiences, even so much as to be thrown into a water cistern to silence his message. The second person that we encounter in our readings is the legendary John the Baptist, a wild man from the desert country who wore camel's skins and ate locusts and honey as his main diet. Though he probably would've been regarded strange even by first century standards, the prophet was nonetheless a man full of the Holy Spirit appointed to the very important task of preparing the way for the coming of the Lord.

Both men are in focus today, because they illustrate a common theme, namely that God calls certain individuals to do big jobs for him often choosing them for a particular work even before they are born. That he does this may spark some questions in a few people. We may wonder why God selects certain people to do some specific tasks for him and doesn't give the opportunity to others. On what basis does he decide that one person should be a great prophet or evangelist to the exclusion of everyone else? And how is it that he makes his choices before an individual is born and has even had an opportunity to do anything good or bad in this life?

The astute student of the bible will realize that such seemingly arbitrary decisions on behalf of God seem to create a little friction with other prevalent concepts in the bible. Nearly half a dozen times in the New Testament alone we have the recurring statement, "God does not show favoritism," and yet even putting the spiritual dimension aside, it is hard to reconcile this idea with what we observe in the world around us on just a basic material level. On what basis we may ask does someone get chosen to be born in abject poverty in a Third World nation while another comes into the world in great privilege in a prosperous nation, or along the same lines how is it that some are born with robust health while others are sick from day one and must face an entire life being infirmed to one degree or another. Furthermore we may question how it is that some individuals come into life with innate talents and abilities that are not possessed by the masses. Some men and women are greatly talented with tremendous skill in the arts and music. Others are intellectually brilliant or have keen athletic ability, and yet the greater majority of mankind have no such great gifts to speak of.

But returning again to spiritual matters, we could continue to generate similar questions about those who have religious interest in life. Some people come into this life with an inborn bent toward the spiritual side while others demonstrate nothing more than a material inclination their whole lives? And a case in point is one of the prophets we are considering today, namely John the Baptist who as we read in the gospel was filled with the Holy Spirit even from the time he was in his mother's womb. And not only was this saint born with an innate gravitation toward the spiritual, the testimony of the church bears record of a number of other saints who from their earliest childhood expressed great

devotion to God beyond their years. The popular Medieval Saint Catherine of Siena at the early age of five would kneel on each step of her staircase and recite a "Hail Mary." And apparently so pleasing was her devotion to the angels that they would frequently carry her up and down the stairs without her feet touching the ground. Other contemporary saints like Padre Pio exhibited similar piety, and also at the age of five this holy priest devoted his life to God and even began to practice penances such as using a stone for his pillow or sleeping on the cold stone floor at night. We might ask what makes some children do these things while in the words of the Psalmist, "others go astray from birth and are wayward from the womb."

While all of these questions remain a mystery when we approach them from conventional wisdom, if we dare consider that life's inequalities have less to do with the circumstances of this life and more to do with events that transpired before we were born, we will solve this great puzzle. The reality is that who we are now along with the conditions that we have entered this life with have been greatly shaped by who were before this life began. The person that existed before you were conceived in your mother's womb has an ancient past, a long history of good and bad, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses that have carried over into the present and cumulatively molded the person that you now are.

We are only aware of a small fraction of the person that we are. For us, our existence is just like the tip of the iceberg that is visible above the surface of the water, but God is very acquainted with the far greater mass of the iceberg that is hidden under the water. He knows who we really are, for he has known us through the whole course of our existence from one life to another. While we can only identify with the person who is currently living out this short life, the Almighty deals with us according to what he has known about us for many ages. It is based on a man's cumulative experience and knowledge of many centuries that God decides in what setting he is best born and under which circumstances he should live. According to a person's lengthy history, some are chosen to be born under sub-par conditions, while a great number of people are selected to come into the world in a rank and file ordinary setting. And then there are relatively few who are picked to be born at a particular place and time where they are positioned to fulfill a special calling that their long past history has qualified them for.

Such souls like Jeremiah and John the Baptist fit into this category of special people that God appointed to a particular task even before they were conceived into this life. God told Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Because of ancient credentials that the prophet had acquired in past lives, the Lord chose him to fulfill the special mission of speaking up boldly and condemning the nations of his day. Not that the prophet was at all aware of those credentials, for he protested that he wasn't able to do the job that was being called to. Jeremiah complained that he was like a child that didn't know how to speak. Interestingly other great men of God resisted what the Lord was asking them to do for similar reasons. Moses the greatest prophet of Judaism cowered away from God's call to speak to Pharaoh and lead the people of Israel out of Egypt because of his concern about not being eloquent and not of any great social or political standing. He even asked God to choose someone else, convinced that he was the wrong

person for the job, but God who knows what he is doing rebuked him as also he did with Jeremiah.

The problem is that because of our limited knowledge of ourselves, we tend to assess our capabilities based on just the few decades of life that we have known and are aware of. Outer appearances can be deceiving, and who we think we are is often not who we really are. Only God sees the Big Picture and knows the truth about us as the ancient beings that we really are. For this reason he told Jeremiah not to say, "I am only a child." The prophet's estimation of himself was wrong, for little did he know that latent within himself was a man capable of bringing a harsh message to an unreceptive crowd carrying the weight of insult, rejection, and abuse throughout his entire career. Perhaps he was surprised that he was ultimately able to do the job God asked him to do as no doubt Moses was when after 40 years he led a rebellious Semitic tribe to the door of the Promised Land. But of course God wasn't surprised because he doesn't assess us the way we evaluate ourselves.

We tend to look at the external circumstances of our lives and at superficial appearances without knowing what is really inside of us or others that we come into contact with. Another good case and point to illustrate this human tendency is the life of Israel's famous king David. After the Lord had rejected Saul as king for his disobedience, Samuel sought out his replacement and was to anoint one of Jesse's eight sons for the job. Samuel spotted the oldest and assumed it would be God's choice for apparently he was of the height and appearance of a king even as Saul had been. But God indicated that the eldest was not his choice and working his way down through all Jesse's sons in descending order by age, he finally came to the shepherd boy David who to everyone's surprise was God's new selection. The Lord told Samuel that God doesn't look at things that man looks at, for while man looks at outer appearance, the Lord looks at the heart.

Looks can in fact be very deceiving, and if we learn nothing else, if we come to avoid judging others based on appearances whether negative or positive we will have made some spiritual progress. We may esteem the rich and famous and look down at the bum on the city street corner, but from God's perspective, the wealthy ones may be of little spiritual stature while the vagrant in the core of his soul may be a much more holy and pious individual than we could ever imagine. God knows who we really are, and just a couple decades of less than stellar living that we may observe in a person is hardly enough to judge where he or she is on the road to sanctity.

A number of famous saints didn't start off well, but when they received a little stimulus in the right direction they were unstoppable and became great soldiers of God. Francis of Assisi is such an example of someone who made a radical change. Born into a wealthy and privileged family he lived life as a playboy until fighting in a war between his and a neighboring town, he rethought life. Abandoning his comfortable existence, he became a beggar bearing the Christian message from town to town and of all the medieval saints he has left us perhaps the greatest legacy in Christendom. The apostle Paul likewise was another man who made a phenomenal turnaround. We may be inclined to judge him as a hate filled persecutor of the church, but God knowing him better knew this was not so. A

little misguided and zealous for protecting his beloved Jewish faith from heresy, Paul was stamping out what he perceived to be a threat to his religion. But once he learned the truth through a divine revelation, he couldn't be more enthusiastic for propagating the Christian faith, a job that he had for many lifetimes become qualified to do in a special way at the dawn of the Christian era.

Now we have considered several saints and prophets who were called to a job that they either thought was beyond their scope or was regarded as out of their league by peers. Not knowing the prior history of any one of them, all we can say is that God had assessed them better than they and their companions did. But of all the characters in the bible with no doubt an illustrious history prior to their births, there is one for whom we know a little about his past. John the Baptist whom we are considering today is one of the few people that we can positively identify with someone who lived centuries earlier.

It was at the end of the Old Testament, in the book of Malachi that the Lord promised that he would send the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord. In the important role of forerunner of the Messiah, Elijah was to be born again in the land of Israel to be the voice of one crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. The angel Gabriel reiterated these ideas from the prophet Malachi when he heralded John the Baptist's birth, for he told his father Zechariah that the boy would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers before the appearance of the Lord.

Jesus announced to his disciples on a few occasions that John the Baptist was indeed the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy and a reincarnation of the powerful prophet Elijah who had lived 800 years earlier. He told them, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished." "Then the disciples realized he was talking to them about John the Baptist."

A little earlier in the same gospel, Jesus told them very plainly that John was Elijah returned when he said, "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women, there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist ... For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear."

The similarity between both Elijah and John is very strong, not only in the spirit and power they displayed as the servants of God but even in physical appearance. Both are cast as a kind of wild man of the desert, a nomadic loner full of the spirit. Elijah the Tishbite was described in 1 Kings as a "man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." Likewise, the book of Matthew says, "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." These characteristics suggest that more than anything else, what is carried from one incarnation to the next is one's core personality along with its corresponding nature and temperament. Elijah still apparently had similar behavioral patterns when he appeared as John the Baptist as when he had lived centuries earlier.

But though we have some insights to the prior life of John the Baptist, it is indeed rare for anyone to know anything about his past history as in the wisdom of God, this information is veiled from us. In general it is not for us to know the details of the past as our past failures could potentially discourage us in the current life. Likewise knowledge of our triumphs and successes could have the opposite effect of making us vain or lazy. Suffice it to say, it is enough for us to know that where we currently are has been shaped by a long history, and in God's wisdom we have appeared at the right time and place that will best help us make spiritual progress. It is for us to make the most of the life we are leading not being worried about what was behind or what lies ahead. In the words of the apostle Paul, we must all press on to win the prize doing the best we can with what we are given knowing that all has been arranged for us by a loving God with our best interests at heart.

## **Third Sunday after the Feast of St. Michael and all the Angels**

There are very few teachings that are universally held by all of Christendom. With thousands of denominations, it is the norm to disagree on many issues of faith except when it comes to one very important doctrine. Despite schism and disunity within the church, from the earliest of times there has been more or less universal belief in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ which is the focus of today's readings. With the testimony of Jesus himself that he would come again as well as that of the apostles writing in their various epistles, this doctrine has been very clear being affirmed in the major creeds of the Church and professed by every generation of Christians up until the present time.

A teaching that is very near and dear to the heart of the Orthodox Catholic Church, we believe that in his Second Coming, Jesus will complete the mission he began 2000 years ago. Ideally the Savior would have been proclaimed king to begin his benevolent reign over humanity at that time, but through the rejection he cruelly suffered this plan was postponed to a future time. Now through the merits of his great Sacrifice, Jesus has earned the right to be king of all the earth, a position which he will assume whether his subjects would receive him or not when he again steps foot on planet earth.

While belief in the bodily return of Christ is nearly universal with the exception of a few groups that interpret it in a spiritualized non-literal way, for most believers, the question is not if he will return but when. Throughout the church age, there have been many date setters attempting to predict the timing of his return. Obviously to the present day, all such prognosticators have been wrong and often an embarrassment to the church as a whole. In opposition to any who would attempt to pinpoint a specific date for the Second Coming, fairly conservative Christians rightly emphasize the words of the Lord in the gospels which suggest that his return to earth will more or less come as a surprise.

In the latter half of Matthew 24, Jesus compared the time of his return to the circumstances of Noah's Day. In the scenario that he painted, he suggested that he will come on the scene when life is going business as usual with people eating and drinking, marrying, and doing all the normal things of life just as had been occurring up until the day that the Flood came and suddenly brought catastrophe to everyone. As it was a completely unexpected thing for Noah's contemporaries, so Jesus suggests that it will be for those who are living at the time of his appearance.

But more than in just that passage did Christ attempt to drive home that point. He told a few parables throughout his ministry to reiterate that no one knows the day or hour of his return. The popular Parable of the Ten Virgins was another story the Savior spun to illustrate that his return would be a surprise. In that account, five of the virgins were caught off guard when without oil in their lamps, the bridegroom appeared suddenly at the sleepy hour of midnight to commence the wedding feast. The five virgins who kept their lamps burning were invited into the feast while the others caught in a stupor were left outside and barred from the festivities.

In another place, Jesus compared his Second Coming to a thief who breaks into a house during the night. His point was to emphasize that the owner of a house doesn't routinely expect a burglar lying in wait to rob him blind, and yet what Christ attempts to convey in this simile is that his return will once again be at an hour that we least expect him like a break-in during the wee hours of the morning while we are asleep.

The idea that Jesus wants to convey in all of these little stories is that it is necessary to be vigilant for we do not know the hour of his return. Because he will appear at an unexpected time like when we are caught up in the normal activities of life or like when we are fast asleep in our beds, the Savior wishes to communicate that people need to be very careful to maintain their spiritual side, not neglecting their duties toward God who will surely call each to account for his activities when he comes. That he promises to come at an hour we least expect him is his way of keeping mankind on its toes lest if given prior notice many would live a lazy life without making any effort to be spiritual until the very end. That his coming should be a surprise is therefore a great kindness to humanity for whom the Savior has its best interests at heart.

Because life has been going on as business as usual for the twenty centuries since Jesus was last with us, many scoffers have said "Where is the promise of his coming? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." And while they mock those who preach the Second Coming saying nothing has changed since day one, modern day naysayers are perhaps overlooking some important indicators that Jesus' return is now imminent. While it might be true that no one knows the specific day or hour which is the emphasis of Christ to keep mankind watchful about his spiritual responsibility, we nonetheless believe that mankind will not be completely in the dark about the general season of the Second Coming which many signs now foretell. The apostle Paul himself told the Thessalonian Christians that though the coming of the Lord would be as a thief in the night, the believer should not be in darkness so that the day completely surprise him like a thief.

While Jesus devoted the second half of Matthew 24 to the element of surprise regarding the time of his return to encourage his flock to be vigilant and on the up-and-up their whole lives, in the first half of that chapter, he enumerated many signs that would precede his coming. The Savior spoke of great trouble on the earth in the advent to his Second Coming, and in an earlier homily it was explained that there is a spiritual mechanism that ensures that this is so. Whenever the Son of God descends from the high plane of the Seraphim to earth, the forces of darkness vehemently oppose him and try to delay if not stop his entry into the world. As he gets closer and closer to the planet, the fighting gets fiercer and fiercer and humanity becomes embroiled in the conflict. Whereas earlier the war is predominantly fought within the angelic ranks, it eventually reaches the human level which John foresaw in his Revelation when he quoted a heavenly voice saying, "Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury because he knows his time is short."

At this time, the evil hierarchy incites men to wickedness with all of their energy, pulling out all of the stops and naturally with the weakness of human nature, this precipitates war

and conflict as the Savior predicted. Additionally the increase in evil causes many a heart to grow cold and indifferent so that men are callous to the needs of their neighbors. Furthermore Christ prophesied that the advent to his coming would see a significant increase in natural disasters including earthquakes and famines across the world, and in a sense we understand these to be merely a reflection of the state of conflict within the hearts of men. An old saying suggests that “as it is above, so it is below” which on one level can mean that conditions on earth reflect those in heaven, though on another level it can imply that what is happening within a man becomes reflected in the world around him. So we expect that before the return of Jesus, the discord among men will be mirrored in the earth and the seas until finally peace appears and both man and his planet come to rest again.

Besides these various indicators, the Savior spoke of other events that would precede his return including various signs in the sun, moon, and stars above. He suggested that he would not appear until the gospel was preached in all nations so that all humanity had an opportunity to hear about him before his return. But he also mentioned that the time before his Second Coming would be marked by the appearance of false Christs and false prophets and that a great persecution would break out against the church.

With the recent close of what has been called the bloodiest century that history has yet seen with two world wars and various holocausts and genocides, there is good evidence that the forces of evil are drawing nearer to our earth and fomenting more and more trouble as the Lord approaches. And while skeptics might argue that the signs that Jesus gave are somewhat vague and can perhaps be shown to characterize various points in past history to certain degrees, there is however one very specific sign to suggest that the Lord’s return is imminent and which cannot be ignored.

The last indicator that Christ gave in his litany of signs to predict his advent was a reference to the fig tree where he said that when it begins to sprout leaves, one knows that summer is approaching and by implication also his Second Coming. While to some this verse may sound a little cryptic, the imagery that Jesus employed was fairly strong, for the fig tree has long been associated with the nation of Israel. In the Old Testament a couple references are made linking Israel with this tree, and one comes from Hosea where the Lord speaks of the people of Israel in its early days just come out of Egypt. In that passage he said, “When I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree.”

Through a few narratives in the gospels as well as a parable that Jesus told his followers, the unfortunate fate of the fig tree was illustrated to suggest that judgment was about to strike the Jewish people for their chronic unbelief and ultimate rejection of their Messiah. At one point Jesus approached a fig tree in his hunger and looking for figs found nothing but leaves symbolically indicating that the nation had produced no spiritual fruit. In anger about this situation, he cursed the tree and said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” And with that word it immediately withered and died. Perhaps about a year earlier he told a parable with a similar tone though the final outcome was not yet presented as a sure thing. In that story, the owner of a vineyard told the man who was the

caretaker of his trees to cut down the fig tree because after three years it still had failed to bear any fruit. But the man asked for a little time to fertilize it and promised that if it made no improvement after a year he would cut it down.

As things would go no improvement would come, and as we know from history, the nation of Israel was cut down, banished from its native land, and scattered among the nations in God's judgment only several decades after the life of Jesus. And although in his anger this curse came upon the Jewish people, God was far from through with this often rebellious and obstinate ethnic group. Through the testimony of a number of Old Testament prophets, a common theme is found in the Hebrew scriptures that God would eventually gather all those Jews who had been scattered to the nations, not just in the First Century but in prior periods where through exile they had been forced to leave their land.

Jeremiah spoke of this coming reality when he promised that a time would come when men would no longer speak of how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt at the beginning of their existence but would rather talk about a greater act of God that trumps that early miracle of Jewish history. The prophet said that a day is coming when people will say, "As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north, and out of all the countries where he had banished them." The Lord pledged in this passage that he will once again restore them to the land he gave their forefathers, the territory once marked out for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The prophet Ezekiel echoed the same message a few times where quoting the Lord said, "I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your land." And Amos expressed similar ideas when he spoke about the exiled people coming back to their land, rebuilding the ruined cities, and planting vineyards never to be uprooted again from the land that is their ancestral home.

Up until the first half of last century, these prophecies were probably interpreted by many as a pipe dream, and the idea that the Jews would ever return to their land as a political entity was far off the radar. But with the events of WWII and the holocaust which cultivated worldwide sympathy for the Jewish people, the miracle of national Israel's rebirth became a reality in 1948 and from that point on Jews have continued to return to their native land where at present six million inhabit the country.

The prophecies about the Zionist movement are indeed being fulfilled in the time in which we live and if not for any other reason, we understand this to be the major sign of the Lord's soon return. Though the fig tree was cursed and withered into a dormant state for nearly 2000 years, Jesus predicted that it would miraculously emerge from its long winter once again putting forth tender green twigs and leaves. As this tree comes into full bloom we certainly expect the fulfillment of Jesus promise that he would return in short order from this extraordinary event. And it is the message that he is coming soon that is our great duty to spread to the world to prepare men to once again say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

## Feast of Christ the King

In 1925, Pope Pius XI instituted what has come to be known as the Feast of Christ the King. The Pontiff at the time apparently felt there was a great need in the Church of 100 years ago to set aside a particular Sunday to recognize the kingship of Jesus Christ. At different points in history when a crisis existed in the Church, a special feast was often established as a reaction to the problem. When belief in the Eucharist was waning, the feast of Corpus Christi was launched to revive belief in the Real Presence of Jesus under the cover of bread and wine. And likewise, when in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a rise in nationalism and secularism, the Church considered it very important to remind all of the faithful that man's first allegiance remains with Jesus who is King of all nations and peoples. In an era of rising dictators who were claiming earthly supremacy, the high clergy of the Roman Church believed it was necessary to strike back, and consequently this very important feast day was to become a part of the liturgical year. And following the lead of the Roman Catholic Church a number of denominations followed suit and began to celebrate this festival on the last Sunday in October as we do now.

While it seems likely that the overt reason for establishing the festival was to counter the oppression of extreme nationalists and dictators, in God's great plan there are often behind the scenes explanations for why certain things come to pass. It is probably not coincidental that the Celebration of Christ the King was instituted in the early part of last century, for beginning to build at that time was a growing expectation for the Second Coming and the reign of King Jesus upon the earth. Apart from the very beginning of Church history when Christians had a belief in the imminent return of the Lord, after the apostolic age was over this heightened expectation would wane to a lower level that would persist through the bulk of the twenty centuries that have passed since Jesus was last with us.

But starting in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, various movements began to focus in earnest on the Second Coming including the Millerites and the Adventists along with Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Eventually their preoccupation with the return of Christ would spill over into the major denominations until today within every branch of the Church there is a great sense of the imminent return of Jesus. More than just a fad, that such heightened expectation permeates all of Christendom and has been accelerating is no doubt a subconscious awareness perhaps inspired through the angels and saints that Christ is indeed on his way back to planet earth. According to our mystics, it was in 1929 that Jesus began making his long and slow descent from the highest plane of angels en route to the earth, and it seems likely that Pius XI's establishment of the Feast of Christ the King in 1925 was an indication that the Holy Spirit was making the world keenly aware of the soon return of the Savior.

Preoccupation with the Second Coming has been intensifying at an almost exponential pace when we consider the number of predictions that are regularly being made about the Lord's return. Prior to 1925, there were less than 50 documented forecasts of apocalyptic events spanning the nineteen centuries since the start of the Church, merely one prediction every 40 years. But between 1925 and 1990 there were 26 predictions

equating to roughly one every 3 years. And now in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century there are at least a dozen well publicized prognostications every year. Polls of the American people corroborate the frenzied interest in the Second Coming as well, and studies performed in the late 1990's indicated that 24% of adults expected to be alive when Jesus comes while a whopping figure of 41% expect that the Savior will appear by the year 2040.

Indeed we expect Jesus Christ to come in the relatively near future to reign as king, a role that potentially could have been realized when he appeared 2000 years ago but was deferred because of the rejection of his own people. But the fact that he wasn't accepted last time he came did nothing to change the reality of his kingship, for despite the protests of his fellow countrymen, the sign erected over his head as he hung on the cross nonetheless read INRI, Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum or Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. Though his compatriots would not recognize his royal position, he mounted his throne anyway when he ascended the cross high above the onlookers.

Though he was not received the last time around as he would have wanted, now through the merits of his sacrificial death he will once again come to earth to reign as king, and this time he will take his full power to do so and will not be resisted. His Second Coming entails finishing what he began two millennia ago and that means ruling over the entire human race. Many nations will come under his lordship including the one he came for in the first place. Though they rejected him the first time around, the Jewish people will ultimately submit to the reign of King Jesus for as we infer from today's gospel reading, the Savior is in fact King of the Jews first and foremost.

But before he can reign over them, he must first gather them from the four corners of the earth and resettle them in their ancestral homeland. As discussed in last week's homily, it was foretold long ago that the Jewish people would begin an immigration movement to Palestine in the years preceding the return of the Messiah, and since the latter half of last century we have been witnessing a steady stream of Jews making their way home again after being displaced for many centuries. The prophet Ezekiel predicted that the Israelites would be taken out of all the nations to which they were scattered and gathered together in their own land as a restored nation once again, an event which miraculously began in 1948. Since then Jews have come from many places, even obscure locations like Ethiopia which as we have seen has been the abode of Jews since antiquity. In the 1980's the nation of Israel successfully rescued the race of Black Jews or Falashas from famine and civil war in Ethiopia and transplanted them in the land of Canaan so that today almost all of them reside back in the ancestral homeland. This appears to be a fulfillment of what Isaiah wrote about 2700 years ago when he prophesied that God would gather the remnant of the Jews in Southern Egypt and in the land of Cush where the headwaters of the Nile are found.

That God is gathering the Chosen People back into their old stomping grounds is more than just a sign of his imminent return but of equal importance is an indication that he has a plan for the Jews that will kick into action near the time of his return. Clearly most of the scattered Jews throughout the world have been hostile and at best indifferent towards Jesus over the past 2000 years. Perhaps as a punishment for their corporate rejection of

the Messiah they have been under a long curse of suffering and persistent unbelief in the person of Christ as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament scriptures. In the words of Paul, a veil has been over their eyes which has kept them from seeing Jesus for who he really is.

And though the veil has obscured their spiritual sight for many centuries, the scriptures foretell that it will eventually be taken away paving the way for the Jewish people to embrace the Messiah they once rejected. Paul predicted that the scales would eventually fall from their eyes enabling them to see the truth about Jesus as he recognized that as a people they would only remain in a hardened state until the fullness of the Gentiles had entered the Christian faith. At that point which coincides with the ending of this present age of the Gentile, he fully expected that “all Israel would be saved” and like ourselves take part in the salvation program offered by the Savior. The prophet Ezekiel foresaw that at that time God would give them a new heart and a new spirit, removing a heart of stone and giving in its place a heart of flesh so that the Son of David could become their king in that day. Zechariah predicted that in the advent of the Messiah’s Second Coming the Jewish people would be overcome by a spirit of penitence and begin to weep over how they had rejected their king long ago. Gazing on the one whom they had pierced, they will be grieved and filled without a spirit of supplication when their king comes again to take his place of power over them.

In fact it is absolutely necessary that the nation of Israel warm up to its Savior before he comes on the scene again, for as Christ promised, the people of the Jews will not see him again until they can say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” And not surprisingly in recent times we are not only witnessing the return of Jews to Israel but also an ever growing contingent of them who are confessing belief in Jesus as their Messiah. Known as Messianic Jews, there are hundreds of such congregations throughout the nation of Israel numbering about 15,000 people altogether, a figure which is up a couple hundred percent in the past 10 years and continues to grow. And this phenomenon is undoubtedly a sign that the veil is indeed lifting from the eyes of the people of Israel after twenty centuries of blindness to the identity of their Messiah.

As mentioned earlier, that Israel should be converted to the faith of Jesus is an important part of the plan of God for the new age that is dawning, for the Jewish people will become a beacon of light to the other nations in that day. Several prophets foretell that this should be the case including Isaiah who regarding Israel predicted, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” And the prophet Zechariah expressed the favored position of the Jews even more graphically when he said, “In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’” Clearly though they have long rebelled against their Master, the Chosen People are still favored of God and as their long tenure of punishment draws to a close, they will ultimately become the shining star to the nations that God originally intended them to be.

## First Sunday after the Feast of Christ the King

The major creeds of the Christian church say very little about the details of the Second Coming save that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. Perhaps the early fathers of the church felt that the details of his next visit to us were fuzzy enough not to say anything more definitive on the subject than that we simply expect him to come back once again. However, the limitations of the creeds have not stopped people from speculating and developing intricate theories on the events of the Second Coming. Particularly in the last couple centuries when belief and expectation in the return of Christ has been intensifying, many grandiose scenarios have been offered.

Some popular concepts involve Jesus returning in a larger than life way obvious to all with a trumpet blast that could be heard from New York to China. Such proponents envision what has come to be called “the Rapture,” an event in which the Lord suddenly appears in the sky and gathers to himself all of the true believers. In such a scenario all those who are considered bona fide Christians will disappear suddenly leaving behind the vehicles they were driving and the planes they were flying to meet Christ in the air. In some expectations, the righteous are removed in this miraculous manner to avoid a time of intense upheaval and tribulation in the world which the ungodly will be left to face alone.

A teaching that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has become very mainstream in evangelical churches and popularized through books and movies like the very successful “Left Behind” series. However, the more traditional churches have been wary of it as it constitutes a notion not found anywhere among the fathers of the early church and has little biblical support. And for a number of reasons we would also reject this scenario despite its current popularity. While there have been cases of people miraculously getting translated from this life to the next without dying, these have always been rare and only a privileged few holy people like Mary and Elijah have experienced it, and so we would not expect it for the masses. Additionally the reason for the rapture is even more objectionable in that it suggests that believers will be spared from trouble on earth while the rest of humanity has to suffer. History shows us that God does not play favorites in this way as godly people have at many times been subjected to martyrdom. In addressing his disciples, Jesus warned them that the events preceding his coming would be ugly and would affect all, and in John’s revelation many a soul that had been martyred was seen under the altar in heaven awaiting God’s retribution.

Other end-time theorists expect more sensational events to characterize the return of Jesus Christ, and among such ideas is an expectation of a worldwide final conflict known as Armageddon in which the armies of earth enter upon an epic battle in the land of Israel. In this scenario, the Lord returns to earth mounted on his steed with his heavenly army surrounding him to decide the battle for the forces of good.

A word only appearing once in the bible, Armageddon derives from a region in Israel known as the plain of Megiddo, a place where some momentous battles were fought in antiquity. Shortly before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, the Egyptians

launched a campaign against the Canaanites in this area and severely defeated them undoubtedly leaving a scarred memory of the event for generations to come. In later times, King Josiah engaged the Egyptians in the same place attempting to stop them on their way to Assyria to fight the Babylonians. A bad decision on the part of the king, he ultimately lost his life while Israel suffered a defeat that also became etched in the minds of the locals.

While clearly as Christ draws nearer to the earth we expect conflict to escalate with many wars taking place, it is not clear that Armageddon is anything more than the spiritual battle that embroils the heavens and the earth in the advent of Jesus' return. Because Armageddon represents memorable battles in Jewish memory, it probably is a symbol of the final conflict between good and evil more than any one physical battle. In any event, it would seem physically impossible for all the armies of the earth to converge on one battlefield in Israel let alone occupy the tiny nation itself.

Others see in the return of Christ a cataclysmic event in which the earth is destroyed by fire. Some have speculated that we will be struck by an asteroid or a comet as the vehicle of God's destructive judgment when he appears to annihilate the earth and all its inhabitants. The proponents of this thinking believe that the elements will melt away under great heat when the Savior comes destroying the earth and all life on it, but such theories are at odds with the idea that Jesus is planning to return and reign over this world and all those people who will accept him as their king. Cataclysm doesn't allow for the dawn of the new age, the messianic era that is fast approaching and which many an Old Testament prophet foretold.

As has been briefly outlined, there are many opinions on the form in which the Second Coming will take and while they differ greatly, in general they all assume that the Messiah will appear again in great fanfare and majesty to be witnessed by all the inhabitants of the earth simultaneously. While this has been the popular opinion, we would suggest that the Second Coming of the Son of God will be a good deal quieter and low key than what is expected. Perhaps more in line with the obscurity of his First Coming, our church envisions that the Messiah will come in like manner to the way that he left 2000 years ago. At least this was the suggestion of the angels at the ascension. In the presence of only his small band of disciples Jesus quietly disappeared from the earth without the notice of the entire world, let alone the city of Jerusalem itself. And it seems likely that he will appear out of a cloud suddenly materializing once again at the right time in the presence of some group of his devoted followers.

Certainly in his last visit to earth, he came on the scene in obscurity living the first thirty years without notice of any but his family, and then slowly as he began his ministry his fame began to spread throughout the region so that by the time of his Crucifixion he was known throughout the whole land of Israel and even in some of the surrounding countries. Likewise it is conceivable that when the Savior appears again he will come among small groups of people ministering to their needs teaching and working miracles while his renown steadily grows throughout the earth.

As with many the last time around, he will not be recognized immediately for who he is. The hypocrites and the materialistically oriented will label him a huckster and just another religious charlatan trying to start a movement for his own benefit, but those who have eyes to see will know him as they have always known him. Looking into his eyes they will see the face of the one whom they know intimately in prayer, perhaps the one they faithfully visited each week in the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus will not begin to live among us again dressed in flowing robes and a cloak. Perhaps dressed in ordinary 21<sup>st</sup> century apparel wearing a shirt and pants will he walk in the circles of men. Recognizing him will therefore be like on his last visit a matter of spiritual insight. The miracles will be present along with his teaching but the greatest evidence that he lives among us again will be his overpowering love that will radiate from his body, the same love that we are familiar with when we sense him in church.

As the Savior begins to walk among mortals for the first time in 2000 years, he will begin taking measures to set up his kingdom as has been promised. It will be necessary to locate faithful workers who can assume roles in the administration of that kingdom, and he will appear to many who are worthy of that job giving them the opportunity to serve him in the daunting task of ruling over the entire world. As he called the 12 apostles one by one in the land of Israel, he will approach devout souls all around the earth to work for him in that endeavor.

But before his fame and good reputation spreads far enough so that the nations are ready to hail him as king, it will also be necessary for him to cleanse house, for as the creed confesses, Jesus will come again to judge. Separating the sheep from the goats, he will particularly assess many of those who have been in powerful positions throughout the world, either giving them his approval or voicing condemnation for how they have lived their lives. The high clergy will get his special attention for the welfare of his entire flock had been in their hands, and those who have used the church for their financial gain, power, or fame will be severely dealt with in the judgment.

In the day of his rising power on earth, nations will be evaluated, some found worthy to have a place in his kingdom and some not. Individuals will also be judged, but hardly a fraction of the earth's population will stand before the Savior to hear his assessment of their performance. With perhaps a world population of several billion people at the time of his coming, it would be an impossible task to give each person an appraisal, and more than likely only the very good and the very bad will be summoned to stand before him for great praise or harsh criticism. The rank and file individual will not have such an opportunity, and we should hardly imagine that the entire world's population will be herded into some valley so that the Savior can separate one from another as the parable suggests.

But this is not to say that everyone does not receive judgment. For all of us, routine evaluation happens all of the time, but it is not something that necessarily occurs before a heavenly tribunal assessing our individual case. Rather judgment is something that for all intents and purposes happens automatically. God has designed the universe according to certain laws, and one of the big ones is the concept of "sow and reap." If we sow good

seed, we will reap a good harvest, and if we sow evil we will likewise receive evil in return. No celestial court needs to preside over us to determine that justice is meted out. Though often not immediately, what comes around goes around and we will reap what we sow through the divine law many times during our lives. And that is the judgment that we each receive over and over again.

No soul is waiting for the Second Coming to be critiqued and awarded its just deserts, For over the course of life good and evil are returned to us all of the time. For characters like Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts, judgment came swiftly and they received the punishment of death. But for other cities and countries retribution can take centuries such as the case of Sodom and Gomorrah and the nation of Israel itself which rebelled against God for a very long time before it was eventually exiled.

Not only during life, but also at our death there is an automatic judgment that takes place and according to the level of our spiritual nature we immediately find ourselves in that part of the spirit world that best matches our level of sanctity. For some it will be the heights of paradise and for other the depths of hell, but for most it will be somewhere in between. No soul waits for the return of Jesus to be assigned its proper place, for judgment is a spontaneous and regular part of our lives in life and in death.

Whether we are ultimately privileged to see the Lord face to face when he comes or not will not matter much in the grand scheme of things. Last time he came relatively few souls got to have a direct encounter with him and presumably it will be so again with an even larger population in the world. Nonetheless, it is something that we can all aspire to, and in the words of Jesus we should pray that we have the strength to stand before the Son of Man. If called into his presence, there will be nothing better that we can possibly hear but those salvific words, “Well done good and faithful servant. Come and share your Master’s happiness.”

## Second Sunday after the Feast of Christ the King

Today's epistle reading comes from the prophet Daniel and it represents the tail end of a lengthy vision that the man of God received while he was living among the exiles in Babylon. One of a few prophecies in the book that communicate the same message, Daniel saw in his vision a sequence of beasts, ferocious looking animals with some strange features to them. The first creature he beheld was a lion with the wings of an eagle and while he was watching it, its wings were savagely torn off. Following this image, another animal came into view that looked like a bear that noticeably had three ribs in its mouth and in Daniel's vision, the creature was instructed to eat its fill of flesh. Coming next on the scene a leopard emerged that appeared just as bizarre as the lion, for it had four wings on its back and had four heads instead of one. Succeeding this fanciful animal another beast entered the prophet's view and it was more terrible than any of the others, ferocious and powerful with ten horns and large iron teeth that it used to crush and devour its victims. And after this succession of strange animals there came into sight what was read in the passage. Daniel looked and saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven, and this person received power from the Ancient of Days and received worship from all nations.

As prophecies go, this one is certainly cryptic and employs the same unusual imagery that we find in similar apocalyptic texts throughout the bible. Fortunately though, unlike many other passages which don't offer any hint to interpretation, Daniel was kind enough to explain the gist of his vision to demystify it a bit for us and keep us from scratching our heads. We are told that each of the four beasts symbolizes a kingdom that will rise in the earth, one after another, and having this little piece of information, historians have been able to decode the various creatures described in the vision. The first kingdom represented by the lion was none other than the great ancient realm of Babylon which spanned the entire Fertile Crescent from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers all the way to the Mediterranean. It was the vast country that Daniel lived in during the early part of the Exile, and in his lifetime it was quickly succeeded by the kingdom of the Medes and Persians represented by the bear. The three ribs that were found in its mouth have been identified by scholars as pertaining to the three main conquests of this empire in Lydia, Babylon, and Egypt. The Medo-Persian Empire was quickly overrun by what Daniel describes as the leopard with four wings and four heads. Leaving not much to the imagination, historians easily recognize it as the great kingdom of Alexander the Great which the young man amassed in four short years to span from the Eastern Mediterranean to India. The wings on the leopard undoubtedly represent the swiftness of his conquest, and possibly Alexander would have had an even larger domain were it not for his untimely death at the age of 32. It was then that his kingdom was divided into four parts represented by the leopard's four heads. But the Empire of the Greeks would eventually fade off the scene when the mighty Roman Empire came to birth in the first century B.C. It was this kingdom that Daniel envisioned as a ferocious creature that would in its heyday control the entire Mediterranean as well as half of Europe.

Four mighty empires were perceived in Daniel's vision all with tremendous power and were seemingly invincible in their day, but no one kingdom lasted more than a few

hundred years. Each one ultimately fell prey to another stronger force often after internal corruption and degeneration weakened the kingdom. The reality is that no human institution made up of sinful people can find the strength to continue indefinitely. Human nature ensures that nations come and go passing with the sands of time, but the prophet saw in his vision that in the future a kingdom would emerge that would be unlike all of its predecessors. An empire encompassing the whole earth and lasting far longer than any of the man-made enterprises that came before it would appear after the kingdom of the fourth beast faded into history. And of course this is the Kingdom of God which Jesus will set up on earth upon his Second Coming, one that he will govern with the assistance of many saintly people as his helpers throughout the world.

Some may wonder why this holy kingdom is delayed in its appearing. Each of the four empires that Daniel saw in his vision was succeeded immediately by another which was more dominant and seized control of the other's territory. But the mighty Roman Empire has been gone for over 1500 years after falling to the Barbarians in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the Reign of God has not yet come to replace it. Though this might seem like an unexplainable gap, there is a hint to resolving the discontinuity embedded in the prophecy as well as in another similar vision in the Book of Daniel. The prophet had seen the fourth beast which we identify as the Roman Empire with ten conspicuous horns upon his head and these features parallel a description given in an earlier prophecy which depicted the four kingdoms in the form of a statue with a gold head, a silver chest and arms, a bronze belly and thighs, and iron legs. And beneath the legs were feet of iron and clay with of course ten toes protruding. In the vision, a rock was cut out but not by human hands and it was hurled at the feet of the statue shattering it to pieces. Then the rock grew into a huge mountain that filled the whole earth.

Naturally we understand the rock to be the Kingdom of God on earth which will cover the entire globe, but the point of interest in this parallel prophecy is the feature of ten toes which are analogous to the ten horns on the head of the fourth beast. Daniel infers that these ten appendages are actually an outcropping of the Roman Empire, a confederation of kings that the Romans will ultimately give birth to, a league of powers that we have come to know as Western civilization. More specifically, the ten toes or ten horns can be potentially linked with the European nations that have derived their culture and civilization from Rome. Including the United States which rightly belongs to this grouping, we have nations like Spain, Portugal, Britain, Holland, France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and Denmark, each of which have assumed the role of a colonial power stretching its tentacles and influence around the globe. And perhaps none have had greater influence than Great Britain which in its heyday had an empire upon which the sun never set. Together these ten nations represent what can collectively be called the kingdom of western materialism which now dominates the earth spreading the worship of mammon and the idolatry of possessions around the globe. It is this currently existing empire that will be supplanted by the soon coming Kingdom of God in which the love of money will play no part.

Because Rome has symbolized this present evil system of materialism, it appears that the city itself which has still remained a strong fixture in the world until the present time will

not survive in the kingdom which is to come. It may have seemed practical that the center of the Christian faith should remain a part of the age to come perhaps even to host the King of Kings when he comes, but many indicators suggest that the city will be unfit to continue in the Messianic Kingdom. Perhaps because of the excesses of the Caesars of old or the blood of the martyrs that was shed in its streets, the bible and other sources suggest that Rome's days are numbered. The city built on seven hills is doomed to fall according to John's Apocalypse, and if not for a specific fault then simply because it symbolizes the hub of Western Materialism it appears to be slated for destruction. Not just the scriptures, but the prophecies of others in the Christian age have said the same thing. St. Malachy who predicted all of the popes until Christ comes again prophesied that the final pontiff to reign before Jesus rules the world will have the formidable job of pasturing the sheep in a time of many tribulations. At the end of this time, he foretold that the city of seven hills would be destroyed as the Great Judge of all the earth ascends the throne. Along similar lines, the Fatima prophecies have suggested the same fate for the Eternal City. Particularly the much anticipated Third Secret portrayed the Pope walking through a big city half in ruins trembling and afflicted with pain and sorrow.

The exact mechanism for Rome's destruction is not clear. Perhaps a natural disaster like an earthquake will cause its doom, but in any event it will not be the city from which Christ will rule the world. Another more ancient city with a legacy as a city of faith will be the epicenter of Jesus' government when he comes again. Jerusalem, the city of peace will host the Prince the Peace as many scriptures foretell. This very important locale has been of great relevance to several religions including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and so it represents the universality of the whole world that Christ will reign over. As far as we know, it has been the host city for the Son of God on several occasions, not just when he came as Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago but also two millennia earlier than that when he visited us as Melchizedek the priest-king of Salem. This ancient city which boasts over 5000 years of continuous habitation will once again become the temporary home of the Second Person of the Trinity when he visits us again as foretold by prophets like Zechariah, Isaiah, and even King David. The Psalms predict that the Messianic King will be installed on Zion God's holy mountain in the day that he comes to rule the world. Many other prophecies speak of the nations of the new age routinely coming to Jerusalem to pay tribute to the king at whose feet they will receive instruction in the way of righteousness that he will reveal.

In the ancient city of Jerusalem, the Savior will set up his headquarters for world government for the next age that is now dawning upon us. Unlike the many earthly kingdoms that have come and gone rather quickly, the kingdom that Jesus sets up will be a long lasting one dominating the entire new age that is coming. In the Book of Revelation this time period is referred to as the thousand years, but we do not understand that as a literal period of time but just a symbol of the length of the age to come. Conceivably it could be as long as two thousand years which is the normal length of the ages in recorded history, but suffice it to say, it will be a very long time indeed.

In an unprecedented way, peace will characterize the Messianic kingdom in a way the world has never known before, and there are several reasons why this will be so.

According to the Book of Revelation, Satan will be restricted in his ability to deceive the nations and stir up mischief which is to say that none of his henchmen will be alive on earth to foment trouble among the living. With the advent of the Savior's return, a powerful cleansing will take place in the earth whereby all evil entities will be swept away together into hell. This will create a unique circumstance on this planet that has not previously existed, one in which only good souls are dwelling in the world at the same time. Effectively a comprehensive separation of the wheat from the chaff will take place facilitating pervasive good will and peace among the nations. Until now good, bad, and everything in between have striven together in the earth for many ages, but the time is shortly coming when a great separation will occur that will make world wide harmony possible. And effectively this benign condition will endure most of the next age because only good souls will be born during the era of peace. It was renown psychic Edgar Cayce's belief that during this proverbial "Thousand Years" only relatively good souls will be allowed to reincarnate from the spirit world while those intransigently evil ones would remain incarcerated in hell until the age was drawing to a close, and in this way we would expect good to not only characterize the beginning of the Messiah's reign but the whole duration of the kingdom.

Though Jesus will set up this New World Order founded on love and install able administrators to govern it for him, it is not clear exactly how long the King of Kings will actually stay with us this time around. If the precedent of his prior visitations is any indicator we probably wouldn't expect it to be any more than several decades. Some historical indicators suggest the Son of God came as Melchizedek for roughly 70 years, the normal life span of an average man as attested by the Psalms. Presumably Jesus would have stayed with us about the same amount of time had he not been prematurely cut off near the age of 35. Along these lines, the prophet Daniel suggests that the Lord's life was only halfway through when he was crucified, and in a sense we may anticipate him finishing the remaining 35 years of his life on his next visit, for the appearance of Christ the King is really just the continuation of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The Son of God comes to complete the program he began 2000 years ago and complete the time that was robbed of him, for he was struck down in the prime of life and he intends to claim what was taken from him. But however long he stays with us, it will be enough to train his disciples to function without him and do their job of administrating a world wide kingdom.

Many empires have risen and fallen in the long history of the earth, but one is at the doorstep unlike all of its predecessors. A kingdom founded by God and ruled by saintly people, it will undoubtedly be like a dream for those live to see it appear. May God look kindly toward each of us and give us the tremendous privilege of living a few years in the era of peace.

## Third Sunday after the Feast of Christ the King

Over the past few weeks we have been considering various aspects of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. There was a focus on the signs and events leading up to his imminent return, and there was a discussion about which manner the Son of God would appear again on earth and begin his reign. We looked at the prophecies of Daniel which sketched out the many great kingdoms of the world anticipating the glorious kingdom of God which would replace them all. But up until now we haven't addressed to any great extent the work of Jesus when he comes to dwell among us again.

Some ideas are fairly clear in the scriptures which reveal among many functions that he will be a righteous judge of the people living in that golden age. He will govern the nations ruling them with an iron scepter in the words of the Psalmist. The Son of God will be an advocate for the poor and the needy and will be a friend to the weak who live in the land. Saving them from oppression he will be the defender of the afflicted and vulnerable of the earth. Certainly we get the idea that God will be busy with the work of justice, especially justice for the poor which has always been one of the strong themes of the bible. According to James the Lord's brother, one of the purest forms of religion that one can practice is to look out for the needs of orphans and widows in their distress and clearly that will be part of the agenda of the new age.

But today's Old Testament reading hints at another very important focus of the Savior's work when he comes to live among us for a season. Zechariah prophesied about the day of the Lord in his writings and used the metaphor of water a few times to characterize the ministry of the Messianic kingdom. In particular he mentioned that living water would flow out from Jerusalem with half being routed to the eastern sea and half to the western sea which by implication we understand to mean the whole world. As we have discussed on a prior occasion, the symbol of water has been a big one in the bible primarily as the representation of the life-force, the substance that brings vitality to the land awakening what particularly in the desert dryness is inert and dormant. Water is understood to be the element that has the power to revive what is wilted and bring restoration, healing, and wholeness. Because of its physical properties and its effects on the material world we live in, it has not surprisingly come to represent the spiritual life-force of God which flows to creation bringing truth, refreshment, and spiritual awakening to the soul.

Long before the apostle John envisioned the River of Life flowing from the throne of God to water the earth, the prophet Zechariah had seen a glimpse of how the spiritual power of God would flow to the inhabitants of the world from Jerusalem, the place where as we have seen the Lord will mount his throne and set up his headquarters. A little further along in the same chapter, the prophet spoke of this life-force as rain which would fall from the skies upon the nations illustrating how this water of life is a heavenly substance that has its origin in the Godhead. While there are many forms that this heavenly water can take, what is applicable to today's message is the idea that this river flowing out from Jerusalem represents new words of truth and a higher revelation that the Savior will disseminate to the world when he comes. The life giving stream serves as a

symbol of divine knowledge that will be dispersed to the thirsty souls of earth longing to understand more of the ways of God.

Of all of the work that the Son of God will do when he comes, this is perhaps the most important of them all. This role of spiritual teacher was envisioned by Isaiah who saw that in the Messianic kingdom many from around the world would converge upon Jerusalem and say, "Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The prophet foresaw the inhabitants of earth longing for the new teaching that the Savior will bring as indeed we are today.

But this role of the Son of God as the messenger of advanced spiritual truth is not one unique to the Second Coming, for in all of his prior visits to earth, the Savior has always brought a higher revelation to those who were living at the time. As man has been steadily evolving from a beast into an intelligent and spiritual being, he has been in constant need of guidance and new divine revelation to aid him on the way. As man's capacity to love and follow the path of the spirit grows larger, the Second Person of the Trinity comes to raise the standard of morality to a higher level that in earlier times the human race was not yet ready to handle.

In his last visit, Jesus set new standards for people particularly in the Sermon on the Mount when he laid down the idea that marriage would from that day onward mean the union of one man and one woman. Prior to that time, polygamy was very common in the various cultures of the earth when for long ages multiple partners were permitted for the human race even among the great patriarchs of the Old Testament.

Not only did Christ raise the bar on human sexuality, establishing monogamy and condemning the practice of divorce that had been a part of the Mosaic Law of old, he set out to bring a fresh interpretation to the law that for the people of his day was novel and revolutionary. Unlike with us, in the consciousness of First Century Palestine, outward conformance to the Ten Commandments was probably just about all that registered with most, and for this reason the Pharisees smugly felt they were righteous for not killing anyone or committing adultery. It was a higher revelation for many at the time to learn that hating someone in one's heart was spiritually equivalent to murder while lusting after a woman was tantamount to adultery.

While we might now consider such insights as trivial because they have become a part of the fabric of 21<sup>st</sup> century moral standards, this was not the case 2000 years ago. Likewise when Jesus shortly returns he will bring a new expansion on the truth that we have heretofore been ignorant of and the light will go on in our heads as it did for our predecessors twenty centuries ago.

Not only do we expect that the Savior will bring a higher revelation of the truth to the world, but we anticipate major religious changes to accompany it. It was very radical two thousand years ago when the Jewish faith with all of its sacrifices, rituals, and regulations was replaced by Christianity with its new priesthood, sacraments, and

abolition of many of the former ways. So again, with the coming of Jesus, humanity will witness another great transformation of religion as the faith of Christ Crucified turns into the religion of Christ the King. The institutions that we have been celebrating faithfully for two millennia will suddenly fade out of relevance when the emphasis on the dying of the Lord Jesus shifts to an emphasis on the glory of the Lord Jesus. The Eucharist which we have long held dear, the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ will terminate along with the other sacraments only to be replaced by new rituals which have not yet been revealed. With even greater saving power, the new institutions of the higher religion Jesus will bring will afford many with even more opportunities to make spiritual advancement and achieve salvation at the end of life.

Indeed, the Savior comes again to “make all things new” in the words of the Apocalypse, not only for those who have been Christians but for the entire world. The new higher faith will not only replace Christianity, but it will supplant all of the religions of the world enabling all of the inhabitants of the Messianic kingdom to live under a common spirituality. Just as Judaism, a religion for a small ethnic group would give birth to Christianity which could be embraced throughout the world, so too will the faith of the New Age completely swallow all existing religions, transcending them into something new and better which our minds have not yet conceived.

Interestingly, just about all modern religions have been prepared to expect the new revelation that is coming, because over the ages their prophets have foretold that a Great One will come on the scene who will establish a new glorious era on earth, a golden age with spiritual replenishment, peace, and prosperity. Each faith has called this figure by a different name and has its own spin on what the person will do, but in common all expect him to bring justice and righteousness in the earth at a time when it sorely needs it. As we have learned, it is the job of some angels to guide and inspire different religions and in preparing the way for the Second Coming of Jesus of Nazareth, they have been busy inculcating in other faiths a belief in a Messianic figure. It is this element existing in most all major religions of the world that will pave the way for worldwide acceptance of the Savior as the fulfillment of their own tradition despite some degree in variation of how they have perceived him.

For the Muslim, this Great Expected One is known as the Mahdi, a Messianic personage anticipated by Muhammad himself as well as many of his successors. Translated as “divinely guided one,” many see him as a semi-divine figure. Envisioned as a great deliverer he is expected to fill the Earth with justice and equity, restore true religion, and usher in a very short golden age lasting no more than ten years before the end of the world. While we would disagree with the duration they propose for the kingdom of God on earth, nonetheless we have a good deal in common with Islam’s Messiah who they believe will conquer the world and illuminate everyone with the light of God. According to their scholars, in the day of the Mahdi there will be just one religion in the earth, the religion of God as we would concur.

Similarly the devout Hindu expects a Divine Being to visit earth in the future. According to the teachings of this religion, the second person in the Hindu Trinity known as Vishnu

makes periodic visits to the earth spaced many centuries apart, an idea not unlike our own. Many stories have been written in Hindu literature about earlier incarnations of this god who thousands of years ago came first as Rama the ideal prince, and Krishna the great warrior. The next time Vishnu is scheduled to appear, it is expected that he will come under the name of Kalkhi which has the connotation of being the destroyer of darkness and the annihilator of ignorance. Not unlike our own belief, Hinduism anticipates that this great one will arrive when the world is lawless and men have departed from morality for all sorts of iniquities. Then it is affirmed that Kalkhi will destroy all thieves and evildoers and restore righteousness upon the earth.

The Buddhist also has the same great hope in a mighty spiritual leader arising in the earth whom they call Maitreya. As another great Enlightened One succeeding Gautama Buddha who lived thousands of years ago, it is believed that he will appear when the world in general has forsaken the spiritual path and needs correction. Not unlike our own perception, the Buddhist believes that Maitreya will come at a time when the old spiritual teachings have lost relevance to the world, and so he will come to communicate them in a new and fresh way as he brings with him a higher revelation of truth.

There are many names under which the various religions of the world expect their Messianic figure, and it is not really important what each calls him. In the end, the members of each religion will recognize him as the one that their prophecies have spoken about and embrace him as King of the Nations. We know him as Jesus of Nazareth, for that is how he came to us last time, but a time is coming when all nations will share our Savior with us when he comes to rule the world in righteousness and truth bringing with him the higher teaching that the world is now ready to receive.

## Advent Sunday

Those who study the bible are aware of the fact that the scriptures often have many layers of meaning to them beyond the superficial. The keen student will make both literal and allegorical interpretations of the text he is studying and pick up on subtle innuendos embedded in a given narrative. As a supernatural book, the bible is multi-dimensional and we often see that any given passage can have several applications, and this is particularly true when it comes to prophecy within the scriptures. Scholars have called the concept progressive fulfillment which is to say that any given prophecy can come to pass in stages and in greater and greater significance over time. That is to say that any given biblical prediction may come to pass at several times in history with ever increasing relevance.

There are many Old Testament prophecies that have this dynamic nature to them, usually having an immediate fulfillment nearer to the time they were given and a greater fulfillment many centuries later. The New Testament is full of examples of how old prophecies regarding the ancient Jews took on new significance in the time of Christ and the apostles. And this is especially true of those passages which predicted the exile of the rebellious Jewish people in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

Jeremiah uttered a prophecy about the impending doom coming to the people of Judah which said, "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because her children are no more." Though the language may be a little cryptic to our ears, the prediction was an immediate allusion to how the Jews would be carted off to Babylon. It was in the city of Ramah that the exiles were gathered together before deportation by their captors and so Jeremiah saw the town as a place of great sorrow. The reference to Rachel is of course an allusion to Jacob's favorite wife and the ultimate mother of the two largest tribes of Israel, and the prophet seemingly invoked her name as the representative of all Israel which now was receiving its just punishment for centuries of defiance against God. But though the prophecy was shortly fulfilled in Jeremiah's day when the army of Nebuchadnezzar came into town, the gospel of Matthew announced that the prediction was also realized just a short time after the birth of Christ. When King Herod sought to kill off any potential rivals to his throne, he ordered all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and younger to be put to the sword in an attempt to stamp out the baby Jesus. And naturally among the families of these poor children there was great mourning and weeping throughout the region. In the eyes of Matthew, Rachel's children were no more and she refused to be comforted in her profound grief.

Other prophetic words foretelling the exile were also reinterpreted by New Testament writers, and citing another example we can consider the words of Habakkuk who was also a contemporary of Jeremiah. Despite the many warnings that the prophets had given the people about going into captivity, in general people failed to believe them choosing instead to think that things would continue business as usual indefinitely in which they could maintain their selfish lifestyles in neglect of the poor. Countering this posture of unbelief, Habakkuk speaking for God said to the people, "Look at the nations and watch

– and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.” Certainly the message was given for shock value as the people would later be astounded to see foreign armies rolling into their country to take them away. But Paul in the Book of Acts made reference to this passage again when addressing the unbelieving Jews of his day. In effect he was warning them that once again because of hard-heartedness they would come under judgment, and indeed it was a shock to many when the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and proceeded to raze the city.

Many other on-going prophecies can be cited in the scriptures like the sign of the prophet Jonah who spent three days in the belly of the whale to foreshadow the three days Jesus spent in the tomb. And we could also mention the words of the prophet Hosea who speaking of the Exodus said, “Out of Egypt I have called my son,” a prophecy which took on another level of fulfillment when the Holy Family went to live in Egypt for a time to escape the wrath of Herod. But now our attention will be focused on the epistle of the day which also has a similar dynamic quality to it as all of these other ancient prophecies.

The opening verses of Isaiah 40 make a rapid departure from the harsh tone of judgment found in all of the previous chapters. The passage opens with words of consolation as the people in exile are told to take comfort for their many years of banishment have come to an end. Having expiated all of their sins through the punishment of exile, the people of Judah were now getting the green light to go home again. The prophet proceeds to speak of making a highway in the desert, the route by which the Jews would cross from Babylon to their own native land, but he talks about it in a way as if God himself would accompany them on their way to Jerusalem. In the language of the ancient Near East, Isaiah envisions a processional highway of the Israelites followed by God himself en route for the Promised Land.

Whenever a monarch in this part of the world embarked upon a long expedition or journey, particularly through the desert or unfamiliar countries, he would always send messengers on ahead of him to make sure that the road was navigable. Such work might involve opening mountain passes or leveling the highway to make the ride smooth. All impediments and obstacles in the path needed to be removed so that the king could make his journey without holdups or delays. In the historical account of Queen Semiramis who made an expedition into Persia, it is recorded that her forerunners came across a mountain full of many craggy precipices and deep hollows, and it was so large that it was too far out of the way to go around it. Desiring to shorten the way, the queen ordered that the precipices be dug down and the hollows filled up to make a passable road over the mountain and to this day the path that she made bears her name. Though not necessarily to the same extent that the couriers of this queen made efforts to smooth the passage for her, Isaiah speaks of raising the valleys and lowering the mountains as the people of God march back to the land of Israel paving the way for God himself. In fact the prophet was suggesting that their journey back to the Promised Land should be one of spiritual preparation as they would turn over a new leaf with a second chance to be faithful to God after their humiliating and sorrowful experience.

Clearly this prophecy was fulfilled 70 years after the Jews went into captivity when they began to return in waves from the East back into Palestine. But the New Testament interprets a greater fulfillment of this prophecy in the advent of the First Coming of the Lord that we read about in today's gospel story. In a greater sense Isaiah's words ring with more significance some centuries later when the Lord would not just figuratively be following the people of Israel to Jerusalem but would literally do so in the flesh. The prophet Zechariah foretold the Lord's real visit to Israel when he said, "Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming and will live among you." In preparation for this auspicious occasion, the people would need to raise the valleys, lower the hills, and smooth the rough places in their hearts to receive their king who not appearing unannounced would give the Jews ample time to get themselves in a right way for his arrival.

And according to all of the gospel writers, there was one man who had the special job of heralding the coming King, smoothing the road so that the children of Israel would be ready to receive him. John the Baptist, the person whom Isaiah calls the "voice of one crying out in the wilderness" was commissioned with the job of blazing the trail and pioneering the way for the Messiah to come upon the scene. With a loud voice he was appointed to speak to the inhabitants of the desert or what we might call the spiritual wilderness to get themselves ready to meet God face to face.

The first part of the job was to increase awareness and drum up interest in the Messiah who for centuries had been part of the religious expectation of the people. Though the Jews always expected the Anointed One to appear one day, John was intent on working this national hope into the belief of an imminent reality which he by and large accomplished. Many began to believe that John himself was the Messiah, but he would tell them that one yet greater than himself was scheduled to appear, the thongs of whose sandals he was unworthy to untie.

But it wasn't enough just to get the people anticipating the King of the Jews living among them, what was more important was getting them to reform their lives in preparation for encountering him, and John frequently spoke of the coming judgment. Urging the people of Palestine to repent of their sins and determine to live a holy life, he warned them that the axe is already at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be thrown into the fire. As in every visit of the Savior to our planet, judgment is on the agenda, and unfortunately because overall the Jewish people did not receive him, their holy city was destroyed and they were once again banished from the land of Israel, this time for two thousand years.

While John was focused on helping his fellow Jews clean up their act, he also served another important role in greasing the skids for the new religion that Jesus would set up. For his countrymen who were well entrenched in the Mosaic way of life, introducing change was no easy job, but the great fore-runner of the Messiah clued everyone in to the idea that a new dispensation was dawning that would transcend the old law and religious system. Bridging the gap to the sacramental system that Jesus would establish, John was busy baptizing with water for repentance in anticipation of the baptism for the

forgiveness of sins that the Savior would bring along in the near future. John announced that while he baptized with water, the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire making an allusion to confirmation when the Holy Spirit descends in a special way upon the candidate. The Baptist also hinted at a major change in the sacrificial system when he pointed the Savior out to some of his disciples and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Through that strange proclamation he made known to the Jews that a man would be offered as a sacrifice for sins replacing the ritual of animal sacrifice once and for all.

Certainly not the whole nation of Israel responded to John's teaching, but the prophet gained a sizeable following nonetheless which in another respect primed the pump for Jesus' ministry. John the son of Zebedee and Andrew bar Jonah were among John's followers and with them perhaps other familiar disciples. These were all trained in part under the ministry of John only to be transferred to Christ when he came on the scene. But not only in preparing the apostles to follow the Savior, John the Baptist's ministry was responsible for much of the initial wave of Judeo-Christians who embraced the Messiah when he was revealed to the nation. Not only at home, but also abroad John's ministry stretched out into the Diaspora where he had a number of devoted followers. Apollos the Alexandrian Jew had been one of them according to the Book of Acts, and this zealous man brought the teaching of the Baptist to Ephesus where a number of people were baptized. As the Acts of the Apostles reveals, all of these individuals were more than ready to receive Christian teaching as a result of what John had done ahead of time.

While we must give John the Baptist a lot of credit for paving the way of the Lord in his First Coming, it should be noted that the prophet and his teachings had not come out of a vacuum. John had been trained by one of the Jewish sects in his day that lived in the desert of Judea south of Jerusalem. The Essenes who were a mystical group of Jews outside of the mainstream molded John into the great voice in the wilderness that he came to be. With a practice of adopting orphaned children and raising them in their communities in the desert, the Essenes had taken John under their wing after the murder of his father Zechariah and the death of his elderly mother Elizabeth.

There in the remote parts of Palestine, they impressed their beliefs upon him including among other things a strong conviction and preoccupation with the coming of the Messiah. Additionally, their rituals made an impact on the man in terms of the baptism that he practiced, for the Essenes were strong advocates of ritual purification and a baptism of repentance. The discovery of their communities in Qumran revealed a number of large tanks in which they practiced these rituals. While it is not clear if John conveyed it to his own disciples, the Essenes were also known for observing what they called the Marriage Supper of the Messiah, a ritual that they practiced every year at Pentecost. Utilizing bread and wine, it foreshadowed both the early Christian Agape love feast and of course the Eucharistic celebration.

In many ways, this very spiritually minded sect as a group entity prepared the way for the coming of the Lord a good deal before John the Baptist ever came on the scene. Many

scholars have seen their teachings as precursors to the teachings of Christ and along with their pre-sacramental rituals, they could be said to have laid the foundation for the new revelation that Jesus brought to mankind when he last came to earth. Now as their spiritual successors, it is the special job of the Orthodox Catholic Church, a small body like the Essenes to prepare the world for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. And like John the Baptist and the community he hailed from, we are attempting to raise expectation in the return of the Messiah as well as to prepare people to reform their lives in anticipation of that event. Along with these intentions, like the Baptist of old, we are certainly endeavoring to prepare mankind for the new revelation and new religion that will be brought by the Savior when he comes. More than anything else, it is our new age teachings that we have to offer the world as it makes its transition into the glorious kingdom of Jesus Christ.

## Second Sunday in Advent

Coming on the heels of last week's discussion, we have in today's epistle reading another Old Testament prophecy that falls under the category of progressive fulfillment. Like the others that we looked at, this passage from Isaiah represents another prediction that came to pass fairly quickly after the prophet foretold it but then was realized in a much greater sense many hundreds of years later.

In order to understand the sign indicated in the passage that was read, it is important to get an idea of the background story which surrounds what Isaiah foretold. In a time of political instability and war that frequently embroiled Palestine centuries before the birth of Christ, the prophet came to the very distressed king of Judah named Ahaz to offer some words of encouragement. Ahaz was full of fear, because the king of Israel to the north along with the king of Aram had descended upon Jerusalem to fight against it. Their move was one of retaliation for they had reached out to the king of Judah to join them in an alliance against the very powerful Assyrian Empire which was a looming threat to all of the smaller countries in the region, and Ahaz had refused them wisely considering it foolish to resist the strength of this great nation. So surrounding Jerusalem, Aram and Israel threatened the very existence of Judah and Ahaz was petrified.

But as God usually comes to us in our time of greatest anguish, he promptly sent his representative Isaiah to speak a good word to the king. Despite the foreboding danger outside of the city walls, the prophet told Ahaz that these two kings who had come out against him were an idle threat. Like a couple pieces of smoldering firewood about to burn out, Isaiah told the king that very shortly both of these invading nations would be stomped on and shattered. He urged Ahaz to have faith in God that he would come to the rescue and that these things would surely come to pass and left him with a bit of a warning saying "unless you stand firm in your faith you will not stand at all."

Unfortunately Ahaz wasn't a man of great faith and actually is recorded as one of those leaders who did not follow the way of the Lord very well at all. Sacrificing his son in the fire to the god Molech and offering incense to other gods beside Yahweh, he wasn't remembered as a favorite of Judah's history. And at a crucial time in the Southern Kingdom's history he did not have the faith to believe in the God of his fathers enough to do as he promised. Contrary to Isaiah's advice, he took matters into his own hands and appealed to aid from the Assyrian Empire itself to come and rescue him. Of course there was a price to be paid for this, and effectively Ahaz paid the Assyrian emperor much of the gold and the silver in the temple only to become his subservient vassal. Despite Ahaz's actions, the word of the Lord still came to pass and the Assyrians trampled on both Aram and Syria within a couple years, but now because of Ahaz's lack of faith their would be consequences for Judah.

In this context, Isaiah came back to the king of Judah another time after he had made his alliance with the Assyrians and this time his words to the king were not as consoling. In perhaps a chiding tone, he told Ahaz to ask God for a sign, but no doubt out of fear the king of Judah protested claiming that he wouldn't dare try to put God to the test as is

often the case with those who ask for signs. However, Ahaz's feigned piety was just a way to avoid receiving some supernatural sign that he had failed, and he certainly didn't want to hear, "I told you so." In anger, the prophet told the king that he was trying God's patience through what he had done and whether he liked it or not he would be given a sign of what should come to pass in the near future.

And Ahaz was told what to us are very familiar words, "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." The prophet continued that the boy would eat a diet of curds and honey after he reaches an age where he can tell the difference between right and wrong, but before he should reach such an age of accountability, the two kings who had come from the north to attack Judah would be laid waste. Thereafter the Assyrians would descend upon the kingdom of Judah making it unarable, a land covered with thorns and briars that couldn't be farmed.

Though ultimately a disturbing prophecy for the people of Judah, Isaiah's message was a mixed bag of some good and some bad for the residents of Judah in the years to come. The prophet's initial words seemed to be positive, foretelling the birth of a child that would be called Immanuel or "God with us." In the midst of their national crisis, a message was relayed suggesting that God would still be with his people to give them hope. Scholars have considered several ways in which this verse came to fulfillment in the days of Ahaz which remain distinct possibilities. But in understanding those ideas, it is important to consider what is meant by the word which we translate as virgin in the text. A source of debate between Christians and Jews, the Hebrew word "almah" is not necessarily translated as woman who has never been with a man but can mean more generically a young woman of marriageable age. In this context, the initial fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy wasn't exactly miraculous for it involved the normal way that a young woman should conceive a child through her husband.

Interpreting exactly who the young woman was that the prophet had in mind is not exactly clear, but there are certain hints around the text of the prophecy. In the following chapter, Isaiah reveals himself as a candidate for the father of this special child when he mentions that he "went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son." However the Lord instructed the prophet to name him something other than Immanuel. Instead he was called a long Hebrew name, Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz which translates as "quick to the plunder" or "swift to the spoil." It seems that whether or not Isaiah's son also could be regarded as Immanuel in a broader sense is not certain, but the name of his child would signify the coming disaster foretold for the kings of Aram and Israel who would be decimated within a couple years' time.

If not Isaiah's son who is in view for the prophecy, scholars also suggest that the child called Immanuel or "God with us" was a symbol of many or all of the children conceived in Judah at the time the prophecy was given. It was the case that within nine months of uttering the prediction, the troops of Aram and Israel began to pull out of Judah, and it seems likely that the mothers interpreting this event as a sign that God was helping the nation, delivering it from its enemies decided to name many of their children Immanuel. Not without precedent among the Israelites, many children were named according to the

circumstances at the time of their birth. After having conceived in her old age, Sarah named her son Isaac which means “he laughs,” a sign of her own laughter that such a thing should happen and testimony to the joy this child brought her in her later years. A few centuries after, a special child was found in a basket and drawn out of the water. His adopted mother named him Moses which appropriately means “drawn out.” And then a few centuries after that when following a battle between the Israelites and the Philistines, the ark of the covenant was taken by the enemy, a woman was devastated and named her newborn Ichabod which means that the glory had departed from Israel. Conceivably many women in Judah at the time of this deliverance from Aram and Israel decided that Immanuel was a very appropriate name for their children.

But whoever this child named Immanuel was in the prophecy of Isaiah, according to what was foretold, his life would follow along with the political conditions of his region as he grew up. Isaiah foretold that before this male child reached the age of accountability to decipher right from wrong, both the kingdoms of Israel and Aram would be overrun. And as it would turn out, in 732 B.C. when Immanuel was around two years old, the Assyrians crushed Damascus, the capital city of Aram and shortly thereafter defeated the Israelites. According to the word of the Lord that Isaiah earlier relayed to Ahaz, these two nations were summarily reduced to nothing in a short amount of time.

However, because of Ahaz’s unbelief and attempt to take matters into his own hands to protect his nation rather than trusting in the power of Yahweh, repercussions would follow for the nation of Judah. The prophet spoke about the child Immanuel eating curds and honey in his adult years which correlates well with the fate of Judah a few decades after Aram and Israel were leveled. In 701 B.C., Sennacherib the king of the Assyrians invaded Judah and the presence of the army made farming impossible. As a result the land grew wild and became covered with thorns and briars. People could not eat the normal agricultural products like grain and so were forced to consume whatever the land produced naturally. Perhaps it consisted of some wild grapes and gourds or maybe the fruit growing on trees in the countryside, but the prophet envisioned the diet of young Immanuel as that of curds and honey. In Isaiah’s estimation, the land would have returned to what their forefathers would have centuries earlier called the land of milk and honey. While no wheat or barley were available to eat, the people of Judah would still have cows or goats that could browse the overgrown fields and produce milk and yogurt for the people. And bees which were apparently in abundance did not fail to provide ample wild honey to fill the stomachs of the people of Judah.

But so much for the history of the first Immanuel who came to live among the Jewish people in the time of Isaiah. We may never know exactly what the prophet had in mind when the prediction was given that the virgin would be with child, give birth to a son, and call him Immanuel. And though that prophesy was fulfilled in a preliminary way in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., as we know well it came to pass in a much bigger way in the birth of Christ a very long time later. Though the first Immanuel was an ordinary boy conceived in the normal way, the second Immanuel was much more than a simple male child. As the gospel of Matthew attests, the ultimate sense of Isaiah’s prophecy came to pass when a supernatural child, the God-man was born of not just a young woman but a real virgin

who had never known a man. And whereas in the time of Ahaz, God was with the people in a figurative way to deliver them from their enemies, in the coming of the Christ child, “God with us” became a literal reality to deliver the people of Judah from their sins. As with so many Old Testament prophecies, their full significance is often only revealed in the New Testament and many have yet to come to pass in their fullest sense. Therefore we wait with great expectation for the time when the Savior appears among us once again when old predictions will come into a new light that we had not previously conceived. Even so Come Lord Jesus!

## Third Sunday in Advent

In today's gospel we read about Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea. In that narrative, we are told that as soon as the pregnant Mary crossed the threshold of the door to her home, Elizabeth was full of the Holy Spirit and shouted those familiar words we know so well, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." A little earlier in Luke's gospel we learned about how Mary was regarded as highly favored of God when the Angel Gabriel told her the good news about how she would bear the Son of God. And again in this story Elizabeth confirms for us that Mary is blessed above all women.

In fact all generations since these events took place have regarded her so, and the logical question for many would be to ask who was this highly praised woman and what made her so special. While for many this question is mysterious, we can perhaps provide some answers to what even among many Catholics is an enigma. Tradition has told us that Mary was preserved from all stain of sin for the special job of carrying the God-man within her womb. We regard her as Immaculate Mary as in fact was confirmed at Lourdes over 150 years ago. Pure from the time of her conception, the Church has understood Mary to have received a special privilege from God that the rest of humanity was not given, the grace of going through life without sin like her Divine Son.

Again, such a teaching begs a question, and the inquisitive student of the bible might ask on what basis Mary was chosen for such a high role. We might wonder if God had been arbitrary in his choice of this young teenage girl to be the mother of Jesus. Somehow did he play favorites in selecting her for this lofty job, and of course based on what was discussed some weeks ago, the answer is a definite no. At least half a dozen times the New Testament tells us that God does not show favoritism, and so to be consistent with the scriptures we must acknowledge that there was merit in the person of Mary that earned for her the right to be the Mother of God. Just like the prophets Jeremiah and John the Baptist who we studied not long ago, the life of Mary before she came into this world as the special person we know is the explanation for the high favor that God bestowed upon her.

Not unlike the others, Mary had led a very holy life in the incarnation before she came to be the mother of the Savior. But in contrast to the others, she was unique, for while people like Jeremiah and John the Baptist were still struggling with some small degree of sins in their lifetime, Mary did not. And the reason that she avoided any stain on her soul was again not because of any favoritism that God had showed her, but because in her last life on earth she had finally conquered sin. In other words, she had become a saint at the close of her prior incarnation. Ordinarily all people who accomplish this goal do not return to earth again, but as we have seen they pass permanently into the heavenly kingdom, gone from the physical world forever.

But Mary was a very unusual exception to this rule, and in 2000 years of averred church history we have never known another saint who was sent back again to earth on a special mission. From what we understand, only a saint could have fulfilled the important job of

nurturing the Son of God, and for this reason God needed to find one who was willing to return again into this difficult world to carry out this purpose. Mary said yes to God's request, and in return for her sacrifice she has not only been rewarded with the love and admiration of much of the human race but she has rapidly sped up her own progress, even to the point of receiving a title known as "queen of the angels."

Such is the background of the one who would become the virgin of Nazareth, and while the bible doesn't tell us much about her years of preparation to become Jesus' mother, we have plenty of highly regarded 1<sup>st</sup> century books that tell her story from the time of her conception until Gabriel met her on that blessed day. Our main source for the early life of Mary is the Protevangelion written by James the stepbrother of the Lord. The story begins about 20 B.C. when a very wealthy and pious Jew named Joachim came to the temple to make an offering to the Lord and was rudely turned away by the high-priest. Aware that Joachim and his wife were childless for over twenty years, the cleric assumed that Joachim was under some kind of punishment from God, for an old saying among the Jews declared, "Cursed is everyone who has not begotten male or female in Israel." Childlessness was a great shame among the Jews and this priest made sure that Joachim was aware of it.

Dejected and forlorn, the man decided not to go home but went into the wilderness where he elected to fast and pray until God looked down upon him. In the meanwhile, his wife Anna was in a state of distress herself fearing that she had become a widow and saddened by her continued barren condition. Sitting down under a tree, she prayed that God would open her womb even as he did for the age-stricken Sarah a couple thousand years earlier, and according to the narrative, God heard her prayer and sent an angel to her telling her that she would conceive a child whose name would be spoken of in all the world. On hearing this Anna responded much like Hannah of old who dedicated her son Samuel to the service of the Lord for his whole life. She promised that whether the child was male or female, she would give it up to the ministry of God in holy things.

While these things were happening, Joachim was also apprised of the same message by an angel where he had exiled himself in the wilderness. Promptly coming home to his wife, Mary was conceived. At one year old, Joachim through a great feast for his daughter in which he invited the priests of the community, and they prophetically blessed the child asking that God would give her a famous name to last through all generations. At three years of age, Mary's parents decided it was time to fulfill their vow to the Lord, and so they took their daughter to the temple where she would be raised in that holy place as a consecrated virgin. While there, Mary was said to have been like a dove in the sanctuary where she lived and routinely received encounters with angels who were said to have fed her.

All was well with Mary in her life at the temple until when she was 12 years of age, the priests started to get a little concerned that she would shortly enter puberty and consequently defile the sanctuary through menstruation. While the other young virgins that lived with Mary were married off before this threat became evident, the priests had a problem because unlike the other girls, Mary had pledged to God a vow of perpetual

virginity and the priests couldn't force her to violate it. One priest named Zechariah, probably the husband of Elizabeth was consulted and asked to enter the Holy Place to inquire of God about the situation. An angel promptly addressed Zechariah's concerns and instructed him that all of the widowers of Judah should be called together to present their rods to the Lord for selection.

A tradition harking back to the time of Moses when there was a dispute about who rightly held the honor of the priesthood, each tribe presented a staff before God with its name inscribed upon it. Leaving them before the Testimony of the Lord overnight, when Moses came back in the morning Aaron's rod from the tribe of Levi had budded, blossomed, and produced almonds to indicate that to his line belonged the priesthood.

In a similar way, the angel now asked that all of the widowers bring their staffs before the Lord for a comparable sign, and according to several versions of the story, when Joseph brought his rod, it not only budded but a dove flew out from the end of it and landed on Joseph's head so that all knew that he was the man whom God had chosen. According to one rendition found in the Gospel of the Birth of Mary, this miracle was a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy which we heard in today's epistle reading. The prophet had foretold, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit," and considering that Joseph was a descendant of David the son of Jesse this seems to be an appropriate realization of the prophecy.

But Joseph was not initially enthused at the sign that had taken place, and when the priests indicated that he should take Mary to his own home and out of their hands he protested. Probably somewhat embarrassed that he an old man with grown children should take a 13 year old into his home, he resisted. However, the priests prevailed on him warning him about what could happen should he disobey God in this affair, and so he consented and Joseph and Mary were betrothed.

At that point, Joseph seems to have gone home to Bethlehem while Mary was to return to Nazareth until the actual marriage. But before Mary departed, another set of events transpired in the temple which got everyone abuzz. Zechariah the priest, the husband of Elizabeth had been offering incense in the Holy Place when he had an encounter with the Angel Gabriel. It was revealed to him that his aged wife would bear John the Baptist, and disbelieving this message he was struck dumb. After tarrying much longer than usual in this priestly function and emerging without the ability to speak, the priestly community realized that another miraculous sign had occurred.

Possibly motivated by this supernatural sequence of events, the priests decided that it was time to make a few upgrades to the temple seeing that God was visiting them so very often of late. It was agreed that the Holy of Holies was in need of a new veil, and the priests determined that seven virgins of the tribe of David would have the job of spinning the threads for the new curtain. By lots each girl was allotted the task of weaving a particular color that would comprise the new veil, and Mary was chosen for the purpose of spinning the purple. With her task defined, the young teenager went home to begin work when after six months occupied in her chore, she was suddenly greeted by Gabriel

while working at the loom. After receiving the great tidings that she would become the mother of the Savior, she was also informed that her cousin Elizabeth was six months pregnant.

Just about finished with weaving the purple fabric for the new temple curtain, Mary departed from Nazareth with great joy working her way south to Jerusalem where she dropped it off to the high-priest. After he gave her a blessing, Mary elected to kill two birds with one stone and decided to take the short trip to the nearby hill country of Judea to stop in on Elizabeth which is where today's gospel picks up the story that our other sources have started. Mary must have known Elizabeth well while living in Jerusalem for so many years. Certainly as a wife of one of the priests she was often busy helping out around the temple where she would have had opportunity to visit Mary often.

Though they are often referred to as cousins, in fact we are not sure exactly how Mary and Elizabeth are related to each other. The New Testament word describing their relationship is as kinswomen which may suggest just about anything. Traditionally they are believed to have been first cousins, as one church father says that Mary's mother Anna and Elizabeth's mother Sobe were sisters. But this seems a little hard to believe since Elizabeth must have been about 30 to 40 years older than Mary. Anne Catherine Emmerich, the 18<sup>th</sup> century church mystic said that this connection was not exactly right as it was revealed to her that Elizabeth was actually the daughter of Sobe's aunt. If that is true, then age-wise it would make more sense.

But whatever the connection between the two women, upon Mary's visit the elderly Elizabeth was overcome with joy at her presence. No doubt that John the Baptist leaped within her womb she was supernaturally clued in to the knowledge that Mary was pregnant with no ordinary child. In fact, were it not for this supernatural revelation it seems likely that Elizabeth would not be able to know on her own that Mary who was only a couple weeks pregnant was indeed expecting. With a tremendous show of humility, the much older cousin saluted this young teenage girl as her superior, for she acknowledged that the child within Mary's womb was much greater than that of herself. Recognizing this fact, she hailed Mary most blessed of women, words which have become immortalized in the familiar prayer that all Catholics know. May we continue Elizabeth's tradition by remembering Mary, the blessed soul who bore our Savior and who lovingly aids the children of God in all generations.

## Fourth Sunday in Advent

With the conclusion of last week's narrative, all seemed to be well for the holy characters that we were introduced to at the beginning of the gospel story. Elizabeth was greatly overjoyed to have conceived a child, presumably miraculously in her old age, and Mary was in a state of wonder how she should be given the privilege to be the mother of God's own Son. But these idyllic conditions were not to last much longer for either of these two women and their families.

At least trouble would be brewing for Mary on the horizon, and when after being with Elizabeth for three months until the birth of John the Baptist, it seems that reality hit her. According to the Protevangelion, the other first century account that fills in some of the blanks of the gospel story, Mary took notice that she was starting to grow big and realizing that it would soon be apparent to all that she was pregnant, she hurried home to Nazareth where she could remain cloistered in the house of Joachim and Anna. She knew very well the truth of her pregnancy, but besides Elizabeth, not another human being was aware of it, not even the old widower Joseph to whom she was betrothed. Perhaps at this point the ecstatic moment when she first heard the news from Gabriel had worn off and there was great concern about how this situation was going to be received by the community let alone Joseph, for a miracle like this was unprecedented in all of human history.

Upon discovery of her pregnancy, she must have thought that the community would certainly assume that she had been with Joseph before their formal marriage. But a worse possibility existed, for Joseph would assume she had been with another man, and if the children of Israel learned of this, according to the Law of Moses she could be stoned. Clearly a great potential existed for the sweet Virgin Mary to have her name besmirched. This one who vowed perpetual virginity to God was now in a very awkward predicament, and the clock was ticking before the matter would come to a head.

According to our extra-biblical sources, while Mary was holed up in her parents' home in Nazareth, Joseph was busy in his carpentry trade a good ways off. Constructing buildings along the seacoast of Israel, Joseph was apparently employed as a contractor under King Herod who was always engaged in some sort of construction. After recently acquiring the seaports, much work was available for men like Joseph, but after being away from his hometown of Bethlehem for six months since the betrothal, he made his journey back and stopped in at Nazareth to check in on Mary. And what a surprise he received when he walked in the door and found her already entering her third trimester!

According to the Protevangelion, Joseph was greatly upset as we could imagine. Striking his face he was plagued with guilt that he had been charged with the care of this young virgin and had not preserved her innocence. Rhetorically he cried aloud, "Who has seduced this virgin and defiled her?" He must have wondered how this could have happened when according to another source other virgins of the temple were living with Mary to watch over her in Joseph's absence. Turning to the likely person who could give him an answer, he questioned Mary asking how she a pure virgin of the temple could

have soiled herself in this way. Addressing her as the one who had been educated like a dove in the temple and been fed by the hand of angels, he queried how she could have done this terrible thing. But Mary the pure soul that she was burst into a flood of tears and maintained her innocence, denying that she had been with any man, and not knowing exactly how the pregnancy had taken place.

We may wonder why this scenario had to unfold the way that it did. If Mary had been informed about the truth of it, and Elizabeth had been made aware of the miraculous nature of her pregnancy, why couldn't an angel have tipped off Joseph to the fact early on and saved a lot of distress on his part and Mary's. Naturally, a messenger from heaven could very well have brought him in the loop before making what to Joseph was a rude discovery, but obviously that wasn't God's plan. We may infer that the reason such information was withheld from the stepfather of the Lord was simply for the purpose of testing the man to see how he would react to finding the young virgin to whom he was betrothed in an unexpected state.

God is always interested in testing us fairly regularly throughout the course of our lives for among other reasons building our character and making us fit for the kingdom of heaven, and it seems Joseph was targeted for a bit of challenge at this juncture to see how well he would respond. A number of negative possibilities could have ensued. The carpenter could have fallen into depression allowing guilt to get the better of him for failing to preserve his charge's virginity. On the other hand he could have responded with fury and disbelief accusing Mary of lying and then proceeding to turn her into the religious authorities where as has been pointed out she could receive the death penalty.

Making a wise move, we are told that Joseph withdrew from the Blessed Virgin to mull over his thoughts. Considering his options, he worked through in his mind a couple different scenarios. He could try to conceal her alleged infidelity but then run the risk of being found guilty by the Law of Moses with its ugly penalty. Alternatively, he could turn her in but then run the risk of betraying innocent blood in the event that she was truly with child by an angel. Not liking either of these options, and following what seemed like the righteous thing to do, he elected to privately dismiss her. Not knowing what the truth was behind the mysterious pregnancy, Joseph decided that he would just try to sweep the matter under the rug in a way that would protect the young virgin and preserve his own integrity.

Satisfied that he had responded to the test appropriately, as we know the story well, an angel of the Lord did appear to Joseph in a dream to let him know the truth of the matter, and so the elderly widower was encouraged to go ahead and take Mary as his wife not fearing any repercussions. But though Mary and Joseph were now on the same page, and there was calm in the house at Nazareth, more trouble was brewing and more severe testing was about to take place. At times we may go from the frying pan into the fire with one test after another coming at us, and such was the lot of the Holy Family at this point in time.

Not long after Joseph came to visit Mary, a scribe named Annas, potentially the very same one who stood over Jesus' trial on Good Friday came to call on Joseph, and while speaking with the old carpenter, he happened to turn about and noticed that Mary was great with child. Not saying a word, he smugly departed from the home to snitch out what he saw to the high priest. Without much delay charges were brought up against Joseph for defiling the virgin before the actual marriage, and both he and Mary were brought to the temple to stand trial for this perceived crime.

Very unlike our modern judicial system, the temple authorities sought to find out the truth by another means, an ancient means which we know as "trial by water." Stemming back at least as far as the Babylonians nearly 4000 years ago, the Code of Hammurabi mentions the use of water for deciphering cases where evidence was scanty or lacking. Perhaps based on the idea that water is a pure element representing life, it was thought to have the power to divinely reveal who was innocent and who had offended against it. Those who were accused without evidence, perhaps a woman charged with adultery who had not been seen in the act was to be thrown into the river. Should she sink to the bottom, it was understood to be a sign of her guilt, but if she should float and hence survive the ordeal it was believed that the water had exonerated her and proven her innocence.

Varying forms of this ordeal have evolved throughout the ages, and notably in the Middle Ages the accused might have a millstone thrown around their necks and be thrown into a lake, and obviously only a miracle could substantiate true innocence as in the case of Quirinus, bishop of the church of Sissek. Other modes of trial by water were present in England and involved the accused being forced to retrieve a stone at the bottom of a pot of boiling water. Innocence was not surprisingly determined by the lack of any burns on the hand and forearm. And in more recent times even in our own country trial by water had served as the means of exposing witchcraft, and a number of woman were subjected to a no-win situation in the frenzy at Salem. Just the opposite of the ancient Babylonian technique, those who floated on the water were considered guilty under the assumption that it meant that the purity of the water had rejected them. As if having forsaken their baptismal vows such accused women would die no matter what the outcome, for innocence could only be determined by drowning.

Ordeal by water has had a role to play in many a culture, and that of the Jews was no exception. Intent on discovering the truth about Mary's pregnancy, the priests of their day were prepared to invoke the protocol of the Law of Moses to determine guilt or innocence. A ritual originally intended to discern the truth about a woman accused of adultery, a priest would take a clay jar filled with holy water and add to it some dust from the tabernacle floor. Then he would force the defendant to drink this concoction while incanting a curse over the accused. If guilt were indicated, the priest would request the power of the Almighty to make the woman's belly begin to swell causing her to miscarry and ultimately die. But he would also ask that the woman be preserved from any ill effects if she were truly innocent. Whether or not the dirt on the tabernacle floor was in fact poisonous is hard to say, but in any case the power of the curse was thought to reveal the truth of the matter.

According to one First Century source that tells the story, the technique was supported by God and quickly revealed guilt or innocence, and so the high-priest Abiathar invoked it first against Joseph. First giving him an opportunity to confess his sin of defiling the young temple virgin, when Joseph denied that he ever touched Mary, the priest gave him the water to drink as it would assuredly catch him in a lie. After making the carpenter to walk around the altar seven times as was their custom in this ritual, all were satisfied with his innocence when he failed to keel over in their presence. Quickly switching their attention to little Mary, needless to say the community was convinced that she had been with another man and proceeded to make her drink the holy water and walk around the altar seven times. When Mary completed the ancient protocol and continued to stand in their midst unscathed, those present were greatly astonished. Kissing her feet and embracing her knees they asked her forgiveness for having assumed the worst of her. At that point it was understood that what the Virgin carried in her womb was no ordinary child, and for a time Mary and Joseph would have peace.