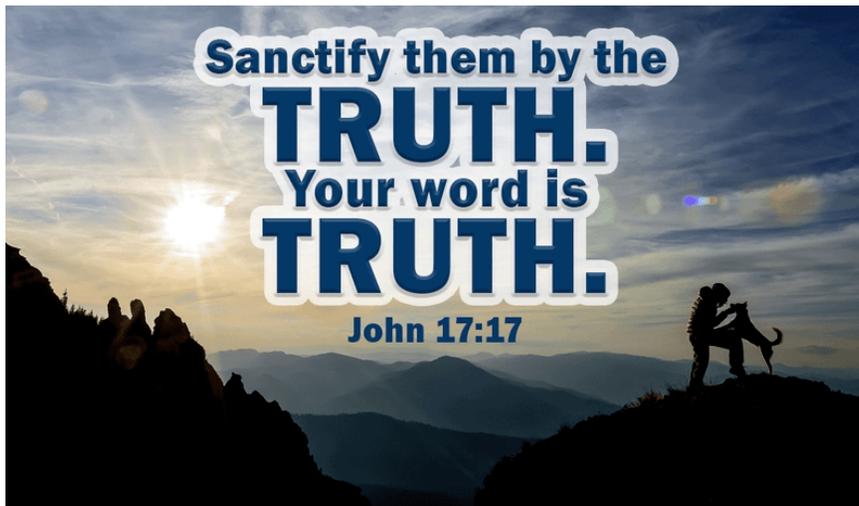


Thy Word is Truth



Meditations on Daily Lectionary Readings of the Gospel

Lenten Meditations for 2020
The Venerable William G. McLoughlin

Introduction

Sanctify them by the Truth. Thy Word is Truth.
—John 17:17

“Thy Word is Truth” (John 17:17). “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever” (Isaiah 40:8). “The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...” (Hebrews 4:12). “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The Word of God is Truth. It is Good News. The meditations which follow are based on the Gospel readings in the daily lectionary found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the *Simplified Liturgy of the Hours* which I compiled. The weekday readings for weeks one through five are from the first ten chapters of the Gospel of Mark. The Sunday readings and those during the week of Ash Wednesday are from the Gospel of John. But the primary focus of our meditations will be on Mark. Why? Mark was the first of the Gospel writers. Mark was enthusiastic about the message of Good News, and yet, his Gospel is the most simple and straightforward of the four Biblical Gospels. Mark’s focus is the Passion of our Lord—Jesus’ sacrifice that brought salvation to mankind. Fully one third of his Gospel, chapters 11-16, is dedicated to the events of the final week of our Lord’s incarnate life. But the first ten chapters describe Jesus’ three-year ministry and preparation for His Passion. It is upon these chapters that we will concentrate. Why? Because Mark has something to say to each one of us. He is speaking the Word of Truth. His is a message of hope and redemption.

Ash Wednesday February 26, 2020

Read Luke 18:9-14

The message, though, can never be divorced from the man. God has chosen to make known His revelation to mankind through fallible human messengers. The Gospels are no different. The four Gospel narratives we have in our Bible each reflect the personality and experiences of the four evangelists. Mark was a man who failed in his early ministry, but by grace experienced redemption. The loving care of our Lord, through the leadership of the Church, informed and influenced Mark's presentation of the Gospel. His message has something to say to each one of us. Both Barnabas, his cousin, and Peter, who himself knew failure and redemption, helped Mark overcome his early failings. And as we shall see, these first ten chapters of his Gospel are most probably reflections of the stories that he heard from his mentor, St. Peter.

In the meditations which follow, we will examine not only the Word, but the man who brings us the Word. Each Sunday we will look at an aspect of the life and experience of Mark. These early chapters of his Gospel are an expression of his experience of our Lord's redemption, and have been a hallmark of faith for Christians in every century. We have much to learn from Mark.

The lessons during the week of Ash Wednesday, as noted above, are from John's Gospel. They lay a very good framework for us to enter into meditation upon Mark's Gospel. And reference will be made to the Johannine lessons each Sunday. But our focus will be on the Word of Truth made manifest in the first ten chapters of Mark's Gospel. If you want a meditative study of the final six chapters of Mark, I wrote a booklet of Lenten meditations on the Passion in Mark's Gospel in 2013. If you would like a copy of those meditations, please let me know and I will e-mail a pdf copy to you.

Mark presents Jesus as always looking to and journeying toward Jerusalem. In these readings and meditations, let us join Him as we make our Lenten pilgrimage, journeying to the New Jerusalem.

Though the focus of these meditations will be on the Gospel of Mark, with a smattering of Johannine passages, we begin with an encouraging and comforting word from Luke. The story of the Pharisee and publican is found only in the third evangelist's presentation of the Gospel, and the compilers of the lectionary recognized the importance and relevance of this parable to our day of penitence. And for our study it is a word that relates well to the message of Mark and his personal experience. Mark, as we shall see in the coming weeks, experienced a severe breaking. He came up short in the eyes and expectations of a man he admired and wanted to emulate. Later, however, he experienced the fruit of humble repentance.

In the parable of today's lesson, Jesus contrasts two men, and two attitudes. Luke says, "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves...but he who humbles himself will be exalted." Mark fell short in his first attempt to evangelize, but under the tutelage of Barnabas and Peter, he humbled himself, and threw himself on the mercy of God. God redeemed and restored him. Jesus' words in the parable could well have been uttered over Mark: "...this man went down to his house justified..."

On this Ash Wednesday we are reminded that God is infinitely merciful. "As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our sins from us" (Psalm 103:12). And for those who humble themselves under the mighty hand of God, they will be exalted, they will go down to their home justified.

There is no one more fervently rooting for us to succeed than Jesus Christ. He died that we might live. And as we shall see in the readings from John this week, He is continually making intercession for us at the right hand of the Father.

Thursday After Ash Wednesday February 27, 2020

Read John 17:1-8

It is appropriate for us to begin our Lenten pilgrimage with a prayer. And what better prayer is there than the one that Jesus Himself prayed to the Father on our behalf. Over these next three days we will read the whole of our Lord's high priestly prayer recorded in the Gospel of John.

It is incredibly comforting to know that, as St. Paul reminds us, Jesus Christ did not only pray for us on the last night of His earthly ministry, He "is at the right hand of God, and is interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34). We can come to Him with all of our petitions. The curtain is open and we have been granted access to Him. We can bring all of our concerns and lay them at His feet. But even when we neglect to call upon Him, His constant prayer is that we will know Him, and continue to live eternally in relationship with Him.

In today's pericope, Jesus defines eternal life. "Now this is eternal life," He says to the Father, "that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent." But what does it mean to know Jesus and the Father who sent Him? To know, in the Biblical sense, is a deeply intimate, loving relationship, in the way a husband and wife know one another. This is a relationship grounded in both the Word and the Spirit. Twice in the preceding chapters Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15; 15:14). Jesus says that those whom the Father has given to Him are "they who have obeyed Your Word...I gave them the words You gave Me and they accepted them..." And in his first epistle, John writes, "Whoever says, 'I know him,' but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys His word, love for God is truly made complete in them" (2:4-5). The Word of God is Truth, and those who obey His Word dwell eternally with Him. Jesus' prayer is that we may know Him and the Father who sent Him.

Friday After Ash Wednesday February 28, 2020

Read John 17:9-19

Jesus prays that the Father will "Sanctify them (His disciples and all who follow in their footsteps) by the Truth; Your Word is Truth." To sanctify something is to set it apart for holy purposes. The thing sanctified then can never be used for anything else. Holy water cannot be used to wash the dishes. Consecrated wine cannot be used for the social gathering after church. A clergyman's stole cannot be used as a winter muffler. Jesus is praying to the Father to set us apart for His purposes, for His Kingdom work. And we are to be sanctified by the Truth. Jesus is the Truth. Thy Word is Truth. Jesus is the Living Word—the Word of Truth!

In His high priestly prayer, Jesus tells the Father that He is not praying that the Father would take us out of the world, but that He would protect us from the evil one. We are to be in the world, but by God's sanctification, His setting us apart, we are to live differently from those who are of the world. Jesus says, "I have given them your Word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world..." That is a hard place for us to be. We are set apart, sanctified, but that puts us at immediate odds with others with whom we live and work. And they hate us for it.

But our separateness from those around us is not to be an occasion for judgment. Jesus prayed that we may be set apart for Him, that we may be used by Him for the furthering of His Kingdom, bringing those who do not know Him to the knowledge and love of Him. For He says to the Father, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." Jesus was sent into the world that the world might be saved through Him. And now He is asking the Father to sanctify us that His redeeming work may continue to be carried out through us—we who are set apart for Him.

Saturday After Ash Wednesday February 29, 2020

Read John 17:20-26

One might argue that our Lord's high priestly prayer was for His twelve disciples. He says in verse 6, "You gave them to me..." which seems to indicate that He is talking to the Father about the twelve. However, the first verse in today's reading sets the record straight: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message..." We are inheritors of the Kingdom because we have believed in Jesus "through their message." He is praying for us!

And what does the Lord pray for us? "That they may all be one." What does that oneness look like? "Father, just as You are in Me, and I am in You, may they also be in us..." Jesus tells the Father about His hope, and prays that the fruits of this oneness may be "that the world may believe that You have sent Me." Jesus has prayed that we might all be set apart in Him, that our identity may be in Christ. It matters not if we are black or white, Baptist or Catholic, refugee or rich man; our Lord's prayer is that we may all be one in Him. That does not happen because we all worship the same way, or vote the same ticket, or look alike and dress alike. It happens only by God's grace, when His people obey His Word, and live according to the Truth. Thy Word is Truth!

Unity, though, appears to have escaped the grip of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Sadly, His Body is heavily divided around innumerable man-made lines. And each time we disagree with someone and separate from them rather than seek reconciliation, we create more division. Mark's departure from Paul and Barnabas ended up causing the two apostles to separate from each other. They could not agree. But it was the grace of God and humble reconciliation that brought healing to Mark, and restoration of relationship with Paul. Our Lord's prayer was answered. And Mark gladly shares that Good News in his Gospel.

The First Week of Lent Sunday, March 1, 2020

Read John 12:44-50

The Gospel is occasionally studied as a historical record of the life of Jesus. And there are others who would want to perceive it as a biography, written that we may know more about Jesus. But the Gospels were not written for these purposes; they are, as Mark declares in his opening verse, the written revelation of Jesus Christ—"the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

St. Mark had a dynamic experience of that Good News made real in his personal life. As we will see in the weeks to come, Mark had a falling away, and a gracious restoration to the faith and ministry. God never gave up on him, and neither did the Church. He was mentored by Peter, and much of what we read in the early chapters of his Gospel are the reflections Peter shared with the young evangelist. What we will see in the Gospel of Mark is his experience of God's love made manifest in Jesus. There could be no better reason to write a Gospel narrative.

Young Mark probably did not know Jesus personally during our Lord's earthly ministry. He was not one of the twelve, and as a young man (probably no more than a teen) he most likely didn't travel with the multitude who followed Jesus. But it is likely that he witnessed the events of our Lord's Passion. He may well have been the young man who ran away naked from the garden (Mark 14:51-52), and was thus positioned to see the full extent of our Lord's sacrificial love in His crucifixion.

What we see in the revelation of Mark's Gospel is what Jesus declares in today's Gospel reading: "I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness...I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world to but save the world." Mark experienced that truth and recorded it in his Gospel. Let us now enter into the young evangelist's experience.

Monday of 1 Lent March 2, 2020

Read Mark 1:1-13

As with the entirety of this Gospel, the first thirteen verses are packed with action and insight. Mark lets it be known from the first verse that all he is doing is whetting your appetite for more of Jesus. He is not presenting the complete message of the Good News; he is writing “the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” It is up to us to accept that Good News and to enter into relationship with God’s beloved Son.

What we can glean from these early verses is that the evangelist is presenting the revelation of God’s love made manifest in the human person of Jesus. Mark presents the prophetic witness from Isaiah and Malachi (vv. 2-3), the testimony of John the Baptist (vv. 7-8), and most significantly, the witness of the Holy Spirit (vv. 10-11).

In the harsh environment of incarnate life, it seems somehow peculiarly important that it was a dove that the Father sent as a witness to the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon His Son. Among the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22f) that are bestowed upon those who walk in the Spirit, is gentleness. A dove is one of the most gentle of animals. God did not send a hawk to take us by force; He sent a dove—a gentle invitation. A dove also hearkens back to Noah who sent a dove from the ark as a sign and messenger of deliverance to the once perishing, but now restoring, world. Mark shows us the dove as a sign of the true Deliverer, the One who has come to save all who will come to Him.

Mark reveals that life in Jesus is life in the Spirit. We can receive baptism for remission of sin, as John bestowed, but we must also welcome baptism in the Holy Spirit, given by Jesus, in order to experience fullness of life. The evangelist also reminds us that the Spirit will provide for us when we find ourselves walking in the wilderness (vv. 12-13). The Spirit is life.

Tuesday of 1 Lent March 3, 2020

Read Mark 1:14-28

I am a bit of an action movie junkie, which may be the reason I am fond of the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s Gospel is the action movie version of the Good News. Mark uses the Greek phrase, *kai euthus*, “and immediately”, 20 times in 16 chapters. And he uses the word *euthus* alone an additional 22 times. As a comparison, Luke uses the word *euthus* only once in his Gospel. There is a breathless quality to Mark’s presentation, much like a good action movie. For example, Alfred Hitchcock would shoot scenes with an average shot length of 9.4 seconds. By comparison, the James Bond film, “Quantum of Solace”, has an average shot length of 1.8 seconds. “And immediately...” We are first introduced to this phrase in verse 18 of today’s reading, and Mark uses it nine times in the first chapter; four times in this short passage. Mark is telling us that this is important stuff. Pay attention! By His actions, Jesus is revealing who He is. You need to be alert, ready to respond.

Look at the things that Mark highlights with this phrase. In verse 18, Simon and Andrew leave their nets and follow Jesus—Immediately! James and John immediately leave their father Zebedee in verse 20. Jesus enters a synagogue and immediately begins teaching (vs. 21), and when confronted, Jesus casts out a demon immediately in verse 23.

Jesus’ proclamation is simple: “repent and believe” (vs. 15). Do not delay. But Mark’s focus is less on the teachings of Jesus than on the revelation of Him as the Son of God in His actions—His healings, deliverances, and miracles. Recognition of Him as the beloved Son of God requires a response from each one of us. And Mark declares that this response should be immediate. As we shall see, Mark is speaking from experience. He faltered and delayed. But the Good News, he declares, is that God is merciful. It is never too late to turn, or return, to God. Do it immediately.

Wednesday of 1 Lent March 4, 2020

Read Mark 1:29-45

This pericope begins and ends with healing and deliverance, and wedged in the middle is our Lord's escape into a time of prayer. This sandwich consisting of the meat of prayer between the bread of miracles was significant for Mark, and is instructive for us.

Mark tells us that Jesus "drove out many demons, but He would not let the demons speak, because they knew who He was." And in the conclusion of this chapter, Jesus tells the man who was cured of leprosy, "See that you don't tell this to anyone..." Why? Is it ever wrong to proclaim what the Lord has done for us? It is a two-fold question of motivation and obedience. Are we testifying to draw attention to ourselves, or are we motivated by love for Christ? And, secondly, is it an appropriate time and venue for giving witness to Christ? Are we walking in obedience to Him?

The demons knew who Jesus was, but their proclamation of the Truth was not motivated by love. St. Athanasius says, "For although what they said was true...yet Jesus did not wish that the truth should proceed from an unclean mouth, and especially from such as those who under pretense of truth might mingle with it their own malicious devices." And as for the leper at the end of the chapter, he was openly disobedient. Jesus told him to not say anything, "But go, show yourself to the priest..." And Mark records, "Instead he went out and began to talk freely...As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly..."

But let us not forget the meat of this sandwich. "Jesus...went to a solitary place, where He prayed." Jesus looked to the Father for direction and only did and spoke what the Father commanded (John 14:31). When we testify to God's work is it for His glory or to draw attention to ourselves? And have we prayed and are we moving in obedience to God's prompting? Let us do only what He directs.

Thursday of 1 Lent March 5, 2020

Read Mark 2:1-12

Is this a healing story? Or is this a story about forgiveness and Jesus' ability to forgive sins? Maybe it is a story about the friends' perseverance in pursuing Jesus for the paralytic. Yes. It is all of those. But for Mark, it must have been incredibly heartening to hear Peter talk about Jesus' authority made manifest before the teachers of the law. The teachers asked themselves, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus' response was immediate! "Why are you thinking these things?"

Once again, Mark presents an action that Jesus took to make manifest His Sonship. Who can forgive? Only God. But, Jesus let the action speak for Him. He said to the paralytic, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk." He did not simply say, get up and walk. But Jesus said, "take up your pallet and walk." The very sign of the man's infirmity—the bed upon which he had lain for however long—became the sign of his healing. It became the sign of his forgiveness!

Too often we want to divorce our mind, spirit, and body from each other. If I am walking in unforgiveness, it affects the way I think about myself, others, and God. It can lead to discouragement, depression, and doubt. My body then suffers, and my spirit is derailed. That is why St. Paul warns us to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Mark could have wallowed in his failure to persevere in ministry with Paul and Barnabas, but Peter helped him see that Jesus has the authority to forgive, and that his return to ministry would be a sign of the wholeness that God had restored to him.

The people who saw the man carrying his pallet were "amazed... and they praised God." Walking in forgiveness is an amazing thing. It brings wholeness and life to our broken selves.

Friday of 1 Lent March 6, 2020

Read Mark 2:13-22

Fridays, especially during Lent, are traditional days of fasting. In today's reading, the questions about eating with tax collectors and fasting all took place around the table in Levi's home. As we saw in the story on Ash Wednesday, the tradition of the Pharisees was to fast twice a week. But here is Jesus, in the home of a notorious sinner, feasting on what was probably one of those fast days. Jesus is asked why neither He nor His disciples are keeping the tradition. He said, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?" It would be inappropriate to fast at a feast. But Jesus adds that "the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them and on that day they will fast." Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh, so now is an appropriate time for fasting. But what does putting a new patch on an old garment, and putting new wine in old wineskins have to do with fasting?

Mark has placed these two parables as a transition between the questions about fasting and those about the sabbath, which we will discuss tomorrow. Our Lord's statement about old cloth and old wineskins refers to old traditions. Jesus is not suggesting that the Old Covenant be ignored, rather that the Pharisaical traditions associated with it are not incumbent upon the faithful in light of the New Covenant. The old traditions were about rigidity and legalistic ritual. The New Covenant in Jesus is about relationship with the Bridegroom. It is about grace! We are to put on the new garments of salvation. We are to put the new wine of the Holy Spirit in new wineskins, not brittle and aged traditions.

Should we fast? The more relevant question is: "Does the fasting that we choose help us focus more closely on our relationship with Jesus?" If fasting is distracting, don't do it. If it helps you, then by all means it is a healthy discipline and worthy to be practiced. It is a season of fasting. It is also a season of grace.

Saturday of 1 Lent March 7, 2020

Read Mark 2:23-3:6

"The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." Sadly, many have used this statement of our Lord's as an excuse for ignoring the sabbath. In our modern world, we have come to believe that filling every moment with activity is virtuous. We scorn rest as wasted time. This incessant busyness takes its toll on our bodies, our minds, our families, and most significantly, on our relationship with God. The sabbath was made for man—it is a gift. But it is also the fourth of the 10 commandments.

When God commanded His people to "keep holy the sabbath day," He was telling us to "set apart" a day when we can rest—a day to focus on our family and our relationship with Him. It is a gift. The teachers of the law attempted to spell out specifics on what constituted work on the sabbath. So, when Jesus' disciples plucked a kernel from a head of grain, the tradition declared their action as harvesting—they were working on the sabbath! Ultimately, when Jesus went into the synagogue, He is confronted with the effort of the teachers to find fault. He uses their reasoning against them, saying, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent—they had no answer.

The sabbath is a gift, a gift of rest for God's faithful people. Saturday, the sabbath, is a day of rest and preparation for the day of resurrection. Sabbath days are time to spend with God, and time to prepare for celebratory worship of Him. Look at the collects appointed for Saturdays. In Morning Prayer we pray, "Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary..." And as we lay the day behind us in Compline, we pray, "Grant as we sing your glory at the close of this day, our joy may abound in the morning as we celebrate the Paschal mystery..." The sabbath was made for man, as a precious gift to us. Why would we want to scorn such a precious gift?

The Second Week of Lent Sunday, March 8, 2020

Read John 5:19-24

Who was the Gospel writer, Mark? Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles that he was a young man whose given name was John, but went by the name Mark (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37). Mary, his mother, may have been a Jew, and his father a Gentile, and it is obvious from the evidence in Acts that his family had some wealth. John was his Hebrew name and Mark his Gentile name. Some refer to him by both, John Mark. He was known to Peter, as is evidenced in Acts 12:12, and sometime later became his disciple.

After the resurrection of our Lord and following Paul's conversion, Paul and Mark's cousin, Barnabas (Col. 4:10), invited the young man to join them on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25). But after a difficult encounter in Paphos, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas and returned home (Acts 13:13). This abandonment of the mission later came to haunt the young minister as we will see next Sunday.

But we can take great comfort and be filled with hope in reading Mark's account of the Good News, because we know that he lived it. As the Gospel reading appointed for today reminds us, Jesus promises that "he who hears my word and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life, he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." We were all young once, both chronologically and spiritually. And we all have had to learn through experience. Mark learned. He made mistakes, and he has graciously revealed to us in his Gospel how Jesus came to redeem and restore him. And that is an encouraging message for us.

In the readings for this second week of Lent, Mark will show us examples of Jesus' power and authority. This was Good News for Mark. It is Good News for all who call on the Name of Jesus and look to Him for deliverance from strife, peril, and enemies.

Monday of 2 Lent March 9, 2020

Read Mark 3:7-20

"He appointed twelve...that they might...have authority to drive out demons." And some early manuscripts add that Jesus designated them to be "apostles". The word apostle means, "one who is sent." Whether He gave them the title or not, Jesus did send them out, and most importantly, He gave them "authority." At the great commission in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..." (28:18-19). "Therefore, go!" They are sent. And we, through the Holy Spirit given in baptism are also sent. In the welcome of the newly baptized we say, "We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim His resurrection, and share with us in His eternal priesthood." To share in Christ's eternal priesthood is to be endowed with His authority. We were baptized into Christ Jesus. Our ministry is in Him. It is His ministry and authority made manifest through us.

You have to be with Him before you can be sent by Him. This was a hard lesson that Mark learned through his misadventure in ministry. Mark may have begun his ministry too soon. He had not walked with Jesus during the Lord's earthly ministry. He had not spent time, like Paul, in the desert (Gal. 1:15-18), nor learned at the feet of the apostles, like Barnabas, but his later association with Peter may have helped him understand the importance of spending time with Jesus. God does not call the equipped; He equips the called. And to be imbued with Christ's authority, we must be in Christ Jesus.

Jesus told His disciples, "he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father" (John 14:12). To believe is to set our hearts firmly in Christ. We believe "into" the Lord. In Him, then, we are sent out to do His work.

Tuesday of 2 Lent March 10, 2020

Read Mark 3:20-35

When I told my mother that I had left the Episcopal Church to join the CEC, she told me, “Don’t ever expect me to go to church with you again.” People react negatively to things they don’t understand or things that challenge what they believe. Mark experienced such rejection when Bar-Jesus, the Jewish prophet and magician in Paphos “withstood them, seeking to turn away the proconsul from the faith” (Acts 13:6-8). So it was probably comforting to him to hear Peter relate the story of Jesus’ rejection by His own family. Sometimes, we have to recognize that our family lines may be drawn with common faith rather than common blood, and that their rejection is a rejection of Jesus, not of us.

Rejection, though, is hard to accept, and the hatred that people express toward us because of our faith is seldom rational. Nevertheless, Jesus warns us that it is to be expected. Mark records that Jesus said that we could expect rejection, even from our own family. “Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:12-13).

For many it is not enough just to disagree with you. They will, like the scribes in today’s lesson, not only denigrate you and your integrity, they will lie about you. And that is hard. But Jesus said that we should expect that. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). “But he who endures to the end will be saved.” That is good news. Pray that God will give you the grace and perseverance to stand fast in the faith.

Wednesday of 2 Lent March 11, 2020

Read Mark 4:1-20

Chapter 4 is Mark’s presentation of the parables of Jesus. Today’s reading contains the Parable of the Sower and our Lord’s explanation of it to His disciples. However, prior to the explanation Mark tells us that Jesus said, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables...” That statement is followed by the harsh word from Isaiah 6:9-10 that the outsiders may “never perceive, and...never understand...otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” How can this be? Didn’t Jesus come that all might be forgiven and saved?

The problem that most of us have with the Word is that we want to intellectually understand it. It is the curse of our Western mindset. The real purpose, though, of the parables is to facilitate apprehension of the Truth by the Spirit. Thy Word is Truth. Jesus is the Truth. To apprehend the Truth we must come into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The capacity to receive the Truth depends on our readiness surrender to His will. As an example, in John’s Gospel, when Philip tells Nathaniel that they have found the Messiah, Nathaniel cannot comprehend this because it does not line up intellectually with what he has been taught. Philip does not argue with him, rather he simply says, “Come and see.” The purpose of the parables, as Mark presents it here, is to pique the interest of the hearer that they might pursue Jesus, that they might come and see, and ultimately accept Him as Lord.

Thus, in today’s reading and in tomorrow’s, the parables presented temporarily conceal truths on an intellectual plane. But the Lord is seeking to touch the hearer’s heart that they may see themselves in these common stories and be convicted in spirit. For it is only when we are truly convicted that we will “turn and be forgiven.”

Thursday of 2 Lent
March 12, 2020

Read Mark 4:21-34

In this second half of chapter 4, Mark continues his presentation of the parables of Jesus. There are three parables: the lamp on the stand, the seeds of the harvest, and the mustard seed. Then in verse 33, Mark indicates that these were but a sample. He says, “With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.” Again, as stated yesterday, Jesus wasn’t presenting the parables that the hearers might grasp the Truth intellectually; rather, His purpose was to draw them to Him with stories to which they could relate. The majority of the parables here and in the other synoptic Gospels were agrarian stories. This was an agrarian culture, and the people could relate to stories about seeds and harvests.

Mark’s experience of the Good News was the profound grace that he was shown by the Lord and the chosen leaders of the Church. For him, the Kingdom of God was dramatically different from what he had expected when he failed in his first attempts to carry out his calling. There was no condemnation. There was no open rejection of Him by Jesus, or Barnabas, or Peter. There was only grace. The nature of the Kingdom is declared to the people, not in intellectual precepts and reasoned arguments. Jesus’ use of parables is designed to present the Kingdom by comparison to common things that the people may grasp.

Ultimately what Mark is presenting in the three parables, and the brief explanation accompanying them, is that the Word of God is Truth, and there is power in the implanted Word. When received, the Word brings light, it works deep in the spirit of the one receiving it, and the Word will produce abundant fruit in and through us. We don’t need to understand how that works, we simply need to yield to His power made manifest through us by the Holy Spirit.

Friday of 2 Lent
March 13, 2020

Read Mark 4:35-41

As we approach the end of this week we have two stories revealing the power and authority that has been given to Jesus by the Father. The first story shows His authority over nature. The story appointed for tomorrow reveals His authority over the demonic. Both stories are found in all three synoptic Gospels, but there are some details in both of these stories which are unique to the Gospel of Mark.

In the reading today, we see Jesus exercising His authority over the wind and waves. But the unique detail that Mark provides is that, before they depart, the disciples “took Him with them in the boat, *just as He was*” (italics added). This peculiar phrase makes sense in light of Mark’s experience. The disciples, and Mark by extension, had seen Jesus as a teacher, and the disciples call Him “teacher” or “Rabbi” in vs. 38. But as Mark later learned through experience, and the disciples learned in the boat on the sea, He is far more than a teacher; He is Lord over creation. There is nothing that is beyond His power—even the wind and waves. Jesus wasn’t afraid of the weather. He was asleep in the back of the boat. As a result, Mark is pointing out that we can draw on His peace, and rest in His presence, and trust His power to deliver! If we acknowledge Him to be who He is, just as He is, we too, have nothing to fear.

All of us will, from time to time, run into situations in our lives when we are powerless to remedy what has happened. Sickness, accidents, financial problems, no matter what it is, we can turn to the Lord Who is all-powerful. And we can trust Him. Too often we try to take control and fix the situation. And all-too-often we make it worse. Jesus is in your boat. He may be asleep in the back, but He is still Lord of all creation, and you can rely upon Him to calm the storm. You need only ask.

Saturday of 2 Lent March 14, 2020

Read Mark 5:1-20

As with yesterday's reading, we have a story which appears in all three of the synoptic Gospels. But again, there are some unique features in Mark's reporting of the event. All three evangelists agree that, in the country of the Gerasenes Jesus and the disciples run into a man who is possessed by many evil spirits and who lives among the tombs. But Mark adds the following details: "No one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him..." Those are some frightening details.

When Paul, Barnabas, and Mark were in Paphos, they were opposed by a sorcerer who had a position of power in the city. There is no description of what he did to try to discourage the pro-consul from accepting the Word preached by Paul, but his opposition must have been significant based on Paul's response. "Filled with the Holy Spirit," Paul "looked straight at Elymas and said, 'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery... Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun'" (Acts 13:9-11). For the young man Mark, this encounter could have been very frightening. Then later to hear from his mentor Peter about the Gerasene demoniac, and the authority that Jesus had over that multi-possessed individual, was undoubtedly encouraging.

That same power and authority is available to all who are in Christ. St. Paul says that we have nothing to fear because in Jesus "we are more than conquerors"; we can "stand against the wiles of the devil", and that Jesus has "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him" (Rom. 8:38; Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15). Nothing can separate us from Him!

The Third Week of Lent Sunday, March 15, 2020

Read John 5:25-29

As mentioned in yesterday's meditation, Paul and Barnabas had a difficult encounter in Paphos (Acts 13:4-13). This conflict may have frightened the young man, Mark. Whether from fear or another reason, Mark left the two older evangelists and returned home. His action was perceived by Paul as an abandonment of the young man's calling, and created a problem for the Apostle. Ultimately, Paul's anger over this perceived failing led to a break-up with Barnabas. When Paul wanted to return to the cities they had previously visited, Barnabas wanted to take Mark. Luke records that "Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other..." (Acts 15:38-39).

Mark may have hoped that he could learn through experience at the feet of the Apostle Paul, and his cousin Barnabas may have pushed him a bit too soon. Nevertheless, Barnabas didn't give up on him, he "took Mark with him and sailed to Cyprus" and they ministered there (Acts 15:39). But both Scripture and tradition attest that Peter, whom we noted in the first week knew Mark and his family, took the young man under his wing and mentored him. At the end of his first Epistle, Peter refers to Mark as "my son" (5:13). And through the care and mentoring that Mark received from both Barnabas and Peter, the young evangelist was restored to the evangelical ministry of the Church. Even Paul once again received him into the company of his disciples (Philemon 24). He also commands Timothy to "Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me" (2 Tim. 4:11). This speaks highly of both Paul and Mark. The two were reconciled, and that produced good fruit for the Church in every era to follow. Mark's experience of Jesus' redeeming love became the heart of his message in the Gospel he wrote.

Monday of 3 Lent
March 16, 2020

Read Mark 5:21-43

The two healing miracles we have in today's reading illustrate Jesus' authority over both sickness and death. Though the one is imbedded in the other, let us begin with the story of the woman's healing, for it speaks to both the individual acting in faith, and the Lord's sensitivity to that faith being exercised.

The woman knew that Jesus could heal her—she had faith. But she was unclean according to Jewish law; she could not ask Him to touch her. Mark says she knew that “If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well,” and she acted on that faith. Mark also points out that, even though there was a huge crowd pressing about Him, Jesus knew that “power had gone out from Him.” He asked, “Who touched my garment?” It is easy for us to get caught up in the crowd, to allow seeds of doubt to take root. If the crowd had known the woman was unclean they would likely have shuffled her off to the perimeter. And there are throngs today who follow Jesus while pushing others away, scorning those who want to touch Him.

It is significant that this woman's story interrupts the story of Jairus' daughter. If the woman had not delayed Jesus, He might have arrived before the girl died. This then became for Jairus a test of faith. The crowd again could have influenced this father. “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher...” How often do we get discouraged when our prayers are not answered in a timely manner? Mark does not tell us what Jairus said in response to the news of his daughter's death. What He does tell us is that Jesus said, “Do not fear, only believe.” Jairus did and his daughter lived!

Not even death has the power to separate us from Christ. Jesus has authority over sickness and death. Are we going to let the throng discourage us, or will we reach out and touch Jesus in faith?

Tuesday of 3 Lent
March 17, 2020

Read Mark 6:1-13

Right after I was ordained, my sponsoring priest invited me to come home and to preach in the parish where I grew up. After the service, one of the matriarchs of the parish came up to me and said, “I remember when you were but a snot-nosed little kid. Who are you to preach to me?” Jesus, can relate. “And they took offense at him.” It is easy to find fault, especially if we are looking for it. We can discern from their words that those in Jesus' hometown were anxious to find fault. “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” Sadly, His family also got caught up in the mood of the crowd. Who does he think he is?

None of us is immune to the temptation to judge another. Even the Apostle Paul was unwilling to accept Mark back for a second missionary tour. He found fault with the young man, and that attitude led to a rift with Barnabas. In today's reading, we see that Jesus recognized that there would be people unwilling to accept the ministry of the twelve He was commissioning. He warned them saying, “And if any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them.” He did not want the fault-finding they would encounter to discourage His disciples.

How easy it is on the one hand to find fault, and on the other to take offense. But we can choose. We can choose to find fault, or seek what is good. We can choose to be offended by others' opinions, or we can choose to ignore a slight. We can choose to “shake off the dust” of the crowd's doubt and reach out to Jesus. Jesus “was amazed at their lack of faith,” but He chose to press on, to commission the twelve, and continue ministering “from village to village.” Let us choose to “shake off the dust” and follow Him.

Wednesday of 3 Lent
March 18, 2020

Read Mark 6:13-29

On Monday we talked about the need to deny the crowd the ability to influence us and to plant seeds of doubt and discouragement in our spirit. But it is easy to get caught up in the opinion of the crowd and to let them sway our decisions. Mark inserts a story at this point in his Gospel narrative which highlights, as it were, the other side of the Good News. King Herod heard about Jesus, and wracked with guilt declares that he must be John the Baptist raised from the dead. The story of John's beheading illustrates the power of a crowd to negatively influence our decisions, if we allow it.

Herod was in an illicit relationship with his brother's wife, Herodias. John reprimanded the king for his unlawful behavior. This displeased his wife. Seeking to please her, Herod had John arrested. Though his wife wanted him to kill John, he would not, "for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe...and he liked to listen to him." When Herodias' daughter danced before the king, he was smitten. He made a public promise to the girl, saying, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it." Her mother advised her to ask for John the Baptist's head. Herod didn't want to kill John; he liked him. But as Mark reports, "because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her." The power of public opinion won the day. He didn't want to disappoint the crowd. Herod folded under the pressure of pleasing others.

Herod did not know Jesus personally, but he admired John who had paved the way for the Lord. The testimony of John, and the reports of Jesus' miracles and teachings were not enough, though, to sway the king. He chose to follow the crowd. Ultimately, we must ask: are we going to follow the crowd, ignoring the evidence of Christ's power and authority, or will we stand in faith with Jesus, even if it is the more difficult place to stand?

Thursday of 3 Lent
March 19, 2020

Read Mark 6:30-46

I am writing these meditations during a short sabbatical. The demands and stresses of ministry had become very heavy for me and I needed some intense quality time with the Lord. Immersing myself in His Word, taking time to reflect on the Good News, and "wasting time" in prayer was essential to my wellbeing and spiritual health. That is where Jesus and His disciples found themselves at this point in their ministry. In today's reading, Mark says "because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, Jesus said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'"

But as so often happens, our times of rest and refreshment can be interrupted, and new demands can shatter the quiet we are pursuing. Jesus and His disciples "went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them." It is important for us to recognize that the Lord has the big picture, and that though we may have designs on our time, He may have other plans for us. For Jesus and His disciples, interruptions were ministry callings. It is another example of walking in the Grace of God—being willing to be led by the Holy Spirit, and living in the moment.

Living in the Spirit is a moment by moment adventure. On this, and other sabbaticals I have taken, there have been interruptions, people making demands on my time. It would be easy for me to get angry, to resent those who, like the crowd in the story, selfishly pursue their own agenda. But "when Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them..." Interruptions are ministry opportunities, moments for grace in the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught and fed the crowd, and then, "After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray." It is best to leave our time in His hands.

Friday of 3 Lent
March 20, 2020

Read Mark 6:47-56

In modern commentaries on Mark's Gospel, when you get to this pericope you will find many writers who want to dismiss this miracle as fantasy. For example, George Young says, "Jesus projected an image of himself while remaining on the shore." Albert Schweitzer suggested that the disciples saw Jesus walking on the shore, but were confused by high wind and darkness. And Vincent Taylor said, "perhaps Jesus waded through the surf." But Jesus declared to the Father that "Thy Word is Truth."

What strikes me as contradictory is that men who are Christian writers can accept that Jesus was the Son of God, born of a virgin, was raised from the dead by the Father, and is seated with Him in glory. But these same theologians and biblical scholars can't accept that He could walk on water. Mark, they conclude, was not an eyewitness to the events he recorded in these early chapters, and so we cannot trust that this was a historical event.

But Mark wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And as we have noted, and has been attested by early Church fathers, he was tutored by the Apostle Peter. The first century father, Papias, wrote that "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered." This view is supported by other early Church fathers such as, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Clement, and Origen, among others. Thy Word is Truth.

For young Mark it was crucial for him to both hear and believe in the all-encompassing power and authority of Jesus. That is a truth to which all of us must cling in this uncertain world. An early fourth century hymn beautifully proclaims our confidence in Christ: "O mighty is the power of God, the power that all things did create, that calmed the waters of the sea when Christ upon its surface walked..." There is no storm too large for Jesus to calm.

Saturday of 3 Lent
March 21, 2020

Read Mark 7:1-23

As has been noted, John Mark was probably the son of a Jewish mother (Mary, Acts 12:12) and a Gentile father. He wrote his gospel in Greek, and it appears to have been written for a gentile community, possibly in Rome where Peter had been martyred. The Christians in Rome had been evangelized by Paul and were not of Jewish origin. They would not have been expected by either Paul or Peter to follow the Jewish rituals or traditions. So the message in today's reading would have been of some comfort to them.

Questions abounded in the early Christian community about keeping the traditions of the Jews and fulfilling the Law. The question of circumcision was dealt with repeatedly by Paul; and the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 settled the question of the need to follow the strict legal code of the Old Covenant. James said at that Council, "my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood (vv. 19-20)". Nevertheless, questions were still raised from time to time, and Paul notes that even Peter was occasionally caught up in the controversies. Paul reports that, "when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party (Gal. 2:11-12)".

Mark sets his readers at ease with our reading today. He records that Jesus gathered the crowd and said, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him." And later, Paul explains the purpose of the law in Galatians 3, and in chapter 5 concludes, "if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law." That is indeed Good News.

The Fourth Week of Lent Sunday, March 22, 2020

Read John 6:27-40

The fourth week of Lent is traditionally a week of respite from the rigors of the Lenten fast. This day is called “Laetare Sunday”, from the introit of the Mass. The word Laetare means “Rejoice”, and the lessons appointed for today reflect our Lord’s ability to provide for His People in all circumstances. He can feed us, even when we find ourselves wandering in the wilderness.

This past Thursday, Mark related the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people with only five loaves and two fish. And this coming Tuesday we will read the evangelist’s record of the feeding of the 4000 with seven loaves “and a few small fish”. But as we have noted, Mark is not presenting a biography or a history. The purpose of the recitation of these feedings is the proclamation of our Lord’s ability to provide for His people. This is made clear when Mark contrasts our Lord’s provision with the “yeast of the Pharisees and Herodians”.

As we are exhorted in the Gospel reading appointed for today, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life...” (John 6:27,35). And then our Lord leaves us with no doubt about the source and substance of that food. The source: “My Father gives you the true bread from heaven” (6:32). And the substance: “I am the bread of life...” (6:35).

As we pass the midway point in our Lenten pilgrimage, Mark begins to turn our attention toward Jerusalem. Jesus begins to prepare His disciples for the sacrifice that is yet to come. They will need encouragement. He knows that all will fail Him. One will betray Him. One will deny Him. All will abandon Him. Mark can relate to their plight. His presentation of our Lord’s preparation is an encouragement for him, and for all of us.

Monday of 4 Lent March 23, 2020

Read Mark 7:24-37

There are two healings described in the reading today. Both took place in Gentile territory. Once again, our Lord has traveled to a remote place looking for some time alone, apart from the crowd and their demands. Mark says that Jesus “entered a house, and would not have any one know it; yet he could not be hid.” A Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, “whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet.” What follows may sound harsh and unlike the Lord. Jesus responds to her request by saying, “Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” It sounds as if He is refusing to heal this little girl. However, could it be that Jesus did not want to deny the woman’s request, rather He wanted her to make a public declaration of faith in His ability to heal her daughter? It is not a rejection, rather an invitation for this woman to enter relationship with Him. And He is not disappointed.

It is obvious that Jesus is impressed by the woman’s response. She says, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She calls Him Lord, and she stands firm in faith on behalf of her daughter. The Lord replies, “For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” Even when it appears that, as it were, the tide has turned against us, we can stand firm in the Lord, knowing that in our relationship with Him it matters not from where we come, or what we have done, in Him there is great compassion.

What a wonderful message for the beginning of this fourth week of Lent. There is hope, and in that we can rejoice. Laetare, rejoice!

Tuesday of 4 Lent
March 24, 2020

Read Mark 8:1-10

It is significant to note where this miracle takes place. It is Gentile territory. In yesterday's reading we were told that "Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went...into the region of the Decapolis" (7:31). The Decapolis, which means Ten Cities, was a center of Greek and Roman culture. The cities were just east of Galilee near the Jordan River. And we read in today's lesson that "During those days another large crowd gathered." This would be a crowd of Gentiles from the Ten Cities. Many scholars argue that today's reading is simply a mirror account of the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6. However, that first miraculous feeding took place in Galilee, Jewish territory. And there is one more clue. Mark uses the word *kophinos* to describe the baskets used to collect the pieces in 6:43. A *kophinos* is a basket of wicker-work used by Jews to carry food, often balanced on a woman's head. In today's reading (8:8), he uses the word *spyris* to describe the baskets used. A *spyris* is a very large reed basket, a kind of hamper, sometimes large enough to hold a man. Luke uses this word for the basket they put Paul in to facilitate his escape in Acts 9:25. It is a basket big enough to hold a grown man. So, why is all of this significant?

In both cases we are told that Jesus had compassion on the crowd. That is significant because He did not make a distinction between Jew and Gentile. It is also significant to note in what manner He fed the respective crowds. In the previous reading (6:34), Mark said that the Jews were like "sheep without a Shepherd," and Jesus began teaching. They had only been with the Lord the better part of one day. Their spiritual need outweighed their physical. In today's reading, the crowd is physically hungry. They had been with Him three days (8:2). He fed them. Mark is reporting that, in His compassion Jesus is capable of meeting all of our needs both physical and spiritual. We need only look to Him, and He will provide all we need, even with basketfuls of provision left over.

Wednesday of 4 Lent
March 25, 2020

Read Mark 8:11-26

There are times when walking in faith is harder than at other times. When I am tired, when ministry is more of a chore than a blessing, when people have disappointed, hurt, or betrayed me, I can find it hard to believe in the love of God. When the times of trial come upon me, I need a sign of God's love. I need to stop and look, not at the present situation, but look back and remember the times that Jesus has been there for me. The times he has healed me, comforted me, and saved me from myself. I ask, when was the last time I KNEW the presence of the Lord? Then start over there.

This is what is happening in today's reading. The Pharisees want a sign, a miracle to prove that Jesus is Messiah. He has just fed 4000 people with a small portion of bread and a few small fish. And you want a sign? Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, no sign will be given." He then warns the disciples to "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." The disciples are tired. They have traveled to Sidon, then to the Decapolis, and now are making their way back to Galilee. They have ministered to the crowds, and have been faithful in serving the Lord. Their thoughts are not straight. They think He is criticizing them. They hear the questions of the Pharisees. They need a sign of His love.

In good Jewish fashion Jesus asks them a question. Did you not see the sign of My provision? Do you not yet realize that I can provide bread for you from next to nothing? Essentially Jesus is telling them, Don't be like the Pharisees or Herod. Be with Me! I have been there for you from the beginning. I am with you now. I will be with you regardless of the temporal circumstances. I AM. And to punctuate the claim, Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida. As John records, "Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind" (9:32). Do we need a sign? No we need a relationship with the One Who loves us. He never disappoints.

Thursday of 4 Lent
March 26, 2020

Read Mark 8:27-9:1

Jesus traveled from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi, northeast of the Sea of Galilee. And from there He will begin His trek south toward Jericho. Ultimately He will make His way up the mountain from there into Jerusalem. Now, His eyes and His heart are set on the Holy City, and He knows He needs to prepare His disciples for what is to come. And so, He asks them, “Who do men say that I am?” They answer Him with stock replies. But He probes further. “But who do you say that I am?” As yesterday’s reading highlighted, the disciples have had moments of confusion, and maybe even moments of doubt. Jesus wants to solidify their commitment to Him before they see Him in the Passion.

Every person, at some point in the here or the hereafter, must answer the question posed by our Lord: “Who do you say that I am?” There is only one acceptable answer: “You are the Christ.” Even Peter, who so profoundly answered our Lord’s question, wanted to put his own interpretation on the meaning. When Jesus explained what it meant to be the Messiah in His Passion prediction, Peter balked. God forbid! He protests: That’s not what we are looking for in Messiah. Nevertheless, we must take our stand in Christ. Who do you say that Jesus is?

Jesus is inviting us, just as He did His disciples, to follow Him. And just as He was preparing His disciples for what it meant to follow Him, so the Word, the Holy Scriptures, are telling us plainly, through the Gospel of Mark, that Jesus IS the Christ. To follow Him is to make the trek to Calvary. For life is found in Jesus. Jesus, the Christ, died that we may have life. “He spoke plainly about this.” Thy Word is Truth. We can try, like Peter did, to put our own spin on the Truth. But, if we do, we should not be surprised if we hear, “Get behind me, Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God.” Thy Word is Truth. Believe!

Friday of 4 Lent
March 27, 2020

Read Mark 9:2-13

It is interesting to remember that it is Peter who is helping young Mark with the tales of our Lord’s earthly ministry. Mark recounted Peter’s rebuke yesterday. And today, we have Peter, once again revealing his shortcomings in not understanding the full extent of our Lord’s demonstration of His glory. To put the exclamation point on Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, our Lord took the inner council of Peter, James, and John up the Mount of Transfiguration and allowed them to see His glory and to hear His Father’s declaration, “This is My Son, whom I love. Listen to Him.” Would it not have been fun to hear from his own lips how flabbergasted Peter felt at that moment?

Regardless of the confusion Peter felt at that moment, it was essential that Jesus reveal the full extent of His relationship with the Father; that He reveal that His life and ministry is a fulfillment of the Law and the prophets made apparent in the presence of Moses and Elijah. The disciples might not understand that revelation at that moment, and Peter, through Mark, seems to indicate that they didn’t, but they would. And now Peter is revealing the truth to his young protege. And Mark dutifully proclaims it in his Gospel.

It is not hard to imagine that Peter and the other disciples had difficulty absorbing the fulness of Jesus’ life and ministry—the reality of Who He truly was. Everything that had been prophesied in the Old Covenant, everything that had been promised to the Jews, and every hope for the reconciliation of mankind to God, was present in this one man, Jesus. That is a tremendous message. It is the message of the Transfiguration. Of course Peter was flabbergasted. He had walked with this man for three years, and now the fulness of His glory is revealed in a moment of time. “He did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid.”

Saturday of 4 Lent March 28, 2020

Read Mark 9:14-29

It is hard to come down from a mountaintop experience. At the beginning of this year, Miranda and I were able to get away for a week to celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary. We did our best to ease back into the daily grind, and our efforts were rewarded. Our reentry into work and ministry was relatively smooth. Jesus and His three disciples did not have that grace. They came down the mountain and were immediately faced with a most difficult ministry issue. There was a crowd, Pharisees, and confusion.

We can hear in our Lord's words His disappointment and frustration: "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" Jesus knows what is ahead, and He knows that the Father will entrust the work of the Kingdom to the disciples whom He is preparing. But they seem a little dense. After Jesus successfully casts out the demon from the young boy, His disciples ask Him, "Why could we not cast it out?" Our Lord's response is key to Mark's inclusion of this story in his gospel. "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

There is no indication that Jesus stopped and prayed when the father brought his son to Jesus. Our Lord's prescription for exorcism given above indicates a lifestyle, not a momentary petition. The prayer that Jesus describes here is a moment by moment dialog with God. It is an invitation to be in Christ. For when we are in Him, we "can do all things in him who strengthens us" (Phil. 4:13). And though we may be frustrated, disappointed, or even angry about a situation, as Jesus was here, because of His relationship with the Father, He was able to overcome the emotion and move in the Spirit to exorcise the demon. His prayerful relationship with God the Father carried Him through the moment. Our prayerful relationship, moment by moment, with Him will equip us and comfort us to deal with all the challenges of life.

The Fifth Week of Lent Sunday, March 29, 2020

Read John 8:46-59

The Gospel of Mark has been called a Passion narrative with a long introduction. This week we come to the conclusion of that long introduction. The Passion begins with our Lord's entry into Jerusalem for the Passover in chapter 11. But Mark leaves no doubt in the minds and spirit of the readers of his Gospel that the Good News is proclaimed most fully in the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord. He gives us early hints of what our Lord will accomplish in the Passion by seeding three Passion predictions in the final three chapters of the introduction. We had the first this past Thursday, and we will have the second and third on Monday and Friday respectively this week.

As we wind our way with Jesus toward Jerusalem this week, we are repeatedly reminded that our commitment to Jesus and to His unfailing Word of Truth must be firm. For between the two Passion predictions, Mark has sandwiched reminders of those who have failed to make the greater covenantal commitment. He references causing another to sin, breaking solemn vows, and selfishness. But with God, Mark reminds us, there is always hope. Mark failed in his early attempts, but Jesus redeemed him. And in the Gospel reading appointed for today Jesus asks, "why do you not believe me?" And then, He offers this encouragement: "He who is of God hears the words of God..." The readings from those mid-week days help us understand how to live a disciplined life in the Word.

Thy Word is Truth! And Mark is the herald of that Good News. May we always be hearers and doers of the Word of God. And let us walk with Mark as he follows Jesus in His pilgrimage toward Jerusalem.

Monday of 5 Lent
March 30, 2020

Read Mark 9:30-41

As was indicated in the meditation yesterday, Jesus has begun moving toward Jerusalem, and on the way He twice more makes prediction of His death. Today's reading is the second of those Passion Predictions, and still the disciples "did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him." Halford Luccock, an early 20th century homiletics professor at Yale, said, "One can readily imagine that the disciples found it extraordinarily hard to accept a conception of messiahship which did such violence to all their ideas of what the Messiah would do and be." This time no one rebuked Jesus, as Peter did in chapter 8, rather they appear to have discussed it among themselves. Ultimately, this discussion gave way to a contest between them of who is the greatest.

There are two dynamics happening here which are profoundly human. First, their hopes for Messiah had been shaped by the teaching of the Jewish community for centuries. The Christ would be a deliverer; and their concept did not include Him being killed as a common criminal by the ones from whom they were seeking deliverance. And secondly, the curse of jealousy rears its ugly head. Peter, James, and John have been accorded what the others considered special privilege. Peter probably went to some effort to explain to Mark how that was not the case, and included this story in his teaching to help the young man understand the importance of humility in ministry. The Lord didn't simply use words to make His point, but action, as is His wont. And it was not simply a lesson about attitude, it was an invitation to relationship. "And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.'" To be with Jesus is to humbly receive Him and yield our will to His. Just as a child submits to a parent, so we are called to submit to the Father—the One Who sent Jesus.

Tuesday of 5 Lent
March 31, 2020

Read Mark 9:42-50

As they wind their way south from Galilee toward Judea, Jesus begins to address some issues of discipline for a disciple. At the end of yesterday's reading Jesus made the statement, "anyone who gives you a cup of water in my Name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward." This is a basic tenet of living a life of charity toward others. And in today's reading He presses these disciplinary teachings further. Just as we should strive for charity toward others, we should practice discipline in self restraint. Nothing we do should ever be considered an occasion of sin for another.

All of this teaching can sound harsh to our ear; however, what the Lord is trying to convey to the disciples is that Christian behavior is not something that comes naturally, because we are all fallen creatures. We must learn it, practice it, and be disciplined in employing it in our daily living. We will make mistakes. We will fall short of the goal of living life in the model given to us by Christ. But when we do fall short, we repent, turn to Him again seeking His grace, and start over. It is when we make the conscious choice to ignore the call to holiness that Jesus says it would be better to cut off that limb, or pluck out that eye.

We will be tried in our attempts to live a life in holiness. That is why in verse 49 He says that we will be tried by fire. But fire can be purifying, burning away the behaviors that are not in line with Christ's calling. If we are not tried, we are not growing. And the salt that He mentions in the last verse of today's reading is best understood as our Christian character. If the various aspects of our character line up with that of the character of Christ, that is good. But it does require discipline—the discipline of continual relationship with Him. If we lose our edge, neglect our walk with Christ, we have lost our saltiness. Thus, "Have salt in yourselves."

Wednesday of 5 Lent
April 1, 2020

Read Mark 10:1-16

Jesus has now arrived in the region of Judea, “and crowds gathered to him again; and again, as his custom was, he taught them.”

Apparently, some of His teaching caused questions in the minds of the Pharisees. This is not surprising. Since Jesus is teaching about matters of discipline, they challenge Him on the matter of marriage and divorce. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” they ask. They are not interested in the Word, rather they want affirmation of the traditions that have accompanied the interpretations given by the Jewish scholars and scribes. But Jesus returns to the Word. He knows, and wants everyone to understand that Thy Word is Truth.

We all want the Word to be accommodating to our preferred understanding and our fleshly desires. But Jesus is telling us that the disciplined spiritual life is founded firmly in the Word of God. Marriage and divorce is a good example. Jesus is clear that divorce was never part of God’s plan for His people. In reply to the Pharisee’s comment that Moses allowed for divorce, He states plainly, “For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” There is no accommodation in Mark’s Gospel for divorce, as there is in Matthew’s (5:32). Thy Word is Truth. A disciplined spiritual life will be lived in accordance with the Word, not our will.

Jesus uses the occasion also to teach the disciples about the nature of true trust. The people were bringing children to Him for a blessing. He says, “I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” We can trust the Word of God to be true. A humble trust is a childlike trust.

Thursday of 5 Lent
April 2, 2020

Read Mark 10:17-31

Undoubtedly our Lord did much more teaching in preparing the disciples for the Passion than is recorded here. For example, Matthew and Luke have included additional teaching material in their respective Gospel narratives that is not found in Mark’s Gospel. But Mark concludes this section of Jesus’ preparation with the story of the rich young man’s encounter with Jesus. There is much that Jesus has to say to this young man, and to us through Mark’s relating of the story, but the key is found in Jesus’s response to the man’s declaration that he has kept all of the commandments. Our Lord said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” The Lord’s message is simple. Where is your focus? What are the things that you hold dear? Whatever it is, none of it compares to having a relationship with Jesus, the Son of God. His final exhortation to the young man summarizes all of His teaching: “Come, follow Me.”

Once again the disciples find that Our Lord’s words shatter their preconceptions about the kingdom. “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” They have been taught that riches are a sign of God’s favor. How can it be that one favored by God will not enter the Kingdom of God? Peter reminds Mark of the sacrifices that he and the other disciples made. Mark records that Peter said to Jesus, “Lo, we have left everything and followed you.” And Jesus assures them that they will receive a greater reward, but it will come with a cost. There will be persecutions in this life, but “in the age to come eternal life.”

The way is narrow that leads to eternal life, but Jesus assures Peter, and all who follow after him, that the sacrifices are worth the cost. “Come, follow Me,” says the Lord. His way leads to eternal life.

Friday of 5 Lent April 3, 2020

Read Mark 10:32-45

Many modern commentators claim that the details in this third Passion prediction hint at a transplanted Passion narrative, that Jesus could not have known that kind of detail before the fact. That seems unlikely. There really would be no reason for Mark to elaborate on Peter's recounting of these events. As Jesus and His band of disciples drew nearer Jerusalem He would want them to be more fully prepared for what was to follow. He would not hide the details, even though it would be uncomfortable for them.

When the Lord takes us out of our comfort zone, it is because He has something better planned for us. The journey to Jerusalem, and on to Calvary, is an important one for all of us to make. It is the test of our profession of faith. But, like James and John, we don't really want to go there. We want assurances. The brothers make a selfish request: "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Their request flows from the springs of their will. They want to be near to the Lord, but their hearts reveal the selfishness of that desire. "We want You to do OUR will."

The Lord has just lovingly explained how He is going to Jerusalem to fulfill the Father's will. Nevertheless, Jesus will have His own deep distress as He fights with self will. "Not my will, but thine be done," He will pray in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:36). He wants to offer Himself as the sacrifice that will bring life to James and John. But the brothers cannot receive that love in the context given. They want to avoid the unpleasantness of the suffering and death.

The Word of God is not always comforting; it is occasionally a harsh word. But His Word is always given in love. How we respond reveals our heart toward His love. Is our prayer, as Jesus taught, "Thy will be done," or "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you"? We may hear, as the brothers did, an uncomfortable word. How will we respond?

Saturday of 5 Lent April 4, 2020

Read Mark 10:46-52

Mark was apparently not a strong literary type. Greek may have been a second language for him, and the example of his writing found in the Gospel did not show evidence of great learning on his part. Compared to Luke's Greek, in both the Gospel and Acts, Mark's Greek is grammatically simple. He was less interested in setting out a well constructed literary treatise than he was in faithfully transcribing Peter's reminiscences, and presenting the Good News as he had experienced it. So, it is interesting to see how the Holy Spirit inspired so much of what we have read through these five weeks. And as we come to the conclusion of chapter 10 and Mark's introduction to the Passion, it is interesting to see the story in today's reading as a fine literary transition, as well as an uplifting story of our Lord's healing power at work.

As Jesus and the disciples leave Jericho, they pass by Blind Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus is a model of Christian conversion. He exemplifies persistence, opposition to the crowd, and giving up everything to follow Jesus. When Bartimaeus first hears that it is Jesus leading the crowd passing by, he cries out to him. The crowd rebuked the blind man and told him to be quiet. But "he shouted all the more." He was persistent, and he wouldn't be influenced by the crowd. Then he made his most telling commitment. "Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus." His cloak was laid out before him to collect money tossed to him by passers-by. That represented his entire living. He threw everything he had away to come to Jesus.

Bartimaeus came to Jesus and immediately he received his sight and followed our Lord on the way. What a good transition to the Way of Holy Week. Our Lord has prepared us. He is asking that we lay aside our cloak and follow Him. Knowing that Calvary is ahead, will we, with Jesus, say "Not my will, but Thine be done"?

Holy Week Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

Read Luke 19:41-48

The Gospel of Luke makes nice bookends for our meditations. We heard from Luke on Ash Wednesday, and as we begin the Passion Week we hear from the good physician once again. Luke is the only one of the four Gospel writers to record our Lord weeping over Jerusalem. Jesus wept “because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

St. John tells us in the prologue of his Gospel, that “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us” (1:14). And Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). “Thy Word is Truth” (John 17:17). The Word of Truth came to His own, and His own received Him not (John 1:11). It broke the heart of the Lord. He knew what their rejection of Him would mean. Jesus wept.

As we enter the events of this Holy Week, what are the things that break your heart? Are they the things that break the heart of God, or are they the more selfish things, things that we want but cannot have for ourselves? As we look at our city and those who live here, what is our response? Do we weep for those who do not know God? Is our heart broken with the things that break the heart of God?

Mark has shown us through the action sequences, the parables, and the teachings of Jesus, how our Lord has brought restoration and redemption to all who turn to Him in faith. Now, as we move with Mark from these early chapters into the Passion of our Lord, we make the transition with him from personal redemption to our Lord’s sacrifice for the salvation of all mankind.

Jesus is standing on the Mount of Olives. He is gazing at the east gate of Jerusalem. He knows what is ahead. He has accurately predicted His Passion. Will you go with Him now? To Calvary?

Monday of Holy Week April 6, 2020

Read Mark 11:12-26

In the tradition of the Church, the first three days of Holy Week recount the anointing of Jesus on Monday, the cleansing of the Temple on Tuesday, and what came to be known as “Spy Wednesday,” our Lord’s betrayal by Judas, on Wednesday. But in keeping with the readings of the daily lectionary, the cleansing of the Temple, is the one designated for today. We will go with that.

It is interesting that Mark encapsulates his account of the cleansing within the only miracle that Jesus does during His final week. The miracle of the fig tree is not only the sole miracle during Passion Week, it is the only “judgment” miracle recorded in the Gospels. It has always seemed unreasonable to me that Jesus would curse the tree because it had no fruit when, as Mark records, “it was not the season for figs.” But fig trees do produce what are called *taksh*, which are green pods and appear on the branches before the leaves. Peasants would often pick the trees clean before the fruit had an opportunity to bud. It may be that Jesus was looking for the *taksh*, but the pilgrims coming to the feast beat Him to it. Regardless, Peter must have related the story to Mark, and most probably applied it to the event in the Temple. The fig tree has often been seen as a symbol of Israel (cf. Joel 2:21-23), and the cursing of the fig tree by our Lord was symbolic of the inability of Israel to produce fruits of righteousness at the dawn of the Messianic age.

The Lord not only gave the parabolic message of judgment, He also used the encounter with the tree as a teaching tool. When Peter noted the withered tree the following morning, Jesus replied, “Have faith in God.” That is an interesting response to Peter’s exclamation. Jesus, is less interested in their understanding of what happened to the tree than He is in helping them understand and believe in the power of prayer. He says, “whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

Tuesday of Holy Week April 7, 2020

Read Mark 11:27-33

After the cleansing of the Temple, those in “authority” are offended. They ask Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” It is a rhetorical question, because they already “know” the answer! Jesus is not a priest, nor even of the Levitical tribe. Levites were the recognized authority in matters relating to the Temple. He is not a scribe. The scribes were the “accredited” teachers—the true rabbis. And neither was Jesus an elder, that is a member of the Sanhedrin. They were the court of judges who ruled on all matters relating to the Jewish community. Jesus, in effect, had overruled every recognized authority by cleansing the Temple of the moneychangers. From the perspective of the Jewish elite Jesus had no authority in the Temple or the wider community.

But Jesus is a good Jew. He answers their rhetorical question with one of His own: “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?” Like any rhetorical question, the answer should be obvious. It was from heaven, but the “authorities” cannot go there, for “they were afraid of the people.” St. John Chrysostom summarizes the situation for us, saying, “Because they were crafty and said, ‘We do not know,’ He did not say, ‘Neither do I know,’ rather ‘Neither will I tell you.’ . . . And how was it that they did not say the baptism was of men? ‘They feared the people.’ Do you see their perverse heart? In every case they despise God and do all things for the sake of men. On account of men they were not willing to believe in Christ. As a result, all of their evils were engendered to them.”

Mark has already shown us the dangers of following the crowd (meditations in Week 3). And here Jesus offers a presage of the crowds frenzy on Good Friday. Will we stand on the word of the “authorities”? The word of the crowd? Or the Word of Truth? Thy Word is Truth!

Wednesday of Holy Week April 8, 2020

Read Mark 12:1-11

Once again Jesus speaks to a crowd which has gathered around Him. “And he began to speak to them in parables.” This time, though, it is not a teaching lesson, rather an illustration for the Jewish leaders of the deception under which they are living and ruling. The scope of the parable is enlightening for those who were schooled in the Old Covenant. Isaiah laid the foundation for understanding this parable in the fifth chapter of his book of prophecy, and that would not have been missed by the elders. For Isaiah, “the vineyard . . . is the house of Israel,” and Jesus borrows that image for His parable. There is a hedge, a pit for the wine press, and a tower, just like in Isaiah’s song. And the Lord says that the owner (God) “let it out to tenants.”

When the Lord sent servants—the faithful judges and righteous kings, the prophets and John the Baptist—looking for the fruits of righteousness and repentance, they were beaten and killed. Last of all God has sent His beloved Son. “He came to His own, but His own would not receive Him” (John 1:11). Sadly, Jesus points out, they mistakenly believe that the inheritance of the kingdom will be theirs if they kill the Son. By this, our Lord foreshadows His death.

Even if they were blind and deaf to the meaning of the parable, Jesus quotes from a Messianic Psalm: “Have you not read this scripture: ‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’ (118:22)” Though the Son may be rejected by His own people, the Father will exalt Him to the place of glory at His right hand. And that will be “marvelous in our eyes.”

It is the very next night that this prophetic parable began to be fulfilled. Let us look to this Cornerstone, for upon Him the Kingdom rests. He is our Rock and our Salvation.

Maundy Thursday April 9, 2020

Read Mark 14:12-25

What can we say about Maundy Thursday and the institution of the Holy Eucharist? We celebrate this event, not only every year during Holy Week, we celebrate this event every time we gather together to break bread. There are those who would argue that we do “The Lord’s Supper” too often, that it loses its meaning, and has become too familiar. Thus we do it by rote. If this were simply a memorial meal, that might be true. But what our Lord instituted on the night that He was betrayed was a Covenant, a Sacrament, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given in His Love for us that we might be nourished in Him by the Real Presence of His Body and His Blood!

As is his wont in the presentation of this Gospel, Mark is spare in his detail. He gives us the most simple, most straightforward description of the Last Supper. He stuck to the facts. He related that when Jesus consecrated the bread He said, “Take; this is my body.” And when He gave them the wine, He said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” Every time we partake of the bread and the wine of the Holy Eucharist, we not only remember our Lord’s last meal with His disciples, we re-call His Sacramental Presence. And at every Eucharist He renews the Covenant in His Blood. When we celebrate, He truly comes again in power, in grace, and in His all-encompassing Love.

What more can we say about this Feast of the Institution of the Holy Eucharist? We cannot add to it, because it is a limitless gift. But we would be highly remiss if we tried to take anything away from it. He gave us His Body and His Blood as the covenantal grace and hope for all mankind. It is THE sacrament of His Real Presence.

Good Friday April 10, 2020

Read John 13:36-38; 19:38-42

The first of these two Gospel lessons appointed for the daily office today is intended to be read in the morning; the second in the evening. But for purposes of this meditation, I recommend that you read them together. At the Mass of the Presanctified, or the Good Friday liturgy, the lesson appointed is John 19:1-37. These two daily office readings nicely frame the Passion Gospel of the liturgy.

The first of the two lessons is the foretelling of Peter’s denial. But what is interesting for our purposes is Peter’s contention that “I will lay down my life for you.” In the second reading it is two Jewish leaders who claim the crucified body of Jesus. None of our Lord’s disciples is there, and despite Peter’s assurance, he is conspicuously absent.

Yesterday we read that Jesus gave us His Body and His Blood. For us to truly receive Him, He had to die. Without the crucifixion, there could be no resurrection. His sacrifice upon that cross was not simply for Peter and His disciples. It wasn’t just for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. It wasn’t just for that generation, but for us and all who have come before us and will come after us. His death was for all mankind, even those who had lived before the days of our Lord’s earthly ministry.

In the latter of the two readings for today we read that “because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.” In John’s timeline it was the day of preparation for the Passover. But what is significant for us is that there is an implied invitation for us to prepare for receiving the Resurrected Jesus. As we will see tomorrow, Jesus descends into hell and releases the captives. He will yet rise from the tomb and greet the women and the disciples. Will we be ready to greet Him, too?

Holy Saturday

April 11, 2020

Read Mark 15:42-47

The message for today is that it's never too late. If we have gotten this far and have not recognized the great love that is made manifest in Mark's Gospel, that is in the Word—Thy Word is Truth—now is the time to turn to Him, “and immediately” ask Him to renew His covenant with you. The Good News of Holy Saturday is that the way to God is ALWAYS open. The curtain has been torn in two. The gates of hell have been destroyed. He has led the captives to freedom. Nothing stands between us and our God, except our own fear, reluctance, and disobedience.

The appointed reading today is not reflective of the events of Holy Saturday. In the Apostle's Creed, our baptismal statement of faith, we declare that after His Crucifixion, Jesus descended into hell. The reading above is about Jesus being laid in the tomb. And the other lessons appointed for this day are about rest. But the Church teaches that Jesus did not rest on that day, rather “He descended into hell.” We have this teaching from 1 Peter 3:18-20; 4:6 and Ephesians 4:8-10 among many others. This is an important doctrine, that has sadly become lost or buried in our modern culture. As King David sang in Psalm 24, “Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!” The gates of hell have been broken, lifted up, and the King of Glory has come in. Our Lord has completed His triumph. He has conquered, sin and hell, and in His Resurrection “death is swallowed up in victory!” (1 Cor. 15:54).

This is the Good News of Holy Saturday. This is, as Mark declares in the first verse of his Gospel, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The rest of the story must be lived out in our lives. Mark learned it, and lived it. He knew the reconciling Love of Jesus. And he has invited us to join him.