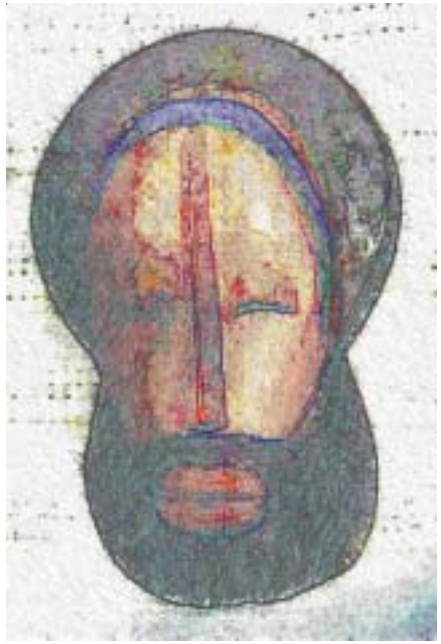

Homilies
1998-1999

Reverend Ron Trojcak

About the Author

Father Ron Trojcak studied music at the University of Illinois (1952-55). In 1953 he entered the seminary at Notre Dame, moved to St. Mary of the Lake seminary in 1955, and was ordained in 1968. From 1968 to 1969, he completed a Masters in Theology at the McCormick Theological Seminar. In 1970 he came Canada to undertake Ph. D. at St. Michael's in Toronto.

In 1972 he came to King's College in London Ontario, where he remained for over two decades, teaching theology and serving as College Chaplain.

In 1980 he went to Lusaka Zambia on a one year leave of absence. It is there that his love affair with African art began. He first purchase was the mother and child by Zambian artist Eddie Mumba. In the winter of 1996 and again in 1997, an exhibition of his collection was hosted at the library of King's College. Some of these pages are decorated with this art.

Father Trojcak retired as Chaplain in 2001. He continues to teach at King's College as an Emeritus Professor.

Some of Father Trojcak's other sermons can be found on the web at www.ronsweb.ca including voice recording in mp3 format.

Transcribed by Paula Sinclair and Rosy Pellarin from taped recordings of Father Ron Trojcak's sermons.

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Ordinary Time

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Believing in spite of

1st Sunday of Advent
Is. 2.1-5; Rom. 13.11-14; Mt. 24.37-44.

I have a suspicion that the liturgical year worked much better when we were an agricultural society. That is, the liturgical seasons, Advent, Lent, Christmas, and Easter worked better when what was being celebrated liturgically resonated with the natural environment. We know that Christmas was taken over from a Roman festival, celebrated on December 25, after the winter solstice, when the sun started "coming back" and the days were getting longer. And of course, Easter is obvious: the celebration of new life. And I think that this resonance with nature, is one of the reasons why the liturgical year is somewhat lost on us.

Now, is all this just a lament for times long past and gone? I don't think so, because one of the things that is present in the liturgical and natural year is that, together, they were supposed to amplify or echo the experience of faith, of believing. Speaking for myself, most of the time, faith is experienced as enormous darkness. For me, and many people, faith is a matter of real struggle, of hanging on, believing in spite of. And so, it is really useful to have some kind of place or event where you can say that there is an experiential dimension to this reality that we say we believe in. And all of this is brought to mind by the occurrence of Advent.

What is Advent about? Well, we will be hearing from the Prophets all during the four weeks of Advent. Isaiah is going to be the leading one. The Prophets and even this passage from Romans, and the passage from Matthew all have this much in common: they talk about emptiness. The whole prophetic experience was experience of emptiness: something is not here; swords are not beaten into plough shares; swords are precisely used for their original intention. It is the genius of the Prophets, who looked at the world and said; "something is missing, there is an emptiness here". And of course, as

we read the lives of the saints that experience is a constant there, that we sort of cheapen when we so easily talk about the “dark night of the souls”. When the mail doesn’t arrive on time or my Master Card bill is miscalculated - then we have dark nights of the soul. That is not what John of the Cross was talking about. He was talking about an absolute sense of desolation. All you have to do is to read him. And that is what Advent points to. Because we are so removed from all this I would like to take the four Sundays of Advent and talk about emptiness from a variety of perspectives.

Today, to start with, I suggest that the fact that emptiness is an anomaly for us, at least most of the time. We are not empty, an most especially during advent. Go to Sears, go to Wal Mart, the place is full of people, of goods, of music. The parking lots are full. Everything is full. Our schedules are full. There is no emptiness at all in our lives. And so, just to start things off I would like to ask the question: where is there some real experience of emptiness? Maybe it would be also useful to ask: why are the parking lots full? Why are the department stores doing 33% of their business in this month before Christmas? Why this sense of plentitude, exuberance, dare I say it, excess? Nature abhors a vacuum. So whether it is physical nature or psychological nature, we can’t stand emptiness, something not being there which we expect or desire to be there.

The essence of the emptiness of Advent, is that we are supposed to be waiting. In Simone Weil’s wonderful phrase, We are “waiting for God”. But, in fact, we are not waiting for God. We are too busy. We have too much stuff going on. Waiting for God.. I mean Advent... is a non-event. Two weeks ago, I somewhat reluctantly, attended a Christmas party at my workplace. Then, some of my neighbours have already had their Christmas lights up for three weeks. And well before the first Sunday of Advent, there were Christmas trees in some of the houses on my block. Why? All this activity is something to fill us up, perhaps a response to the threat of boredom. Is that it? I don’t know. But surely a central problem is that we have to be active and, thereby in control. So, if there is even a suggestion of a gap, of a sense of emptiness, I must rush in immedi-

ately and fill it with something, like buying Christmas tree lights or decorating the shrubbery in front of the house. Or making sure that I have three hundred presents for everybody on my list.

If any of this is true, we may well ask: are we ready, are we even prepared to wait for God? To be empty... so that we can be filled, and not by our own nervousness at the thought of a vacuum, or the threat of a void that we have to fill it in by ourselves or by all our stuff, my stuff, stuff, stuffing. We are not empty. So, in order to really participate in Advent, the first thing to do is to find out where we are already filled up, to do some interior excavation. Why this frenetic, passionate, intensity in filling up with stuff? By asking this question, we can , I hope, begin to create apertures, cracks, crevices in this overfull life, in this overfull world, that we above all, in North America, live in.

A small incident that strikes me, that perhaps, may not resonate with too many people, but I ask that you indulge me. I remember going into the grocery store in Lusaka Zambia, a long time ago. I saw this large this room ,full of shelves, with only two onions in the whole room. For us who have thirty-two kinds of Corn Flakes, it was really an uncanny experience, to go into that room and find nothing but two rather sad looking onions. And anyone, who has ever lived in the third world, knows that this is not an anomalous event. I believe that there are all kinds of unrecognized places in our lives, where we could do some evacuation., create some empty spaces. And because we are also insulated from nature, and we do not have that kind of natural resonance for what we say we believe., we can, by questioning ourselves, come to discover that we in fact live in a culture that radically wants to resist any sense of emptiness. Perhaps above all, we resist any sense, or even prospect of psychic emptiness. In one way or another, we are being constantly told that each or us can pull our own strings, that we can be our own best friend, that we can be in control, in charge of our lives, not to say, our worlds. Emptiness? Who needs emptiness? And yet without emptiness, where is there room for God? The question is very simple: without emptiness, where is there room for God?

And I know that, year after year, I come to Christmas and look at the preceding four weeks and ask; “what happened? I think I missed something”. Well, I hope, this year I do not miss it and I hope that you don’t either.

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A time to reflect on absence

2nd Sunday of Advent
Is. 11.1-10; Rom. 15.4-9; Mt. 3.1-12

Last Sunday, I suggested a theme that pervades all the readings in Advent, and that makes all kinds of sense of the season. It is the notion of emptiness, the experience of absence. I suggest that the problem for many of us is that our lives are too full. In fact, we boast of having such full lives. This is of course, terribly misleading because no matter how full our lives are, with whatever, it is impossible to escape some sense of emptiness, that, at some level, something is missing, is absent. It is simply part of the human condition. Something is not here that we believe, ought to be here, whether it is another academic degree, more money, more power, more friends, more people to love me, whatever. We are all dogged by these, and all kinds of other absences. And so, the problem of Advent becomes the process of trying to sort out one form of emptiness from another, because there are all kinds of emptiness, all kinds of absences. Although I believe that absence, of some sort, is part of being a human being, it makes all the difference in the world as to what you feel is absent or is missing. The process of locating, and the locale itself of one's emptiness is therefore crucial. And this is what Advent is: a time for us to do that locating. The music that we'll hear at Communion time is a prayer to God to help us to be penitent. Penitent about what? Our misplaced emptinesses, about the fact that we endure and even seek to maintain, the wrong absences.

So with all this as preface, we go to the readings. What all three of the readings focus on, in quite different ways, is the matter of relationships. From the Christian point of view, or the Jewish point of view, the prime emptiness is found in the area of relationships. So you get this extraordinary vision from one of the Messianic texts out of Isaiah about wolves living with, rather than eating lambs, and lions lying down beside young calves. It is the vision of the

peaceable kingdom. What is going on is clearly a reference to how I am related to those people who threaten me, who are my enemies, and those who are excluded in some way. This Isaian vision is what God is going to realize through the Messiah whose task will be to remove those boundaries of antagonism, and thereby to help us to focus on the boundaries of peaceable and amiable relationships. In a word, the text from Isaiah is to enjoin us to think about is what is absent and who is absent. That indeed, was the whole project of Jesus. We get it reflected in Paul talking in the letter to the Romans. He says that Christ became the servant of the circumcised in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs. I ask your indulgence for a couple of minutes for some fairly technical exegesis of this text. What does this mean ,that Christ had become the servant of the circumcised etc., etc. We want to say that Christ (which is simply the word for Messiah in Greek) occupied the position of trying to talk to his fellow Jews about the boundaries that they had built among themselves to distinguish themselves from all the other people who were not Jews, and from their fellow Jews as well (e.g., lepers, sinners, women, etc.) Historically, in Jesus' day, some Jews had done what every human group seems to do; in order to preserve some sense of what and who they are. They radically differentiated themselves from everybody else, making themselves superior and everyone else, inferior. So Jesus becomes a servant of the circumcised, this means the Jews, acting to accomplish what He believed was the truth of God. Now, what was that truth? It was that God might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs. What were those promises? The promises made to Abraham were that, through Abraham's offspring, all of humanity will be brought together and thus be brought to God. You have the identical notion reflected in the passage from Mathew wherein John the Baptist says to the Pharisees and Sadducees, these super Jews, that God can make children of Abraham out of stones. In other words, John was telling them that all that distinguishes them, that they thought made them God's people in some special way, are irrelevant because God is able to make children of Abraham, that is to bring people together, without their having all those distinguishing hallmarks of Judaism.

So, this raises all kinds of problems. Let me name just a few. How does one coordinate, for example, one's desire to be open to one's immediate circle, one's family, one's students, one's colleagues, without, by dint of lack of energy or lack of insight, simply excluding the rest of the world. How do you do that? I don't know. Because I know all kinds of people who exert enormous amounts of energy in fixing up their relationship with their immediate environment, while at the same time, ignoring the rest of the world. And on the other hand, I know all kinds of people who are extraordinarily concerned about the starving North Vietnamese and Sudanese and who are utter monsters in their domestic situations. We don't seem to be able to bring this off this universalizing or our community very well.

And yet, what we get out of these texts, is that, when we are available to God, God makes us permeable to everyone, everywhere. How does that happen? What does it feel like? I don't know. I know that the felt sense of the absence of that universal connectedness, is itself the beginnings of hearing the Kingdom of God, of listening to Jesus. The fact that that absence is a problem for me, is itself a first step. It is the signal that I am on the way at toward cultivating the sense of multiple absences.

And now we can look at that other issue, which I find personally, extraordinarily problematic. I would love to be able to just turn some switch in myself or in the world so all this stuff would happen. I would love to control the situation in such a way that I could manage to destroy all those barriers whereby I exclude others, or worse, make them invisible. I would love to be able to do that. The problem is, of course, that I cannot do that without violating the freedom of the other people, in which case the whole thing collapses in on itself. Remember the temptation scene at the beginning of the Gospels of Mathew and Luke, where Jesus is out in the desert, hungry, and has this thought – "if only I turn these rocks into bread, people would go wild with enthusiasm at the prospect of unlimited free lunches...and breakfasts and suppers. So that when I tell them, 'repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand', they would fall over themselves in an orgy or self-serving, and so phony repentance. But at what expense?

By removing their freedom. Jesus would be blackmailing them into the Kingdom. But, the wonderful thing about Jesus is that he did not buy into that. He did not coerce people, even if they would be happily coerced, in order to bring about the Kingdom of God. And that is the of problem. The world is full of managers. Pinochet, Milosevic, Hitler...the list is depressingly long, were all managers, very anxious to build some tidy organization. At what cost?

So, we call on Advent as a time to simply reflect on absence. What should I experience in my life that is missing? Where is the emptiness in me? There is plenty of emptiness, of all kinds in our world, all kinds of absences. We are here to try to pray together, to clarify and transform our absences for us. God, help us to feel those absences that Jesus, and the other prophets felt. Help us to be empty in His way rather than that way we are typically empty.

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To recognize that emptiness

3rd Sunday of Advent
Is. 35.1-6a, 10; Jas. 5.7-10; Mt. 11.2-11.

Before I begin with what I'd like to focus on today, just a word about this passage from Mathew. What is going on with this question from the disciple John the Baptist sent to Jesus, asking if he were the coming one, the Messiah? Jesus answers by giving a line from the Prophets, describing a time when God is going to return Israel from exile, to establish Israel as the light of the nations, and have them be the agents of salvation for everybody. And all this is going to be marked by signs: the blind will see, the lame will walk and deaf will hear. The list proceeds in ascending order of improbability: the dead are raised, and, most extraordinary, the poor have the good news brought to them. The point is that when all those things happen, the human community is going to be re-knit. So it is not just a matter of little, disparate miracles thrown out here and there. The whole point of all these miracles is to reconcile us human beings to each other. (Anybody who has lived with handicapped people in one way or another knows how extraneous they are made to feel. And being dead, of course, is being altogether extraneous). But being poor and having nobody paying attention to you is to be even more extraneous than being dead.

But now, I would like to continue examining this business of emptiness and Advent, and in doing so, to suggest a couple of cultural facts. There is a book published a few months ago called "The Argumentative Society" or "The Argumentative Culture". Its thesis is that basically that's the way we human beings are dealing with each other today, i.e., antagonistically, on a very large scale. For years, we've been called a litigious society and the lawyers among us know that to sue is the immediate response to any type of mishap. But the impulse to see the other as enemy or threat seems to be strengthening, and this is occurring even domestically. I just got involved with a mar-

ried couple in the past week, and as I listened to them, I was amazed at the sense of competition between them. Everything became an issue for one-upping the other. **But,** are we different now? Are we more litigious? Are we more argumentative today than people have been in the past? Well, I think it is true that, because we are more individualistic, we probably are more litigious. So much of the social cement, of all sorts, that has held us human beings together, in one way or another, and however tenuously or artificially, has broken down. It's a regular complaint that we never get together. Another telling book title has it that today, we even bowl alone. Everybody is busily engaged in their own little process. This is further exemplification of this sense of isolation from each other and the isolation expressed above all, in our being contentious. What I'd like to propose is that this is a form of emptiness; that this is expressive or symptomatic rather, of a form of emptiness that is well worth examining.

Many of the prayers in the weekdays of Advent begin with this line: "Lord , we are nothing without you". That is an extraordinary line. It sounds like hyperbole – pious excess. However, we say we believe that that is literally the case. We are nothing without You. But I don't think that is our self-consciousness by any means. It certainly is not mine. I'm rushing to the trough and sharpening my elbows, to mix my metaphors, as quickly and as ardently as anyone. And the question is: why? What underlies this profound suspicion that we have of each other? What lies at the root of this contentiousness, of our pervasive sense that life is essentially an enormous and unending competition? We are afraid that, if somebody has more than we do, they are going to get a leg up on us. We are going to be in trouble if someone else has more brains, more money, more power, of one form or another, than we do. All this, of course, testifies to a radically solitary or solipsistic notion of oneself: I am all by myself and I have to look out for number one because nobody else will. Now, juxtapose this notion with the first line of this prayer: "Lord, we are nothing without you". I think our emptiness is highly ambiguous. From a religious point of view, I don't believe I am nothing without God. Simultaneously, I also believe I have to get in there and fight

for my place in the sun — a bigger place than anybody else's if I can manage it. But the real emptiness ought to be the sense that this competitive and aggressive self, is not the authentic one, the God-willed one.. And to be content with that kind of emptiness. You see, if I were content with that kind of emptiness then all this litigiousness , this contentiousness, this fear that somebody's going to get ahead of me in one way or another would dissipate. But the sense of competition is, in fact pervasive: my neighbour's lawn is greener than mine — it runs from the most trivial to the most profound sense that if I don't fight for myself I'm going to get stomped, I'm going to get suffocated, I'm going to get eclipsed absolutely. It is easy to hear this, especially in intimate relationships. But, it happens over the whole scale. The judiciary hearing in the House of Representatives is more evidence, I believe, of the same thing. The self-righteousness of some of those gentlemen oozes out of the TV screen. And what is that all about? The fear that they are nobody, but that they can always appeal to our founding fathers, the constitution, some abstraction that is going to fill them up and give them a club with which to batter somebody else. It's an extraordinary spectacle. I recommend it to you. If you have a sort of masochistic streak it is worth an hour or so or your time. But watch them. And look at the expressions on their faces and all this puffery about their heavy hearts and knotted stomachs. There is glee and vindictiveness of a very high and terrifying order at the topmost level of government of the most powerful country of the world. In face of this we ask again: What is going on? Where is emptiness? What is emptiness? A sense of ourselves ultimately. Our sense that if we don't construct ourselves altogether there is not going to be anything there. And the suspicion is that we know that we cannot really achieve this self-construction, which suspicion adds layer and layer of disguise, camouflage, self-deception and evasion.

So, there is emptiness upon emptiness. Once more, Advent is the time to consider emptiness; to be brought to really believe that as the texts say, without God we truly are nothing. And there is no magical step from that moment of acknowledgement to feeling that we really are in God, and so we do not have to be contentious or argumentative or to fight or compete or be suspicious of each other because God is going to sustain us. No, there is no magical step.

There is only the arduous work of thought and prayer, above all what we used to call asceticism, because that step into the darkness of faith is not going to happen automatically. There is no book I can read, no pill I can take, no sermon I can either give or hear that is going to supply the arduous effort to come to terms with myself before God, and to recognize that emptiness. Because the very recognition of the emptiness, you see, is itself the beginning of its filling. The very recognition of the emptiness is itself Grace. Because we can only sustain that kind of awareness if it is, in turn, sustained by the belief that we really are in the hands of God. He will not abandon us, the One for whom we wait.

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Love is not a feeling

4th Sunday of Advent
Is. 10-14; Rom. 1.1-7; Mt.1.18-24

Today I would like to say some more about this theme that I proposed for Advent, namely, that of emptiness, of absence. I want to talk about what I think is the most profound emptiness. But first I want to remind you again that there is a terrible ambiguity about that notion of emptiness. We who think our lives are so full so much of the time, yet are often aware, at a very deep level that they are really empty. And so we have to be really careful when we talk about emptiness.

Now the deepest emptiness, I would like to propose, has to do with the mystery of love. But the first thing that we North Americans need to be reminded of, is this idiocy which holds that love is a feeling. Love is not a feeling. To call love a feeling is the same as mistaking the shadow for the reality that casts the shadow. Feelings accompany every response that we have to anything. So to say that love is simply a feeling, existing all by itself, is to empty it of all substance, meaning, possibility of being talked about or thought about.

And now I would like to make a proposal, which I think clarifies why love is so problematic for us human beings. It is very simple; I believe that all of us, at very deep parts of our lives, believe that we are unlovable, at a level that we do not recognize, acknowledge, address or think about. If every one of us looked at our past.... whose parents loved them perfectly? Whose parents did not, to some extent, induce a sense of shame, unworthiness, or at least confusion about who we are? And all of this expresses itself in this terrible suspicion that we have, that we really are not lovable. And there is the converse problem, wherein one is so showered with attention, praise, apparent affection, for which one senses there is no warrant, that the same suspicion of being truly lovable, arises. Yet, there is nothing we need so much to live, as to believe that we are truly loved. So there is

the problem. We can't live without love. And yet, we believe that we do not deserve to be loved. And I think that this is what gives rise to all of those profound distortions that go by the name of love, and that are so characteristic of us. Often enough when we say or hear it said to us, "I love you", what we are saying or hearing, is "I need you". I hope to show that love, as an expression of neediness, is an inadequate way of understanding what love is about and, moreover, that it creates enormous problems. It gives rise to love disguised as a desire to control, to manipulate, which is true of all of us. Then there is the desire to compete, as if love were some exhaustible quantum, so that if I don't get to the trough fast enough, I will lose out. And so what goes by the name of love is, often enough, a race to see who is going to get love first. Probably the most obvious distorted form is love as a desire to possess – literally possess the beloved. Above all, if we could manage it, to possess the freedom of another human being. If we look at all of this, and try to filter it through our own experience of people saying that they love us, and our saying that we love them, it accounts for the peculiar fact that love creates more misery than anything else in our lives: what we rightly call heartbreak. And so, it is not surprising that such a great Christian as Dostoyevsky would speak of love as "that harsh and dreadful thing". Because real love demands that we look through all these artificial forms, all these degenerate, distorted forms that we say are love but really are not. It is to see that they really are an expression of neediness growing, out of the basic sense that we do not deserve to be loved.

And so if we talk about emptiness here is where all the ambiguity of emptiness comes into fullest play. Because if, at any moment, we do feel that we can control, or successfully compete, successfully control the other, then emptiness seems to dissipate. But that has no duration, of course. Those moments are fleeting at best, no matter how deep our desire to have them last forever. And so Christmas, is a great celebration of emptiness in that it clarifies all of these distorted, disguised, camouflaged, substitutes for love. For what goes by the name of love is, at least in my case, and for an inordinately a large percentage of the time – an expression of need. I need an audience, I need someone to say that I am important. I need someone to

reassure me that I am not worthless. I need to stand on a stage and be noticed. And how much of our loving consists of that effort; or other pathological forms, whereby we become infinite appetites for what seems to be love. We become two legged black holes, which absorb all of the attention and all of the concern that we can somehow garner for ourselves.

Is this is a dismal and artificially darkened picture of the human condition? Not in my experience. Perhaps, in yours, it might be. Yet I would still propose that these are issues well worth thinking about. Because unless we recognize this we cannot talk about Christmas, which says that love is basically the total concern for the other, independent of what benefits I may accrue from the other. Love that we talk about at Christmas is, putatively at least, a gift. And gifts are very difficult to give and receive because of our belief in our unlovability. It is a wonderful statement of our profound incapacity to get hold of this, when we talk about gifts as being free gifts. Is there any gift that is real that is not free?

What the gift of the birth of Jesus brings us is a whole new possibility - namely, that of an honest belief that we are loved despite ourselves. That love really is a gift. And because of it I can truly love, to the extent that I grow up, transcend my own neediness. So I can really attend wholly to the other - charity without a hook. Christmas reveals the most mysterious, profound, yet necessary form of love – the only form of love.

So today, we can talk about preparing for Christmas in the context of the baptism which we are about to celebrate. What happens when somebody gets baptized, unless it is just sheer convention, something that everybody does? On the part of the parents and the godparents and the rest of us, baptism is recognition that these children are gifts to us, given to us. In a very real sense, they are not ours. Again, the passion to possess is broken by our statement that this child is going to be baptized, is going to be reborn in God. And so it is very important that we, the parents and godparents and the rest of us, know that this child is entrusted to all of us. They are ours. They don’t belong to the parent, they belong to God. And it is our job

and the parent's job to somehow persuade that child that they really are loved by God, not just by us, who so often use our children to possess, to control, to compete with, to draw attention to ourselves. In other words, baptism is the great act of faith that we cannot love well enough, but that God can. And it is an act of freedom, freedom from the neurotic hope that we all have, that anyone of us can supply all the love our children need. We can't, and the empirical evidence that we don't is overwhelming, and it is available to anyone who wants to introspect for more than five minutes.

So what we are about to do is very important. We are doing it in the presence of this man who says "this is my life for you, without hooks. Simply because of my own freedom, because of my own generosity, because I grew up believing that God loves me. And therefore I can be there for you. Not just for my sake". So, this is the context of what we are about to do.

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Everybody is my family

Christmas Day

Several years ago, after considerable struggle, I gave up the attempt to use Christmas homilies as a time to scream about the secularization of the feast. I gave up not so much out of exhaustion , but because I think that in the world at large, the battle is over. Eaton's, Wal -Mart, Hallmark Cards, they've won. They have taken the field. And so it is useless to mount some kind of battle against an enemy that is already victorious. So today, I would like to consider a couple of ways of looking at Christmas that have arisen from this secularized world, and to see if we cannot retrieve them for us who would like to retain and even deepen our sense of the religious significance of this day.

So I propose looking at two statements that we hear over and over again about Christmas and see whether they have some kind of religious valence. The first is: "Christmas is For Families". The second is: "Christmas is For Children". So, I would like to take them in turn. The first one is in a sense easier to dispatch because I think that the experience of most of us is that, although we may want to turn into The Waltons on December 25th, we continue to be The Simpsons. It really doesn't work most of the time. We don't suspend history for that 24 hour period one day a year, so that all the hurts and disappointments and frustrations and offences that have made up so much of our family living, whether intentional or unintentional, can simply disappear, evanesce, only to magically to reappear on December 26th fully invigorated. It does not work. It does not work for a number of reasons, some of them extraordinarily important. I think it does not work first of all...and this has religious significance...because we expect the family to do what only God can do: to love us as we are. Because the fact is, none of us know who we are or who the other is. Even with the best intention in the world we want to love, yet we constantly miss each other.

And so it is possible to look at Christmas as a time to twig our memories that “Ah yes only God can do that, only God knows who I am”. But there is another level of significance in that phrase “Christmas is Family Time” that is even more directly related to the feast. And we can approach that by asking: who is my family? This is a matter that was addressed over and over to Jesus. “Your mother and your brothers are looking for you.’ And Jesus said “Who are they? Who are my mother, my brother and my sister?” It is scary to see how consistently Jesus downplays the significance of the biological unit we call the family. The way that Jesus himself had in mind in discounting, in a certain way, the biological family, was to say: I am brother to everyone. Everyone is my family. And this is really important, especially in the latter part of the 20th century, where the family is clearly beleaguered. There are even some people who are proposing that the family is passé. This tight little island that we attempt to erect in a fundamentally inhospitable world. At least that is the way it seems: the family is the place where we erect bulwarks against all those outsiders in order to protect ourselves. But, what happens with Jesus is that he says “no, you have to look at this all over again. The family is everybody”. And so, when we say that Christmas is a family celebration, that is religiously significant. But we very badly need to know what we mean when we say “the family”.

The second item is a little more problematic: Christmas is for children. What does that mean? I think it means that we would like to shut off the harsh realities of life as we know it and to say that Walt Disney had it right. Everybody is young, everybody is beautiful, everything can be set to music and it will all end happily. There are no sharp edges in life. Life is basically lived on rock candy mountain, if we only awaken to the fact. Christmas is for children. The problem here is similar to the problems we saw in Christmas being for the family. But the biggest problem with this second claim is that it infantilises us. Life is not simply a non-stop satisfaction of our appetites, whatever they are, and should not be. And if it were, imagine what we would all look like. We would have a worse time getting on with each other than we already do. All you have to do is examine the world’s landscape to see how badly we are bringing that off. Again

Oscar Wilde's great remark about there being two sadness' in life: one is not getting everything you want and the second is getting everything you want, is very much to the point. So, is there any way we can rescue that notion of Christmas being a suspension of reality for one day, a kind of soft-edged and highly unreal view of things? Here too we can appeal to the New Testament, because over and over again we have this mysterious language, such as, "unless you become like a child you cannot enter the Kingdom of God". What does that mean? Has Jesus out-Disneyed Disney in making that proposal? I don't think so. The Gospels are neither for, by nor about children. Jesus is making that statement to adults and therefore calling on adults to reflect about what there is about being a child that we have lost. And I think that it is true to say that one of things that children do with infinitely greater ease and grace than the rest of us do, is simply to take everybody as they are. This is embedded in all kinds of fairy tales The Emperor's New Clothes is my favorite instance of that clear sightedness of children. Children initially have the capacity to accept anyone regardless of gender or colour or language, simply as another person.

Growing up, of course, involves constructing a filtration system, whereby we learn to diminish or even deny, the co-humanity of other people, or other groups of people. And so, the recognition and the demolition of that filtration system is very much to the point for us today. Yes, Christmas can be a children's thing if we know what we are talking about; if we are not talking about the infantilisation of our lives. As a footnote, the problem here is that often enough that the Church has been guilty of that telling us that the only thing we need to learn is to obey. This is, of course, what you need to teach a little kid. At least for a while. So, Christmas can be for children if we understand this as meaning the re-appropriation of that capacity not to discriminate on all kinds of grounds, such as that of wardrobe, or income, or level of intelligence, or color or language and if we come to

see everybody else as simply another human being to whom I am called, and for whose presence I must make room in my heart.

I hope we have come a way from talking about Christmas as a family thing, or as it being for children. And if I can use a military metaphor, perhaps we can hoist secularist understanding of this day on its on petard. Yes, this is what God has called us to, in this man Jesus, who said, " everybody is my family, for I was naked and you clothed me, I was in jail and you visited me, I was a stranger and you took me in." And to be a child is to refuse to insist on one's own privilege, not to insist on perks that one's position would require, but simply to take the other into my heart as they are. If we had done that then we have come really close to understanding what a real Merry Christmas is all about.

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Nobody is dismissible

Holy Family
Sir. 3.2-6, Col. 3.12-21; Mt. 13-15, 19-23.

For a change, the readings today offer an embarrassment of riches. There are all kinds of directions in which one can move from any one of the three readings. But, before I launch into what I would like to talk about, just a comment on this business of wives being subject to their husbands. Now we know that Paul, in the letter to the Galatians, said that in Christ there was no longer male and female. Thus, the women who joined the Jesus movement started behaving in the wider community as man's equals, and this, in an intensely patriarchal society. And because the followers of Jesus were subject to all kinds of criticism anyway on political grounds - saying that God is King rather than Caesar - they were really under suspicion. And we also know that fairly early on, some of the Roman emperors started persecuting the members of the Jesus movement. So what scholars have proposed, is that the person who wrote the letter to the Colossians is really saying is: "ladies cool it - if we draw too much attention to ourselves, then the cops are going to get mad and then we will all get into trouble". What is going on, in other words, is clearly a withdrawal from the position staked out by Jesus, and noted by Paul, in which the male/female superior/inferior positions were obliterated. But this proved to be politically and socially hazardous.

So, we have this regression, all of which suggests that you can't read the Bible with your brain turned off. We Catholics who have just re-discovered the Bible not so many year ago, need to have some sense of what it is we do when we read these texts. Yes, they are the inspired word of God. But, what does that mean and how does that equip us?

And this problem creates an opening for what I would like to talk about. How do you judge that this text is superannuated? That wives are not supposed to be subject or submissive to their husbands.

What criteria can we use, then, to say this text is a regression, a decline, from the news about human relationships which Jesus not only announced but embodied? And these questions can lead to a question about the Holy Family. What made the Holy Family holy? Well let's try to look at that by looking at the regular family. I think it was the Russian playwright Chekhov who said all happy families are boring, it is only the troubled families who are interesting. And it is from this perspective that he wrote The Cherry Orchard, The Three Sisters, etc. Well, I think that if he had looked a little more closely, he would have realized that there are no happy families. There are no families which are non-dysfunctional to one extent or another. We do not want to believe this; I do not want to believe this, but I think that this is the case. The reasons for that are not very difficult to discover. We say that the family is supposed to be constituted by love. But what is love? Love is to seek the welfare of the other. OK, then, who is the other? And furthermore, what conduces to the welfare of the other? Now I came very late to parenthood. There is a certain advantage in that. I don't know what worse mistakes I might have made in my attempt to raise my kids had I begun earlier in my live. The only thing that I am sure of is that mistakes were made. Why? Because I do not know how to love, point one. Point two, I am so hobbled by my own needs that , even if I did know how to love, I would not be able to bring it off successfully, totally successfully. And I think this state of affairs, is simply the human condition. Period. Full stop.

So what problems does this raise for the family, what is the family to do? Let me make some proposals, all in the light of trying to get at what makes the Holy Family holy. I think that the very first thing that parents should do, is to recognize that although parents may know genetically what their children are, they do not know who they are as human beings. All they can do is try to create an environment where this little kid feels that it is safe to live in this world. I think that that is the absolutely basic thing: to persuade their kids that life is livable. Now, how do you do that for a six week old, or a two year old, or a ten year old, or a fifteen year old? I don't know. But I know that that has to be the basic item on the agenda. Why? Be-

cause if the kid is convinced that the world is not safe for them then they are fatally hobbled. She or he is crippled at the outset. They are not going to be able to live, which is to say, to grow. So let's assume that that is the first job and that, secondly, that job is never perfectly done. This process thereby creates a kid who is at least wary of the world, and of other people. OK, there is a difference between a sensible wariness and a pathological form of wariness. And I would like to propose that none of us fully escape some degree of the pathological wariness, the fundamental distrust of other people and of life. As a reflex of that sense we have to keep protecting ourselves. Look out for number one.

Now, it is a fascinating thing to come at this from quite a different direction. Let us say that the job of parenting is to convince the child that they are loved. This is slightly different from saying that the world is a secure place to live. The belief that they are loved gives kids the wherewithal, the energy, to make a way through and in the world. But here we meet a North American problem. How can you both convince a kid that they are loved and not at the same time somehow persuade them that the world and other people are there for their taking? We talk about the "Me Generation." What has generated the "Me Generation"? It originates in the belief that the world is there for me, and therefore I have to get whatever is mine before anyone else gets a chance to take it away from me. We see this belief acted out over and over among the students here, in their indifference to other people's feelings, in the violence that they routinely work on themselves by the language that they employ when talking about each other. I am astonished, I'm dumbfounded, I'm terrified sometimes by the language I routinely hear from the students. And the question is why do people do such hurtful things? A really good question.

All right, if then we can upend Chekhov and say that all families are dysfunctional to one degree or another, what makes the Holy Family holy? The fact that they gave this child the sense that the world was a safe place for him to live in, yes, and that they gave the kid the sense that he was loved. Yes, but then, the mysterious and

dumbfounding next step, which seems to be characteristic of Jesus (and this gets us back to the criterion for judging that this thing from the Colossians can be radically criticized). Jesus not only had the sense that he was loved, but he made the transition to an astonishingly different sense, which enabled him to persuade all the people around Him, that they were loved.

I would like to suggest that Jesus' achievement moved across an unbridgeable gap. That is, I don't think that of ourselves, we can move from "I am loved," to "we are loved". I think it is precisely the miracle of Grace that makes that transition., namely that I do not see myself as privileged and therefore able to treat anybody else with contempt or less concern. And this is certainly the hallmark of Jesus' behaviour, that he treated no one contemptuously. "This man eats with sinners." "The prostitutes and tax collectors are going to make it into the Kingdom of Heaven before all you religious high types". Now what enabled Jesus to say such things? To spend so much time talking to women and handicapped people as well as talking to the wealthy and the religiously privileged. I propose to you that it was his awareness that God has no favourites, that we are loved. Not just that I am loved, but that we are loved and that "we" is an all-inclusive we.

Now look at the world today. Today there are 24 full-scale wars going on, where people are killing each other with munitions. What constitutes a war, whether within a family, or between nations, but the incapacity to understand the world as "we"? That it is we, who are loved. And what I want to say is that we cannot effect that awareness by ourselves. We cannot lift ourselves by our own boot straps. Indeed we have a very hard time bringing off those two other very foundational things: assuring the kids that they can be secure in the world, and thereby enabling them to come to the conviction that they are loved. But the next step is the miracle: to universalize those convictions. And that is what the Feast of the Holy Family is all about. I do not think that Mary and Joseph did this on their own steam. But this is the Grace of God, that somehow they raised a kid who could continue to grow into and live out of his consciousness that

we all are loved. So there is no separable I. There is only we, always we.

All this does not mean some kind of homogenization or the collapse of everybody's self worth into some kind of great indiscriminate stew. Rather, it is to say that I am I only insofar as I am connected with you, with God and simultaneously with everybody else.

Why is this important to understand? Because this is the meaning of this feast today and it is the context within which we can hear these texts. But it is important too, because this is so terrifying a prospect, so difficult of achievement, that I don't even want to look very closely at it, because I don't know how to bring it off. I don't know how to bring it off so that the Trojcak that I know is the Trojcak that is absolutely connected with everybody else. And yet, that is the kingdom of God, that is heaven: that nobody is dismissible, nobody is expendable, nobody. And so, we can pray to Jesus, Mary and Joseph to that end. That we make ourselves available to that kind of transformation by God.

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So that is what forgiveness is

Mary Mother of God
Lect. For Sun. and Sol: Numb. 6.22-27; Gal. 4.4-7; Lk. 2.16-21.

What we are doing today is exactly what we did on Christmas. That is, we are taking a basically secular event from its original form as a pagan feast day, and Christianizing it. The feast of Christmas was the Roman feast of the unconquered sun. (It was after the winter solstice when the days started getting longer. Before then, people feared that the sun was going to disappear. So when the sun "returned" they thought that this was a reason for having a big party.) But there is something that is even deeper in the human psyche in the feast of the New Year. It is probably the oldest celebration that human beings ever devised. Yet, it is really curious. One 24-hour period is pretty much like any other 24-hour period. One just follows the other. What should be so different about another day? Well, in the days when people were much closer to the changes of the season, and the powers of fertility were considered divine, there was more warrant for noting beginnings as renewal. And this is what the New Year celebration is about. But I think that there is something much more at stake than that. Very simply, it is the fact that we wear out. The world runs down. Things wear out, dissolve, die, fall apart. This is a terrifying prospect. By a wonderful act of imagination, our ancestors said: "We will stop it. We will start over". This is the beginning. We have a new chance. It is a truly admirable solution to a truly enormous problem. Maybe even the greatest problem: that nothing in my life is secure, because, in one way or another, I keep losing stuff. But now I can pretend that I never did that and I can start all over again. There is something deep in us that wants that kind of thing. So, we in the Christian churches, say well, OK we will take that up and call it the Feast of Circumcision. Then they changed it to the Feast of Mary the Mother of God. We have sacralized this secular, this pagan feast, by saying that this is the Feast of Mary the Mother of God.

So how do we get from Mary the Mother of God to the celebration of the New Year? That is the task. Well, from the Christian point of view, it is not so difficult. Mary raised a child who, according the Gospel of Luke, could die saying “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing”.

In other words, I would like to look a little bit at the Christian meaning of beginnings, and the only real beginning for us is precisely rooted in the possibility of forgiveness. Now, the true attrition that goes on for us Christians, consists of a constant stream of betrayals, big or little, of what we say we believe. It is not just that my body doesn’t work anymore, or my house breaks down... all those forms of dissolution, of attrition, are certainly important. But the biggest form is this gradual erosion of myself by all these little betrayals, either those I perpetrate on my self, or those I experience from others. I have a history, in other words. And what forgiveness is, is not the elimination of that history but the fullest acknowledgement of it. But it is so, because it is the assertion that that past is not going to be absolutely determinative for my future. And that is the most profound and extraordinarily important notion of forgiveness and the basis for the new beginning and so, for the celebration of the coming year. We see all this realized in career of Mary’s child. (Dante called the Gospel of Luke the ‘Gospel of the Great Forgivenesses’. There are major examples of forgiveness which only appear in the Gospel of Luke.) So that is what forgiveness is. It is not an elimination, an ignoring of our history, as most of the New Year’s celebrations are. It takes our history absolutely seriously. That history cannot be wished away, cannot be imagined away, cannot be entertained away, it is there. But there is something beyond it. There is a life.

I do not think that we human beings are very good at forgiveness. And at least in my case, it is not that I believe my history is going to lay like a dead hand on the rest of my life, but because I know myself too well. I know how unreliable I am. I know that there is every likelihood that my past is not going to be just prologue to my future but is going to be a shaper of my future. I also know I may forgive but I won’t forget. That is my standard operating procedure.

It is not just an accusation that someone makes at me but it is something that I see in myself as well.

I would like to propose that real forgiveness is possible only with God. How would that work? It is God who sees potencies beyond our own, but more importantly, it is God who can animate those potencies in a way we can't. We are in fact, trapped in our own history. That is a certainty, a given of human existence, however energetically we may wish to leap over the past, pretend that it did not exist. The real transcending of my past is only possible in the light of that great line from the first Letter of John: "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart". And only God is greater than our heart. To give us the vision that we are not pinioned by our past, that we can go beyond that; that God can also give us the capacity to do that: all that is entailed in forgiveness. And that is the possibility of a new beginning, yet a beginning that is absolutely connected to what has gone before. As such it is in the deepest and realest sense a new beginning. And Mary is party to the illumination of this possibility because of this terrific child that she raised.

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They are truly invisible

2nd Sunday of Ordinary Times
Is. 49.3, 5-6; 1 Cor. 1.1-3; Jn. 1.29-34

At first sight these three readings are not all that impressive. They seem to be bits and pieces, little fragments of various books. And it is certainly not clear why they would be put together for today's Mass. But I think that if we spend a little more time, something does emerge which is common to all these three readings. Isaiah is talking about his awareness of himself as having been sent by God, to act for God. In the Psalm, as we said the response; "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will", we get the same kind of sense: before God I am activated, I have a job now. And of course, Paul constantly refers to himself as being sent by God from Christ. John the Baptist is sent and he talks about Jesus who later on, in the same Gospel, will regularly refer to himself as having been sent. So there is a theme joining these texts.

The Latin word for sent is "missus", from which we get the word "mission". That is what I want to talk about: this business of being sent, of mission. When I was a little kid going through separate school, we had a special chart on the bulletin board with images of pagan babies on it. And we could ransom the pagan babies by bringing in money. And there was a big contest to see how many pagan babies any class could save from Africa, or New Guinea or some other remote and unheard of place in the world. This was missionary activity: it was a kind of extra thing that you did. But if you read the whole Bible, mission is not some something that these religious people did but is something that they were. This is a whole different thing that I hope to try to make sense of.

We read the Call of Moses, the Call of Abraham, the Call of all the Prophets. They all understood themselves as called by God to go do something. In other words, their religion ended outside themselves. "I am being sent to this one, or to this one or to all of these."

That opens up some very useful things to think about, because we live in an age called the “Me Generation” or the “Ego Era”. What does that mean? We are all extraordinarily conscious of ourselves as selves, as disparate, self-enclosed units. How do I look? Do I have the proper high regard for myself? Do I project the right image? Do I love myself as I am supposed to love myself? The self is absolutely central. It is so central to our thinking that we cannot imagine any other way of operating in the world, - apart from that kind of consciousness. Are people looking at me? How do I come across? We’ve got a whole industry called public relations – advertising.— the purpose of which is to create a self. And each of us is our own little PR agent. And all this carries over to religion because religion basically becomes a matter of how I am before God. Am I being a nice person? Am I doing good things? Am I thinking the right thoughts? Am I being obedient or am I virtuous enough? We have, in a very real way, a kind of self-centered religion. And the roots of this are deep. We can see them, for example, in the life of Martin Luther. Reading any of Luther’s stuff, you find that Luther was totally consumed with worrying about himself before God. And so you get this religion that seems totally self enclosed. Am I all right, God? Am I all right? Am I all right? And if you contrast that with Isaiah, Paul, the Psalms, John the Baptist, Jesus, they do not seam to have that as a centre of their consciousness. Rather, they understand themselves as simply sent by God to someone else, or to everyone else. It is a radically different way of putting one’s life together. That is, to see God as wanting me to grow up, to be the best self I can be, is radically different, from seeing myself before God as becoming a self because I am being sent to people. So not only am I on a mission, but I am a mission... So being a missionary is not some thing that the Church can do as some extra thing but that the Church is essentially mission. And that is indeed what it is – beginning, middle and end. Of course, we don’t operate that way.

Let me put it another way. The Church is supposed to be the only institution on the face of the earth that does not exist for its own sake. The University of Western Ontario exists for its own sake. The Better Business Bureau exists for its own sake. The Bank of Mon-

treal exists for its own sake. Everything exists for its own sake. The Church, however, essentially is to exist for the sake of others, because the Church is essentially sent by God. But this notion can make us nervous, because everybody has run across the people who think they have a mission. My mission is to be the best Amway sales person in the whole world. My mission is to get the highest LSAT grades in the whole world. My mission is to be...well, fill in the blanks. We are all made slightly nervous by people like that. Because having a mission usually means that I have all this stuff in my head that I want to dump on everybody else's head, so that they think just as I do, they will want the same stuff as I do. They buy what I am selling whether it is ideas or snake oil, or automobiles or shoes. And this kind of missionary, of course, scares us. And there are, in fact, all kind of religious maniacs running around telling us exactly what God wants us to do, so that all we have to do is to follow these clear and distinct ideas about how we are supposed to run our lives.

And we resist that, understandably. We should resist that, because that is not the Biblical sense of mission at all. If you look at the career of Jesus, He saw himself as sent by God to do what? To listen to people. To hear people as they really are. That doesn't sound like much does it? But how many places in our lives do we experience instances wherein we feel that this other person really wants to hear us, really wants us to be present to them. I don't do that very well and I do not find anybody else doing it particularly well either. But that is what the mission is for. The mission is for the other. And therefore the mission first of all means that we have to hear the other. Let the other come into our consciousness. And here too, the Church does not have a very good record. But if we go back to the example of Jesus, what did Jesus do? Jesus precisely listened to all those people to whom nobody else listened. The people whom nobody else thought even existed. They were invisible, as well as inaudible. There was nothing to hear, because they were not really there., and so had nothing to say. But the genius of Jesus was precisely to let people be, by listening to them. Above all, by hearing the poor because, then and now, these are the people to whom nobody listens. They are truly invisible, inaudible. They do not exist for us. We do

not hear, partly because we are so filled with this notion that we must build this great self before God. This notion of the self is a real decline from the sense of mission that we find throughout the Bible.

One of the great things the Pope has done is a suggestion he made several years ago.)Unfortunately, almost none of the Bishops or Cardinals, were at all interested in acting on it.) The Pope has said that what we must do to initiate the third millennium is to make a great act of repentance. Now, what has the Church to be sorrowful about? How many millions of Indians in Latin America or the Caribbean have been destroyed by those good Catholics from Spain and Portugal? How many black human beings were transported by those good Christians, Dutch Danish, English slavers, who translated at least 20 million people from Africa as so much merchandise? All these, and more, the work of "good" Christian people. And of course slavery was religiously justified because black were not real people. Rather they were animals, savages. How many people's lives were destroyed by the Inquisition? "Because they do not think like us, something is wrong with them and they need to be destroyed." The Crusades were likely one of the greatest catastrophes in the history of Christianity. How many Christians were killed, murdered, slaughtered by these good French, German and English knights because they had darker skin or spoke a different language? And the Pope says, in my context, all these people were invisible, and what we must repent for is the fact that we did not listen. We did not hear their own reality. And that, as I said, is what the Church is supposed to be. It was sent by God to listen, to attend to the world. And finally, let me repeat, does that sound like such a big deal? People take courses in creative listening. "I think I hear you saying," has become a stock phrase in our highly psychologised world. We have the illusion of listening all over the place. But to what effect? For what purpose? To really let the other person emerge, or rather, to persuade them that I am really swell, that I am really good. How many times in the course of your life have you really believed that someone has really listened to you - really listened to you? And yet ,as I have said, this is what the Scripture says we are to be all about. We are sent to do that. The Church is sent to do that. Not just to preserve

ourselves, not just to create all these boundaries so we can tell who is in and who is out, who is good and who is bad, who is worth considering and who is not worth considering. Rather we ARE, to persuade everybody, that the God who made us all, listens to all of us. And we as people of God, the Church of God have that as our primary responsibility., and it is only in fulfilling that responsibility that makes us Church. The mission is not something extra. And all those pagan babies - I do not know what happened to those pagan babies, But I do know that it was a great substitute for the real effort.

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Criterion to judge ourselves

3rd Sunday of Ordinary Times
Is. 9.1-4; Cor. 1.10-13, 17-18; Mt. 4.12-23.

The three readings today are a really mixed bag, in that there seems to be very little connection between them. The Gospel of Mathew quotes a passage from Isaiah, but it is a happenstancial thing, not particularly significant, except in Mathew's overall program. So, it is a real challenge to try to figure out how these three texts can be made to cohere in some way. But I would like to try to use Paul's letter to the church in Corinth as the entrée into the three readings.

Corinth was a major seaport, a very sophisticated Greek city. The Corinthian community that Paul founded there was an extremely contentious and difficult group in many ways. You can see this when you read the two letters to the church in Corinth, wherein Paul is constantly clarifying, correcting, even reprimanding them. And their basic and pervasive problem was that the members were forever erecting some sort of superior/inferior status among themselves. It is this, that exasperates Paul more than anything else in all of his letters: the break down, the granulation of the community. More than anything else, he complains about that. A particular issue in Corinth is that, as Greeks, the Corinthians were convinced that if, you knew something, you were thereby virtuous. Knowledge is virtue. To understand is to be good – automatically. They believed that understanding something made you tantamount to being in possession of that which you understood, and therefore turned you into a really decent human being. Well, Paul rejected that on two grounds.

First of all, we need to look at this notion of wisdom in the Greco-Roman world. There and then, wisdom was always purveyed by people who were skilled speakers. That was a big deal in the ancient world: to speak grandly, to be a good orator. So there were rhetoricians running around, swaying people with their skill in the

use of language. So Paul was upset with the following: if people were being persuaded by the quality of a speaker's rhetorical skill, the question becomes: to what are people being converted ? To the power of someone's rhetoric? The beauty of someone's speech? That is the first problem.

But the second problem is even more acute. If you think that what you learn by listening to one of these great speakers is going to save you, humanize you, "then the cross of Christ is emptied of its power. For Christ did not send me to baptize you but to proclaim the Gospel and not with eloquent wisdom so that the Cross of Christ might not be emptied of his power".

So what is this Cross of Christ business all about? First of all, it's not equivalent to wisdom, which is located just from the eyebrows up. The cross is either situated in the fullness of one's human existence., or it is no place. The cross is an existential, not merely a theoretical or cerebral reality. And it is this mislocation of the cross which enormously agitated Paul. And if you read the whole first chapter of this letter to the Corinthians, you find Paul redefining this notions of foolishness and wisdom. He will say that the cross is the foolishness of God which is greater than human wisdom. So what is there about the cross that is so crucial? Well, it is a very complex thing and I think that much of what goes by the name of Christian preaching does not do justice to it. Often enough, the cross is made to look like some kind of magical thing: so Jesus died on the cross for us and it is over and done with. We don't have to think about this business any more. That is inadequate. What does it mean to say that Jesus died on the cross? Why did Jesus die on the cross? That is the issue.

Jesus died because of his own integrity, his own honesty. Jesus was killed for what he believed and what he said and lived, and what he upheld even under the threat of death. And what is that? That Caesar is not the king of the world, nor is Pharisaic Judaism the means to salvation, because many of the Jews had developed these exclusive tendencies themselves. But what God really wants of the Jews is to be the light of revelation to the Gentiles - the agency of

salvation for everybody. Just as I said regarding the church last week, the Jews were supposed to be the great religion that was not in business for its own sake. Judaism, and Christianity which is rooted in Judaism, has the same form. They are not supposed to exist for our own sake, but for the sake of the world. We are supposed to de-tribalize the world. And that effort gets people into trouble, just as it surely did in the case of Jesus.

Let me give you as an little example of this problem, something that is going on right now in the northern part of Mexico in a diocese called Chiapas. In this diocese is a large indigenous population who have been simply bypassed by everything that is going on elsewhere in the country. They are nonentities. Literally, they are nonentities. They are extraordinarily impoverished, they do not account for anything except for their utility as a cheap source of labour. The outsiders can say to themselves, "we can build the wealth of a nation on the backs of these people without even noticing where our wealth is founded." Chiapas is fortunate in having a Bishop who regularly espouses the cause of the Indians. As a result of his advocacy, he has received numerous death threats. We know already that there are all kinds of people in South Central and Latin America who have been killed for standing with the poor. The Jesuit and their housekeepers in El Salvador; those nuns raped and murdered there; Oscar Romero; the Guatemalan Bishop who was murdered last year. So there are all kinds of precedents. The apostolic delegate, together with a number of the Bishops in Mexico, want the Bishop of Chiapas removed – he is obviously a Communist. Espouse the cause of the poor and you are obviously a Communist, or worse. So what do we see going on there? We see something that goes on all too often and all too unhappily in the history of this church – that money talks. Money talks in the Vatican, money talks in the church at large, too. And conversely of course, the poor who do not have a voice are silent, are inaudible, and therefore do not exist. A very important person is in Mexico right now, it is the Bishop of Rome. What is he going to do with the Bishop of Chiapas? What is he going to do with the apostolic delegate? How is he going to respond to all of the Bishops in Mexico? I have only heard one report about the Pope's first speech there: it

was about anti-abortion and, in vague and general terms, about social justice. Here is a real situation that seems pretty clear. Is the church going to be the light of revelation to the Gentiles, and above all, to the poor? But if it is not that, and at its highest official level, then we have betrayed Jesus. We are not, then, the New Israel that Jesus was hoping to create by picking twelve apostles. (Why twelve apostles? The old Israel was founded by the twelve tribes founded by the son of Jacob.) This New Israel was to do what the old Israel had not done – to be open to everybody. Well, at least one of the multiple values of these readings is that it will give us some sort of criterion to judge ourselves and the church, which of course is enormously important. Are we faithful to this man who was put to death because he bugged all of the big wigs by taking the part of the people who were ignored. We shall see.

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The need to correctly identify the meaning and locale of "Mystery"

5th Sunday of Ordinary Times
Is. 58.6-10; 1 Cor. 2.1-5; Mt.5. 13-16

A couple of weeks ago an interesting suggestion came out of the congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Chief Doctrinal bureau in the Vatican. Its prefect, Joseph Ratzinger suggested, even more, urged a return to Mass being celebrated in Latin rather than in the language of the people. What a startling proposal, I thought. If you go back to the times of the second Vatican Council, when the vernacular was introduced into the Liturgy and to look at that history, it is very interesting. It was the first thing that all the bishops of world got together and decided it needed to change in the Church, because as you know Vatican II was a reform Council. That was what John the 23rd said in his introductory talk: that the Church needed to be updated. So, they took to the heart of the Christian thing, the celebration of the Eucharist, and they changed it into English. It was in the experience of most Catholics, an enormously liberating experience. That is, for the first time the Mass seemed to be not just the province of the priest, who was always facing the wall, never the people, and speaking in a language, usually mumbled, which nobody could understand. Now we have the priest facing everybody. And in the experience of most people, the church was in a sense given back to us. That sense of belonging to the Church was doing what the Vatican Council, above all in its document on the Church, said: that we are not some kind of great pyramidal, hierarchical structure primarily but we are, first of all, the people of God. And the simple shift like moving from Latin to Spanish or Chinese or German, was an enormously significant moment in the life of the Church. And so, you have to think seriously when a man in Cardinal Ratzinger's position, makes his proposal. So you look at his reasons, and his reasons were very simple. They refer to that he has been talking about for the past several years: that we need to go back to some

sense of mystery. Mystery is a Greek word that means “hidden”. If you want to talk about the meaning of the text being hidden either by priests mumbling or being in a foreign language, then you could say, yes that is mysterious. But I don’t think that’s the sense of mystery that Paul talked about in this passage to the Corinthians. Mystery is not just something obscure or puzzling or spooky. Mystery, in the biblical use, has a long and hallowed tradition. So I thought that it might be useful to talk about what mystery means in the biblical sense, as opposed to what seems to be in the mind of Cardinal Ratzinger when he made that proposal.

Paul talks about proclaiming the mystery, and not doing it in lofty words or plausible words of wisdom. In other words, Paul proclaims Jesus, who was crucified and raised by God from the dead, and by this proclamation, attempts to convince people. But the salient point is that Paul made his proclamation, and tried to convince people, in a way that was radically different from the way people were normally convinced. Convincing was usually done by smooth talkers, rhetoricians, people who practiced the art of persuasion, using elegant language. If we wanted to convince people we would probably hire a big PR firm, or we would take ads out on TV, and hire some psychologist. We would poll people and have focus groups and see what turned people on. And then we would pitch everything precisely toward that. That is what normally impresses us, what normally influences us and determines our response to things. But Paul reversed the whole process. None of that glitz and showmanship. And we know that, at the same time, there were people from head quarters, Jerusalem, doing miracles and carrying letters of approbation and credentials from Peter and James and John and preaching in wonderful smooth and elegant language. But Paul said; No folks I am just here, and not as a particularly prepossessing human being, certainly with no great oratorical skills, doing what? Testifying by my life to the reality of this man and His vision of human life. It was not that Paul saw Jesus as Divine...that came much later in Christian history. But he certainly saw Jesus as God’s absolutely privileged and primary agent, trying, and succeeding in living a life that was faithful to God. Paul said: and here I am, with no pretence, no bra-

vado, no big bells and whistles, just me, being who I am, with my life in the process of being transformed into the image of this man that I am preaching. That is what he means when he says that I did not come with plausible words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the spirit and the power. Power of what? Of a man who simply stood there, unpretentiously telling the truth. That is the power of the spirit. Now, I suggest that this is a highly mysterious way of going about things. Just being there, flat out, with people, for people, telling the truth. He was not there to con anybody. And I put it to you, that given the way I normally work, given the way my world normally works, that Paul's method an extraordinarily different and, above all, mysterious kind of process. It obviously worked with the Corinthians. And I don't think that it is too far-fetched to apply all this to our own experience. I hope we are able to distinguish people who come with their brass band and their big self trumpeting to promote themselves or some cause, from people who simply tell the truth and who are really present to me, for me.

But the sense of mystery is much larger than that. Now we can go to this extraordinary passage from Isaiah. "Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs, let the oppressed go, break every yoke, share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house, cover the naked". Well OK, lets look at that a little more. Is Isaiah some kind of social worker before his time? Or was he talking about needing a big social program, or promoting social amelioration? Or did Isaiah have these big principles that he wanted to enunciate and that are embodied in all this kind of stuff? Or, is it as we so often take it, was is a matter of Isaiah making himself feel good by doing good? (The great human theme: it is nice to be nice because then other people will like me if I am nice.) Isaiah's word can be understood in any of these ways. But that is not what Isaiah is talking about. So why does Isaiah talk about all this stuff? Because he is interested in social justice, as some kind of big abstract program? No. Rather, because he believes in this God who favours everybody, above all, the people whom nobody favours. Because he believes in the God of the Exodus who said to Moses; "I have seen the oppression of my people and I have come to do something about it". Because he be-

lieves in this mysterious other whom we call God, and who was unlike any other God in Isaiah's own world. It is a God who says that "I am, for the sake of everybody." I put it to you that this God, and Isaiah's response to this God, is the heart of mystery. Because let's face it folks, life doesn't work that way. Isaiah directs us. I mean, most of us survive, nourished by being able to oppress somebody else in one way or another. That sounds very harsh, but when I introspect, it is certainly not far from the truth. I have to know more, I have to be more powerful, I have to have more of something. And that that having more always involves somebody else, the other, having less... of whatever. Meanwhile, here is Isaiah saying No to all that, because God is this God that he knows to be truly on the side of everybody, indiscriminately. Now that is mystery. Isaiah is not saying what he says because he is getting paid by some politician, or some social agency, or, because he has some sweet idea in his own head, but because he believed that that is what life is to be because the Lord of the universe is on the side of the forgotten others. That is mystery. That is mysterious because this is so alien to the way the world really wags on and the way that at least I operate my life.

And that can move us to the Gospel, to this passage that always made me feel kind of queasy when I read it. "you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world". On one hand, my Christian training said: no, you are supposed to bad mouth yourself because that is the apogee of virtue: to say that I am no good. That is supposed to be humility. And it's worse for us Canadians, who believe that any kind of self-promotion is terribly bad form, and that, as soon we hear someone extolling our virtue,, we say "oh you must have somebody else in mind. That can't be us, we are not the salt of the earth." Because most of us are embarrassed about the thought of blowing our own horns in this way, or so it would seem. But think about being able to walk consciously through the world in which this God in whom we believe, is active in the world, and who is transforming this world. And imagine living out of that belief and saying that that is the thing that really illumines the world: it is I and this God working together, not for any virtue of mine, but because this God works with all of us. To really believe means that I can truly say "I am the salt of the earth and the light of the world", and say that in a

non-self-conscious, non-self-aggrandizing fashion. I would like to suggest that that is another aspect of the mystery as well. And it is only because we are so accustomed to being defrauded or propagandized, or because we know our own double mindedness that so often we find ourselves doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

Mystery pervades the life of faith, but the heart of the mystery is this mysterious Other Whom we call God. And when that mysterious Other becomes the heart of my own thinking, feeling, desiring, living, then I become, mysteriously, the light of the world.

Now to go back to Cardinal Ratzinger. There is a problem when we turn Liturgy into English. All kinds of trashy stuff can happen. What happened musically, for instance, was the worst thing. Anybody who could play two chords on a guitar suddenly became the Mozart of the Catholic Liturgical scene. And we have all this new music, much of it infantile, rubbishy noise. And we are just recovering from all that. But that did not remove mystery from the Liturgy, it merely tawdrified it. Maybe that is what Ratzinger is talking about. I don't know. But there is a real question that he raises; how does one enflesh mystery in its genuine meaning? How does one give cultural shape to the mystery of God and life of faith? The only paradigm we have is Jesus. Namely that, in this human being, the unqualified generosity of God did become accessible; take flesh. But notice how that works. The very fact that this man should exist among us, walk on our earth, breathe our air, yet live as He did: how did he do it? That is mystery.

And all the other stuff about the language in which the Liturgy is celebrated, or the music that we use, these are fairly peripheral issues. What is crucial is that we do not lose our bearings. That we know the real locale of the mysterious in our lives and in our faith and then seek to give that flesh and some kind of visibility that is consonant with the nature of the mystery that we say we believe in. That is a problem. Returning to Latin.... I have my doubts that that's going to bring off that project.

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My own mediocrity as a Christian

2nd Sunday of Lent
Is. 49.3, 5-6; 1 Cor. 1.1-3; Jn. 1.29-34.

Lent always begins with the temptation narratives from one of the three synoptic Gospels. And it is always followed, in the second Sunday by the transfiguration scene. Today we have Mathew's version of it. The point is that the transfiguration points to what we are supposed to become, and what we look forward to at Easter. So this falls very neatly in line with what I propose as a general theme for Lent. It is this notion that is so prominent and forceful in the early Church: that the Christian life is the process of illumination, enlightenment. Another aspect of that is clarification, and that is what the transfiguration theme is all about. Here it is really important to recall that the Gospels of Mathew Luke and Mark did not believe that Jesus was the second person of the Holy Trinity. These guys did not believe that Jesus was divine at the time that they wrote. That clarification of belief in this man Jesus developed over centuries as a matter of fact. And that makes a huge difference, I propose, in the way we understand this text.

First of all, a technical note: the transfiguration is probably a throwing back onto the life of Jesus, an Easter experience of Jesus. Even having said that , we cannot say that this is God doing God's business and we are just interested as spectators. No, that is not what is going on here at all. We have in the baptismal narrative the same statement "this is my son, the beloved". To be called the son of God was a normal Jewish mode of speech. Any good faithful Jew was the son of God (as this was a patriarchal society, they didn't say daughter of God). So we are not talking about God pointing his finger and saying: " this is the second person of the trinity, so now behave yourselves and pay attention to him." Rather, we have in Mathew's reading , God saying: this man is what I meant the human being to be when I created them in the first place. All human beings are my

children , but this is my especially beloved son, because you will see in the course of his life, he is absolutely faithful to Me." And in that fidelity Jesus spelled out the very meaning of what it was to be a human being.

There is even an echo of all this when the letter to Timothy says "Jesus brought life to light". What does that mean He brought life to light? That He clarified the meaning of human existence: what it meant to be alive as a human being is present in this man Jesus.

And it is played out in the first reading too, with the call of Abraham. Abraham is told that, through him, all the families of the earth would be blessed , because out of his progeny would come the person who is going to show the world what it is to be truly human ,. That means that this person is going to embrace everybody.

Everybody has heard all this a number of times. But I would like to make a suggestion, that struck me this week, as I considered my own mediocrity as a Christian. It is so easy to live with this notion of Jesus in some remote part of my consciousness, and to pay absolutely or virtually no attention to Him at all. It terrifies me about myself. Oh yes, I believe in Jesus. Jesus is my Saviour. And then I simply carry on business as usual. Even the whole history of the Church can be read as a co-optation of the figure of Jesus, or the tailoring of the figure of Jesus to the shape of self-serving human desires. We are told that Jesus wants to save me from the ravages of inflation. Jesus wants Notre Dame to win ball games. No. What is stark and striking and not a little terrifying from these readings is that: this is what it is like to be a human being, if you are serious about living a human life. You cannot temporize, you cannot live in this bifurcated world - to have Jesus up here and the standard operating procedures down here.

The whole purpose of Lent is to clarify that bifurcation in us. First of all, to look at this man, to be puzzled by this man. There is a wonderful book called Jesus the Stranger. And until Jesus is really strange to us, is a source of puzzlement, wonderment, amazement, confusion, as well as worship and hope, and love we do not have a

real vision of Him. “This is my son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to Him.” Maybe the pivotal word in all that I have said, certainly for myself, is mediocrity. We are so willing to adjust Jesus to the way we think life ought to go, whereas, if we take Jesus seriously, there is a ferocity in this figure. There is a line in the Gospel of Thomas: “he who is near me is near the fire”. And Luke will have Jesus saying: “I come not to bring peace on earth but the sword.” “I come to spread fire upon the earth”. We are supposed to be uncomfortable. And it should go without saying that being uncomfortable does not mean that I don’t agree with the Pope on birth control. That is not the kind of discomfort I am talking about. (Eighty-seven percent of the Catholic Church does not believe that the Pope is right on birth control. So that doesn’t get us anywhere.) This is something larger and deeper. A shaking of foundations – I think that that is a Kirkegaardian phrase, is it not? That is what Jesus is supposed to do for us. We are then to clarify where Jesus is absent in our lives, a clarification that only comes by diligently seeking who this person really is. Only if we seek who he really is can we even begin to talk about his absence. Otherwise we just say, “oh, good old Jesus, somebody up there likes me, my buddy Jesus.” No, it will not wash. And Lent is this wonderful time for us to reassess who we are, where we are, and whether we really want to be illuminated by this man.

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The illumination of who I am

3rd Sunday of Lent
Exod. 17.3-7; Rom. 5.1-2, 5-8; Jn. 4.5-42

There are a couple of preliminary comments that I think are really essential to getting a hold on the readings today. This massive reading from John particularly needs some kind of context. The Gospel of John was probably the last one that made it into the New Testament. We do not know who wrote it, but we do know that it was written by a group of people who grew up in a Jesus tradition which developed apart from the groups who knew the Gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke. The johannine folks are really a strange group of people. In fact, a lot of people outside that group didn't think that the Gospel of John should really be in the Bible until about the 2nd century. Why? Because its depiction of Jesus is so odd, so weird. Jesus in the Gospel of John does not look at all like the Jesus of the earlier Gospels. So clearly, what has happened is that these johannine people have, out of their own frame of mind, thought long and deeply about this man and have reconstructed his life very much out of that thought-world. Now, that is true of all the Gospels, but particularly so of John. The historic Jesus would never have gone around saying: "I am the Bread of Life"; or "I am the living water". In other words, what we are seeing is that these people are appropriating their understanding of who this man really was in their lives, and then projecting that onto the figure that is written about in this text. That is really important to know.

The second thing that is important relates to the culture. Samaria was the middle range of Palestine. Galilee was on top and Judea was on the bottom. Samaritans were considered half-breed Jews. They had their own temple, their own mountain where they worshipped. (That is why the matter of who worships where comes into the conversation.) Semitic men never talked to women in public, much less a woman who had a really bad reputation in town. Our

present text is a very dense one, and the authors of Gospel of John call to us over and over: “Don’t stay on the surfaces of life, or of this depiction of Jesus, but rather look further”.

The Gospel of John is a particularly apt Gospel for what I am proposing this Lent: that the whole business of growing in a Christian life is a process of illumination. The Gospel of John quite explicitly depicts Jesus as the Great Illuminator, more typically called The Revealer. So we have, time after time conversations , with Nicodemus, with this lady, with this man that Jesus cured of blindness, who kind of know who he is, but really don’t. This woman thinks she knows what is going on when Jesus says: “I will give you living water”. She says: “That is great, because I don’t want to come down here in the heat of the day and have people mock me. I would love to have a tap in my home so that I would not have to come down here an expose myself to people and go to all this trouble”. What the author is saying is that this is what a lot of people want from religion. They want God to be a kind of convenience store; who will precisely fit my program. Over and over John’s Gospel points out that danger that we can readily miss the point of Jesus’ words. And what Jesus is saying is that something is going to be disruptive in this woman’s life. He is not going to make her comfortable. To the extent that she comes to know who Jesus is, her life is going to be upended. She goes back and tells her townsfolk about her encounter with Jesus. Now, a woman in the Semitic world would never go back and tell a bunch of men: “this is what is going on, this is the truth”. Even here you see her caution: “could this be the Messiah?” She puts it as a question.

But, she clearly understands herself differently in the light of this Man’s self-revelation. “In knowing Him, I also know who I am. I can come to terms with who I am.” So the illumination that Jesus provides is not just illumination of who He is and who God is and what God is doing through Jesus. But it results in the illumination of ourselves. The phenomenon is very simple. To see this, we need only to ask: what enables people to come to know who they really are? And why are so many of us, so much of the time, so out of touch with who we really are? I think the answer lies in the fact that we don’t

trust each other, we don't entrust ourselves to each other, because that would somehow make us vulnerable. But, in the case of Jesus, things were not this way. I mean that, the historic Jesus seems to have been this kind of character who gave people space to be. He was someone to whom they could entrust themselves. Now trust ,of course, also means that I know that I am trusted by this other one. Trust is essentially mutual. In light of someone trusting me then I can be who I am, I can discover who I am. And therefore I can, at the same time, entrust my real self to that other one. And this is what illumination looks like from these readings today.

There is a small footnote. Would that the Church were a place where people felt trusted. Would that the Church were a place where people could totally entrust themselves. We don't do badly here: we who meet here every Sunday. But if there is anything Godly about us and our gathering here, it is that we can be brought to entrust ourselves to God because we feel that we are trusted by God. And therefore we can come to see who we really are. And we don't see who we really are most of time, because we live in an alien and alienating world, a world to which we cannot entrust ourselves. It is not easily done. As I said Jesus disrupts this lady's life. She cannot carry on as usual. Jesus is essentially disruptive figure in her life as the Gospel of John puts it. And this is why we need Lent, precisely to deal with that disruption, with that disturbing and strange man.

Finally, to pick up this thing from Romans. Jesus didn't go around saying I am going to die for everybody, I am going to die for sinners. The historic Jesus almost certainly never said anything like that. But here, amazingly, within 20 years after his death, we have Paul saying it to the people in Rome: God proves his love for us, because, while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Where did Paul get an idea like that? He was speaking out of the regular Christian consciousness of this man whose life was illuminating, and whose death was a consequence of that disturbing yet illuminating life. So I now can say that Jesus died for me because I believe that this man is what being a human is all about. That is why I can look at his life and look at his death and appropriate that life and that death,

and say Jesus really did die for me. But notice: it is not automatic, as if there were a kind of divine salvation faucet in the sky, which God just turns it on and saving grace falls on me. No, that is not the way it works. Rather for me to claim that Jesus died for me is me, taking responsibility for my life, choosing to be human as Jesus was. And therefore I grab on to that man, and say that this man's life is salvific for me. But it is I who am doing it., and no one can do this for me. There is nothing automatic in this process.

Finally, this pauline text is Lenten too. So much of our life is lived for us, I think, or, so much of our life is lived on automatic pilot: I have my job, I have my email, and on and on.... To the extent that we are defined by all of those peripheral things, we do not have a life. It is only when we begin to look at this man and try to understand how he operated that I can begin to take hold of my own existence. And that is why we are here today with each other, trying to do it together.

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I discover I don't see very well

4th Sunday of Lent
Sam. 16. 1b, 6-7, 10-13; Eph. 5.8-14; Jn. 9.1-41.

This passage from the letter to the Ephesians contains what scholars believe is one of the oldest Christian statements around, namely: "sleeper awake, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you." This notion of illumination or enlightenment took hold early on in this Jesus movement and it is embodied in that text. The Letter to the Ephesians was probably written around 60 and this notion of Jesus as illumining me, is already part of the tradition. And we can see from the three readings today, that the people who picked them clearly had this notion of light and enlightenment in mind. Right before it, in the 9th chapter in the Gospel of John and in the longer version of the passage, John has Jesus saying: "I am the light of the world". And then Jesus cures this blind man. There is a virtual certainty that the historical Jesus never said anything like "I am the light of the world". And that is not just a little pedantic bit of trivia. The reason we have that line in the Gospel of John is because this is exactly the way that those people who encountered the Jesus movement felt about Jesus: this man really does enlighten me. This man really does show me what is real. I would like to propose that, from this scene of the healing of the blind man, one of the things that is illumined, is just how blind I am. Strangely enough, in this paradoxical way, the illumination that Christ provides is to enable me to see that I don't see. And that truly is illumination. We have an adumbration of this matter, in this famous passage about David and his beefy brothers. We get this pipsqueak David, the youngest, chosen as the second King of Israel. And the writer gives us the line that God sees differently than we see. The world looks different to God then it does to us. And as I said, it is in trying to come to seek God more earnestly, that I discover I don't see very well.

What don't I see? I don't see the need for repentance, really. I mean, we all make mistakes don't we? I had dysfunctional parents like everybody else. So I am obviously a bit screwed up. Since I am, what is there to repent for? Regret, maybe, that I didn't get the right genetic endowment. But repentance? That seems a bit excessive. And this is what I normally believe. I have a very hard time with this notion of repentance, although the texts say it over and over again. Recall this near hysterical line that we just sang: "have mercy on us for we are sinners before you". Oh really? I don't think that is a bone deep conviction for me. I think that there is a kind of obtuseness in me, so that, when I look around, I find I am neither much better nor much worse than anyone else. So what is the problem? Thus, one of the things that comes out Jesus' illumination is that I see that I really do not see. This is the beginning of a new vision.

To illustrate what else don't see, let me give you another example. Recently I was talking to a native person, a student here. They were telling me their background: ghastly. Alcohol has driven people crazy. There is suicide, murder, abuse. And of course, Indians did not invent alcohol. When that person left my office I thought: My God, how blind am I to what is really going on in the lives of all kinds of people. And I am part of a society that engendered this kind of social chaos. But do I see that? And the answer is, no, I don't. So I walk around in this great funk for the rest of the day. No, I don't see that. I don't see myself as brother to the marginalized and dispossessed in this world. I've got my agenda, I've got stuff to do. I have a position to maintain and in the doing of that, I don't have time even to see whether I see.

And that is why these readings are so important. And that is why trying to pray is so important, as it brings me again to the sense that I really don't see very much. And yet, what is Jesus about, as the light of the world? Opening us, not just to see ourselves, but to see ourselves precisely in the world, with the world.

So there is a puzzlement. And push it a little further and you ask, " What is the big obstacle here?" I think part of it is an inner resistance, because usually when someone comes up to me and says: "Trojcak don't you see"? I see that underlining that question is some kind of accusation of my ineptitude or deficiency. Beyond that, there is the fear that seeing the way this person is suggesting, is going to be paralyzing to me. And even if I did see I couldn't do. Such is the way that we operate with each other much of the time. The prospect of seeing more, simply overwhelms me. So I don't want to see and I don't want to be the object of somebody else's obloquy. And I certainly don't want to fit into a world, the difficulties within which are simply too much for me.

We talk about compassion fatigue. I love that phrase, "compassion fatigue". For a Christian, it ought to be as oxymoronic as breathing fatigue, or heart beat fatigue. But it is not. So how can we even want to see more without being terrified at the prospect. If it is God who wants us to see, if it is Jesus who is the light of the world, then a whole bunch of things fall together. Then I don't have to function under what I have come to know as the Atlas complex: that the world is solely on my shoulders; it is there for me to ameliorate, under my own steam. No, the world is still God's. I am still in the world that is God's world, and my job is to cooperate with God in humanizing this world. But Jesus finally helps me see what God, in her mercy and tenderness, and warmth, will somehow enable me to do.

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To act. To respond.

5th Sunday of Lent
Ezek. 37.12-14; Rom. 8.8-11; Jn. 11.1-45

We are getting closer to Passion-tide and Easter and this is reflected in the three readings today, where they are talking, in very different ways, about life out of death. And I'd like to put all this, especially the passage from John, (where they had Jesus say, "I am the Resurrection and the life.") into the context of illumination. What the johannine Jesus declares here, implies, of course, that there is a part of us that is dead. Dead, in the way that Paul talks about being dead, when he talks about living in the flesh. To live in the flesh is to live in such a way that you are simply obtuse to God's own reality and power to change us, and he refers to that power, in a typically Jewish way, as the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God dwells in you, the Spirit who animates, who makes alive. To live in this Spirit, then, means that you're really alive, humanly alive as God intended you to be alive. So we get another chance, with two more weeks of Lent to think about this business of illumination and to try to see in our own lives where we are dead.

We are dead because we are too busy, speaking for myself, and therefore unaware of the world, really. Or we have some kind of tunnel vision with regard to the world, seeing only those things which engage me and my agenda at this moment. We are dead to events. We are dead to great ranges of reality. We are largely dead to other people, I think. And so, when John has Jesus saying, "I am the Resurrection and the life", he's giving us a kind of investigative device whereby we can look at ourselves, ask that question, - which is not asked or even raised anyplace else - Where am I dead? Where am I obtuse? Where am I unaware? Insensitive? Unresponsive to the world? Because I can't respond to something or someone invisible to me, and whose invisibility I don't even acknowledge.

All these questions, of course, open a Pandora's box. How many of us have lived long enough to be able to look back and think: If only....If only... If only I had known. If only I had seen. If only I had reacted.

Life is extraordinarily dense and complicated. As William James' wonderful phrase has it, it is "That buzzing, booming confusion." It's too much. Too much is there. Too much goes on. We have to tame it. We have to, literally, domesticate it. We have to make a home in this great, bewildering chaos which is all the reality that surrounds us, in which we are immersed. We have to. Otherwise we can't live. That's what the parents with all the babies in this room have to do. They have to somehow persuade these babies that the world is safe for them, that they're not going to be overwhelmed by it. This means that we must reduce the world to manageable proportions, and in so doing, simple eliminate great sections of it. But then, what does growing up mean? It ought to mean a retrieving of the fullness of the world, an enlargement of my capacity for reality. But, for me, unfortunately, it means that most of the time I remain in this infantile state, living in this domesticated world that is tailored to only my own needs, my own appetites or interests , I come to live in a state of willed unawareness.

And that's why I suggest that using Jesus' life as a heuristic device, is so important. To do this, is to be able to look back at my life, not with regret, so much as with some greater insight as to what I have missed, where I have been dead, where I have been insensitive, where I have reduced the world far too much...a reduction which is a function of my need for narrowness and exclusion. The narrowness is understandable as I said. If we were to breach every boundary, we would likely fall apart. We would leak out all over the world. We would leak out of ourselves whereby there would be nothing left of us. But to grow in Christ is to receive the Spirit of God, as Paul says. It is to become like Jesus who seemed in an uncanny way to be alive to everything that was going on around him. He responded, above all, to those realities that are most easily, because most conveniently, missed: sick people, weird people, left out and ignored

people: the poor and the powerless. So, again, as one writer put it, the Gospel is always good news, bad news, good news. Good news in that it offers us all kinds of possibilities. Bad news when we start looking to see how we have failed to realize those possibilities in our own lives: how meager, how narrow, how small we have made the world. Then, ultimately, good news again, because we believe in the Spirit of God who will open our eyes, our ears, our hearts, not just to see and to hear, but to act. To act. To respond. So that at our deaths, we will not be buried with a large crowd of "What ifs",. Rather, we will be able to thank God for God's patience with us, God , Who is willing to bring us beyond that narrowness. God, Who desires to show us the world is larger than we want it to be. Again, this is in contrast to the way I normally construct the world. I typically don't want it to be very big, because, I am so busy, doing so much, working so anxiously to make and live in a world which is my substitute for the real world that God wants me to see, inhabit, respond to. But, this process, this expansion of the world: that's life from death. Jesus, the Resurrection, is illuminating us, promising, with this reading from John, to bring us, perhaps kicking and screaming, to a larger but more real and richer role by far. And this is, of course, to bring us to ourselves, to each other and to God.

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The shape of our exile from ourselves

Palm Sunday
Mt. 21.1-11 Is. 50.4-7; Phil. 2.6-11; Mt. 26.14-27.66

It seems reasonably clear that Matthew, as a good Jew, would have known this text from Zechariah, about the Messiah coming into Jerusalem, on a donkey. And Matthew was clearly depicting Jesus fulfilling the messianic role. But, what I want to concentrate on, is this matter of the donkey, because it is crucial to the story. But, first, a caution. At least in the Church that I grew up in, much of our understanding of this week was drastically distorted. Because, I was taught that all these texts that we've read, Matthew, the Philippians, Isaiah, were supposed to be representing Jesus as divine. That's not the case. The Church did not absolutely and unambiguously decide on the divinity of Jesus for 300 years after this. And if it was so clear that Jesus was divine they would not have had 300 years of argument and struggling over this. So, we need to see that the biblical texts are talking about a human being. If we don't understand Holy as a genuinely human drama, then it's just something taking place over our heads, which we may be more or less interested spectators at, but which really does not touch us.

It is very likely, according to a number of scholars, that Jesus really did think that he was the Messiah. But, what does that mean? It certainly does not mean that Jesus would thereby understand himself as a divine person. Even the title "son of God" did not mean, among the Jews, "divine person". It simply means a good Jew. Anybody who is really faithful to God is a "son of God" or a "daughter of God". The Messiah was just a human being whom God chose, to effect what God intended, such as enabling people to beat swords into plough shares, spears into pruning hooks. By the power of God, the Messiah was to so transform the world, that lions and lambs would lie down together and that the poor would receive justice.

About the text from Zechariah, with the Messiah entering Jerusalem on a donkey, two things are important. First of all, the return of the Messiah was to clarify the fact that Israel, was in exile, that they were separated from God and therefore separated from themselves and from each other. The Messiah was to somehow bring Israel back from exile, to restore them to God, themselves and each other. This is the gist of the ninth chapter of Zechariah. But the Messiah is going to do this, not by using the normal means whereby human beings accomplish things, namely, by violating each other in one way or another, however subtly. For this is, de facto, the way by which I get things done: by threat, by menacing in all kinds of subtle, even imperceptible ways, by promising to give or threatening to withhold. I'm speaking of the multiple forms, large and small, overt or disguised, in which I violate and oppress others.

The Messiah, according to Zechariah, was not to come into Jerusalem in the predictable way, namely on a horse. The horse, in the ancient Mediterranean world, was usually a warhorse, a weapon, an instrument of battle, of violence. Rather the Messiah, was to come in an altogether different way. He was to arrive, riding on a donkey, which a radically innocuous animal, used for domestic work So, Israel's exile and Israel's distancing from God was not to be overcome by some kind of violence. It was to be overcome in this absolutely non-violent way.

Now Paul quotes this hymn in the Philippians, about Jesus being in the form of God , which simply means, being human, (The whole of this hymn was created with constant reference to the creation and fall story in Genesis, chapters two and three. Recall that there, God created human being in God‘s own image.) The difference between Jesus and the rest of us is that he precisely did not think that he had to work violence to create room for his life in this world. But He freely did this in a world in which everybody else used violence as a standard mode of operation, a world in which the only good self-defense is a good offence. Jesus did not operate this way. And this is why God was so pleased with this man, and raised him and gave him a name that is above every name. So, that's what the text

has to say to us today.

I want to relate all this to the theme of illumination, which will emerge most clear on Holy Saturday, when we celebrate the light of Christ, physically present in the form of the Paschal candle.. One of the things that I hope has happened during this Lent, for me and for you, is that we become aware of, enlightened as to how exiled we are, how far are we removed from God and so from ourselves and from each other. Jesus illumines us by his human career, in clarifying what it is to live continually at home with God I we accept the illuminating power of that life, we will come to see that we are living our lives, exiled from God, by our lack of courage, by our impatience, by our multiple dishonesties, by all the strategies we use to hurt each other or to distance ourselves from each other. Jesus not only illumines the shape of our exile from ourselves but, above all, shows us how that exile is to be overcome.

I would like to think that I could return to God, from exile, under my own steam. I'd like to make a will act. I'd like to bring in the marines, or use whatever technique or strategy I would have to use, to accomplish my return from exile. But it doesn't work. It works only in the humble search for God and for myself. Apart from Jesus, we are not even aware of our exiled condition. It is Jesus, God's gift (grace), Who both illuminates our exile and show us how it is to be overcome. Quietly. Peacefully. Unobtrusively.

Now, a kind of epilogue The older I get, the more Calvinist or Augustinian I seem to be in my view of things. I look around at the world which appears to me, in large measure, as God - free. Perhaps, more accurately I should say that I inhabit a number of God-free worlds. There is the world of television. The world of the media. The world of commerce. The world of politics. And not less so, the world of academia. The more I come to have some sense of how I am personally exiled from God, myself and to each other, I'm also more and more aware that there's not much that I can do to redress that condition. Maybe the very first thing, to acknowledge that I cannot do

much myself, is the first step in the return from exile.

Now we do have all these wild, intensely pious sounding statements -"Without you we can do nothing", "I am the vine, you are the branches.," so that , cut off from Me you are totally feckless. But it is difficult to believe that these are nothing more that rhetorical excess. Meanwhile, I've the consciousness that, sure, I can do it, withhold the venality , the subtle and multiple violences of myself and my worlds. I'll make a will act. I'll get a therapist. I'll read a book. I'll make enough money. I'll get enough status or job security or whatever else I need to sustain myself. What Palm Sunday says, is that it won't work. None of it will work. None of it.

We have in Holy Week the opportunity to see how full humanization plays out in an exemplary way, in the life of this man, who was a Jew, was a member of an exiled people. But he saw this exile, he saw the exile of his people. And his whole passion and death is his answer as to how you overcome that exile. All of this is not very palatable. It won't sell, folks. It won't sell. I can't use diplomacy or public relations or anything else to make this more palatable, although I want to in the worst possible way! I want to fake it in some way. I want to use some means to dress out my life, and my worlds in a way that would be more appetizing and appealing. And there's absolutely no way to do it. Because the religion of Jesus is not some kind of emotional buzz, spiritual uplift. It's not a moral rectitude. It is a vision of life. It is a vision of who I am and the world I live in. That's what it is primal. And we get Holy Week, this privileged opportunity, to look at that with an intensity greater than any other time during the year, to try to knead it, like yeast, into our hearts.

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How we open our eyes

Holy Thursday
Exod. 12. 1-8, 11-14; 1 Cor, 11.23-26; Jn 13.1-15.

All four gospels have the Last Supper scene. It goes on and on in John, for four very long chapters. But he doesn't have anything to say about taking bread and taking the cup, as all the other gospels do. Even Paul talks about the Eucharist as a tradition in the early church. John does have, however, very early in the gospel, the feeding of the five thousand. And his Jesus concludes this by saying, "I am the bread of life and unless you eat my flesh, you will not have life."

But it is interesting that he doesn't have what we call the "institution scene" in the gospel. Rather, he and he alone, has this extraordinary gesture of the washing of feet.

I think it is not totally farfetched to say that the washing of the feet is illuminating for the Eucharist. It is illuminating for the Christian life, for what Jesus was all about and for what we are called to become. Foot washing was a normal thing in a country where the streets were open sewers, and you didn't wear shoes. So people's feet smelled and were dirty. It was a standard thing to have one's feet washed when entering a house, especially at large parties. But, who did it? It was the most menial job in the house, feet were washed by the youngest child or, if it was a wealthier family, by the lowest of the slaves. But here we have this extraordinary gesture of this man, who was not just the friend of the disciples but was seen as their leader, taking that position: making himself absolutely available in the most menial way, and what is at least as significant, in an absolutely unintimidating way, to everyone else.

That, I think, is consonant with Jesus taking bread and breaking it and sharing it. Because if you look back into Jesus' life, one of

the extraordinary things about him was that he ate with everybody. Jesus shared himself with everybody. This was an enormous scandal in His day., wherein social status determined your companions at meals. And the quality of that companionship was religiously mandated. It was largely the fact of what the scholars call, Jesus' open-table fellowship, which got him into trouble. And Jesus' absolute availability was no mere social misstep, an instance of poor taste. Many of His contemporaries saw such behaviour as a repudiation of proper, religious observance. And this, together with other breaches of religious propriety...think of the purging of the Temple...were so grave, that, as we will see tomorrow, he was killed for them. (For now, we can ignore the Romans' part in Jesus' death, and their reasons for colluding in it.) And this should not be too surprising to us today, because we all exist on the basis of a system of social divisions Indeed, they are largely the source or our sense of who we are: out identity.. "I belong here, you belong there. We certainly don't belong together." What we believe Jesus is saying in the foot washing, of course, is that we all belong together. In fact, that's the way we only belong.

Jesus is illuminating something else in this gesture, as well. There's a wonderful line in the book of Zechariah. (Zechariah, apparently which Jesus knew very well, has all kinds of Messianic texts. As we heard last Sunday, it's the Zechariah text which says "Look Israel, your messiah is coming to bring you out of exile. He comes to you riding not on a war horse, but on a donkey.") Later on, in the book of Zechariah, there is this extraordinary description of the Messianic Age, when even the cooking pots and the bells on the horse's bridles will be sacred to the Lord. What he's getting at is that, with the Messianic Age, we have a radical redefinition of what is sacred, of what is holy.

Now we think we know what is holy. This chapel is a holy place. We have holy fathers and holy mothers and holy objects. Of course the whole meaning of "holiness", anthropologically, is that we distinguish what we see as holy from what we consider to be profane. We make divisions. We make separations. But in the Messianic Age,

what for Zechariah is supposed to be illuminated, is that everything in our life is holy. We cannot make this facile distinction between what is holy and what is not. Our holiness will consist in precisely that open table fellowship. The bread is holy. The table is holy and it is holy insofar as it includes everybody. Everybody.

Patty McLaughlin gave me something that someone in her office had put out. It's of the world, as if it consisted of one hundred people. Half of the world's population would be malnourished. And 80% would be ill-housed and 70% would be illiterate. Now Lent is a time when we redefine holiness. Those are holy statistics. Those are holy statistics. They have to become holy statistics for us. Holy numbers. The bread that is not broken is not holy bread. Only the bread that is broken and shared is holy bread. And bread is supposed to be holy.

The difficult thing is, of course, to discover how we open our eyes, how we open our hearts to see all of these people who go to bed hungry tonight as somehow connected to us. And not in some abstract or idealistic way but in a very concrete way. So that, yes, as a result of seeing in this fashion, we rest uneasily to some extent. We rest uneasily because of that. Because this is a holy fact. These three billion people who are hungry tonight is a holy fact. And our holiness, of course, consists in precisely coming to a point that we see that as a holy fact and those hungry people.

Only someone who would go around washing everybody's feet, doing this grubby job, can bring us, can move us, to recognize that everybody and everything is holy. That's why this is Holy Thursday and we are going to Holy Communion or we should be. But we will try to imitate Jesus and the foot washing.

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Naked and unashamed

Good Friday
Is. 52.13-53.12; Heb. 4,14-16, 5.7-9; Jn. 18.1 - 19.42.

I think the best summary of the fact of the crucifixion was given by Paul the apostle, an early follower of Jesus. He says that a crucified Messiah was a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. I think that this remains a fair description of the status of the crucifixion, even within the Churches. You could read an enormous amount of Christian history as an attempt to conceal the scandalous nature of the crucifixion. Part of it is, in a sense, innocuous. For instance, we read the gospel of John, which is presumably the last of the four gospels. By the time it had come to be written there were three generations of the followers of Jesus who had thought and thought and had been troubled by this scandalous fact and came up with their picture of a Jesus who hardly seemed to undergo anything. You'll notice that the johannine Jesus has no agony in the garden. He is just standing there, sublimely in control of everything. So when he identified himself to those who came to arrest him, they all fall down. Radically different from the Jesus who sweats blood, according to Luke's account. What is going on, of course, is what we call a development of Christological thought. So we get a Jesus who seems more and more removed from the historical reality of the event. A Jesus so overlaid with later thought and praying and thinking, that these have almost occluded the real events here. It had the effect, in other words, of de-fanging the scandalous quality of the crucifixion for us, and certainly for the subsequent history of the Church. For example, before I came in this afternoon, I noticed in the news broadcast a celebration of the Holy Week services in the baroque splendour of St.

Peter's Basilica in Rome. I had a sense of anomaly: here is the most brutal form of execution that the Romans knew, totally overlaid with gold vestments and all that grandeur. It's comforting, I mean it has the effect, of course, of comforting us by distancing us, of course, and setting up a safe space between the event and us, so that the stark reality of the crucifixion doesn't impact on us as it might. So, today I would like to take a few minutes to try to disencumber the crucifixion.

The physical process of crucifixion is fairly simple. The Romans had developed crucifixion from the Persians' mode of public execution. Originally it was impalement: they just stuck a spike in the ground and dropped the body on top of it. Not very pleasant, but the process of dying didn't last long. The Romans said they needed something a little more draconian to make the point. So they devised this other method of nailing a body through the wrists and ankles, and setting the person thus attached to the cross, on a peg between his or her legs. In this arrangement, it usually took three to four days for the crucified person to die. But the primary purpose of crucifixion, as with all state-mandated executions, was sociological and political. Crucifixions always took place in very public places. The person was stripped naked, and if it was a male, he was made to face outward. If it was a female, she was attached, facing the wood. It was a mode of execution so "déclassé" that it was against the law to crucify a Roman citizen. Crucifixion was reserved for the most heinous of criminals and for the most egregious of crimes. And in one way or another, the crimes were always crimes against the State. So crucifixion, as with all forms of public execution, was a statement of the power of the State, and the danger or attempting, in one way or another, of contravening that power. Crucifixion , by acting as a deterrent for breaching State power, was to guarantee "public order." That's why Paul had a really difficult time of selling that crucified figure as the Savior. That's why it was a scandal to the Jews. We are

able to see the intent, very early on in the Christian movement, to escape the brutal actuality of the crucifixion. The Gospel of Mark was apparently written primarily to counter this tendency. Then there is the attempt to "tame" the crucifixion by rationalizing it. So we will say Jesus knew everything that was going to happen, as in the gospel of John. Or that this was clearly God's will. So the whole thing becomes a great kind of play enacted before spectators, the ending, of which everybody knows and anticipates. Again, the effect, though surely not intended by the New Testament writers, is simply to take the sting from the crucifixion.

Or, as a further strategy, we all these tidy, comforting theological affirmation that "Jesus died for our sins", which we find reflected in the New Testament. This man died for our sins. It's as though a scrim had fallen on this historical reality and us so we could sit somehow inoculated from the horror of this event and then count our spiritual benefits. What is missing, of course, is the human reality. We made this all kind of a divine pantomime. So, by way of helping us, I'd just like to remind you of what has happened in our century. We have lived in a century which has been probably the most murderous in human history. But we've had a number of extraordinary events. Yitzhak Rabin, Mohandas Ghandi, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Nasser. (I made the list but have probably forgotten many.). Murdered. Usually by people who were supposedly on their side, and always in the name of some political position. Why? Because they were troublemakers, because they upset the expected order or because they breached all these borders within which we keep ourselves, to make ourselves somebody.

This is precisely the situation in the case of Jesus the Jew. He was killed by some of his fellow Jews, for that very reason. Because a good Jew does not eat with sinners. A good Jew does not break the Sabbath observances. A good Jew does not hobnob with the handi-

capped people, who are ritually impure. A good Jew does not speak publicly with women. If you push this further and lay it out programmatically, such a person is a menace to society and the political order, because society cannot continue as it must, as we all feel it must, if all these boundaries were to fall down, if the outline between myself and the rest of the world becomes porous and the world flows in and I flow out. And before we can talk about Jesus dying for our sins, or Jesus standing sublimely sovereign in this event, as in the gospel of John, we desperately need to consider the raw facts of Jesus' death, and its causes. Because neither as individuals nor as institutions are we very comfortable with that prospect. We go to the edge, and then draw back. So much.... no more. Because it's unsafe to hobnob with the left-outs, to say we are available to everybody. I mean, what will the donors give us if we criticize them? Donors, for ourselves or our institutions are all those people who feed into our sense of being okay in our society. We do not do preach the crucifixion, much less, live it well. We do not do it well either as individuals or as institutions. Certainly the Roman church has no great claim to this kind of behaviour. Rather we immediately, and with extraordinary ease, start to sentimentalize or romanticize this troubling figure in our own history. We must somehow make him safe before we can live comfortably with him. Yet we want to say that His death is a supreme act of love. Okay, let us grant that the death of Jesus is a supreme act of love. But why? Because he made himself available to everybody. Because he did not do what we do: tailor our self-image so as to make ourselves acceptable to whatever social situation we are in. But doing this, of course, makes us inaccessible to other people, because they do not see who we really are. So love is impossible or, at least, seriously hobbled because of all this social management or psychological management.

What we are talking about here is not some kind of political revolutionary scheme in anything like the normal understanding of those words. But we are talking about the only real kind of revolu-

tionary action available to us. We are talking about one human being able to be, in the glorious words of Genesis “naked and unashamed” before everybody else. Jesus did not pretend before others. Therefore, others did not feel they had to pretend before Jesus. But that’s hazardous, hazardous to your health and utterly destruction of the socio-political order. Indeed, it’s mortally dangerous.

So, Good Friday is an enormously important day. An enormously important day in our history as Christians. Above all, it is certainly not an occasion just to feel bad: “Poor old Jesus. Poor old Jesus.”. This is the way the day is very often treated, I’m afraid, instead of giving us the opportunity which I have been suggesting throughout Lent, to shed light on us. To shed light on our cowardice and above all on our dishonesty. So if we wonder why there is so little love in the world today, the crucifixion casts light on that too. How can you love what you don’t know? For how can you let yourself be loved if you don’t let yourself be exposed, in all your reality, to someone else? That’s the issue. That’s why this day is so glorious to us in a strange, strange paradoxical way.

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Why Easter is so difficult

Easter Sunday
Acts 10.34 36-43; Col. 3.1-4 or 1 Cor. 5.6b-8; Jn. 20.1-18

This is my 63rd Easter and after having gone through most of these participating in one way or another, I'm pretty much convinced that Easter doesn't work very well. So, I'd like to try to talk about why I don't think it works very well and what might make it work better. Look at all of the great and momentous festivals we celebrate. The feast of All Saints has become an occasion for little kids to go around with pillowcases collecting candy. Christmas is marginally better we can deal with babies and that's part of what Christmas is about at least. But Easter, by and large we're stymied by it. We can do with bunny rabbits and coloured eggs. But once you get beyond that, I'm not so sure.

There is a pattern in the way we've domesticated, and in a certain sense, denatured these great Christian feasts, in that we've taken what is familiar and basically, non-threatening, and latched onto that, and then forgotten the rest. Even in the seminary, where my uneasiness began. The seminary ceremonies were impeccable. Beautifully executed. Not a misstep. Yet it was very clear, in the course of sitting through these ceremonies, that we were far more worried about not making any missteps or making sure that no one else did. This became a substitute for what it was we were supposed to be celebrating. It's a puzzling kind of thing. But then, I take some comfort. If Easter has to do with the heart of our Christianity, if Easter has to do with, therefore, the most fundamental choices and expectations we have of our human existence, it is not so surprising that we don't do very well by it. I mean, if you sit back and try to think of every time in your life, when you tried to draw from yourself an articulation of what is deepest and most significant to you - how awkwardly and gracelessly we bring that off. Think of our responses, for instance, when somebody says to us (and we believe them) that

they love us. For the most part, we're flummoxed. Or think of the time when we've tried to say to another person that we love them and we want to say it with all the power and persuasiveness and depth and reality that is in us: to honestly communicate that to somebody else. We don't do it very well, I think. Think of the times when I want to say ,I really do forgive you. Or maybe more difficult even, the times when I say to somebody else, please forgive me. The structure is the same you see. Those things that arise from what is most central and significant and real about us, we don't carry off very well. No, let us talk about tinsel, or masks or coloured eggs, and we're okay. It's manageable. But when we come to these other, weightier matters, it's much more difficult.

But there is also the problem that Easter is hard to get my head around. To proclaim that God has raised this man Jesus from the dead means what? That some kind of divine spook has gone home finally after this little masquerade that he's carried on for a few years? I'm afraid that's the kind of Easter understanding that I carried with me for years and years and years. This great charade, Jesus pretending to be a real human being. Pretending to be anguished or confused and jubilant, as I am as a human being. I could not deal with that in terms of Jesus and yet that is precisely what the Easter proclamation is about. Let me get more specific. Jesus, like all of us, was tempted to lie, to falsify himself, to cut corners, to put his best foot forward, to con those people he wanted to influence. Just like me. Only I follow through on all those temptations. The extraordinary thing about this man is that he was tempted to do that, and refused to. I, who so often want to set up relationship with those people who seem desirable to me, whom I want in the worst way to trust me, for example, tailor my self-image in order to accomplish that kind of bond. And Jesus was tempted to do that too. The difference between him and me is that he resisted. I, who so frequently want to run away from hard issues; I, who am so easily intimidated by so many people, by so many things in my life, cave in. Consequently, I am different from Jesus who was, I am sure, intimidated too But he had the courage not to be overcome by his own sense of intimidation. I, who want to make so many distinctions, to choose my friends, to say who's

worthy and who's unworthy of my attention. Jesus I'm sure had that inclination as well but did not. In fact, he acted in precisely the opposite direction, by opening up every possible avenue to himself, to everybody that he met. This man eats with sinners! This man breaks the Sabbath regularly! This man is not a good Jew. And yet he was a supremely good Jew. It is for this reason that God raised this man, Jesus. This one dead Jew, out of so many thousands of dead Jews, even crucified dead Jews. This one dead Jew, we say, God raised. We who look at this man's career and say, that is what it is to be a human being. The standard operating procedures of evasion, of disguise, of missing the point, of finding my place in the world by oppressing others in one way or another , by operating on the self-preserving "law" of expediency- the ways are infinite in their variety - this man did none of these. So, God raised him, took him to Himself, and so , validated his humanity.

This is why Easter is so difficult. We want to believe that illumination. We want to believe that this man really does spell out our humanity in the most perfect form and yet I think, at least in myself, there is something that resists going that far. It's too good to be true. Or maybe it's because the implications for my own life, the light that this figure casts on me and my mediocre humanity, is too painful to endure. In any case, to say that God has raised this man Jesus, is to say all that. But, because it is so unparalleled in our experience, in our hopes, in our expectations, we have a very hard time dealing with it. This awkwardness is almost inevitable.

Let me finish with this little scene that John or the authors of the fourth gospel, created between Jesus and Magdalene. What is happening there? All Jesus does is say her name. What does it mean to really say another human being's name? To acknowledge them, to give them room, to say, " You really are. You really are for me and with me and I know who you are and therefore you are safe with me." So Mary says in her response, "Teacher". The one who's taught her about herself, about life, about himself. This is resurrection from the dead and this is why we can't stand to look at it too quickly, because the world rather pours into our lives and washes away the startling

image of this man and the way he lived.

But that's why we're here today: to try to resist that. No, I will not have it. I will not have it. I will not settle for a truncated, abbreviated, mutilated, deformed humanity. Rather, as the great spiritual says - Give me Jesus!

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Only love is believable

2nd Sunday of Easter
Acts 2.42-47; 1 Pet. 1.3-9; Jn. 20. 19-31

A preliminary word about this passage from the Acts of the Apostles. All of these New Testament writings are political documents. That is, they are written with a view toward influencing the social context. Certainly Luke, a Roman and a pagan before he joined this Jesus movement, was very careful to tailor his depiction of this early Jesus community in a way that would cause no offence to the Roman authority. We see this in many places in both the gospel of Luke and in the book of Acts. We know, for instance, in the year 54, the emperor of the time kicked all the Jews out of Rome, both the Jesus Jews and the non-Jesus Jews, because they kept fighting, i.e., being socially disruptive. And the Romans were big on law and order. So Luke was, as I said, at great pains to show that these Jesus-Jews were really nice, peaceful people who wouldn't cause any trouble for the police. It is important, I think, to mention that, not just because it is the case, and provides the context for the document, but rather, because there is a tendency to read the Book of Acts as if it were a literal description of what was going on, and that Luke didn't have own agenda when he wrote it. For instance, the description of this group as having absolute commonality of possessions, sounds wonderful. But there is evidence, even in the book itself, that such an arrangement didn't work. It should have worked, and Luke was trying to say that that was what Jesus was about, namely, that people could absolutely share their own lives with everybody else and, above all, their possessions. (Because that's where people identify themselves more often than not.) But again, this is all part of the lucan author's effort to show that the members of this Jesus movement were all just nice, innocuous folks . The cops don't have to worry about their disturbing the public order.

Now to this famous passage from the gospel of John. What's happening here? Well, when I was given these texts as a young would-be Catholic, I was told that Jesus is obviously risen from the dead because you've got this guy running around with holes in his hands and his side. What's more, Jesus is inviting people to stick their digits into the holes in his hands and their hand into his side. So, all that clearly indicates that Jesus really has risen from the dead. In other words, this text has been classically used as the great apologetic text proving the Resurrection. Well, let us say, even if you could prove this dead Jew is up and about now, is that going to move you to the faith that God has raised this man Jesus. And what is far more important, is that going to tell you what faith in the Resurrection is all about? John answers this very clearly and loudly, "No". The God of the Jews is not into magic tricks and if you think that God is important just because God can get all these dead bodies up out of the ground, well, we are wide of the mark. What is going on here is expressed in this climatic statement that the risen Jesus makes "Blest are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Believe what? Believe that God can reanimate dead bodies? Clearly not. And as the historians among us know, even if that were true, could you just make the historical assertion that was God's doing this? No. God doesn't happen to be an agent in history the way Napoleon, or Alexander the Great, or anyone of us is. No. What the author of the fourth gospel is trying to say is that, what we believe, is that the human pattern of this man's life is in fact what God intended for all of us. It's not just that God has raised this man, and therefore done some big, spectacular miracle. That's not the point. The point is to see in this man's extraordinary life God's intention for all human life. The Resurrection simply means that God has validated that kind of human life. So it is a much more arduous faith , if you will, that is asked for here. It is a much more profound, a much more transformative faith. It doesn't require the sight of a formerly dead

body with holes in his wrists or his feet in order to come to that faith. None of us has seen that. So, why do we believe? What do we believe, and why do we believe? We believe because of all those people, the saints, somehow managed to embody, in their own quite varied careers, the same astonishing generosity of this man Jesus. Or as Hans van Baltasar, the Swiss theologian has put it, “Only love is believable.”

We didn’t need Kosovo, we didn’t need a half million or more Albanian Moslems being pushed around by those good Orthodox Christian Serbs, to show how difficult it is to believe that love really is the ultimate basis and object of faith. That’s the difficulty in this world, in our world, at this moment. As Kierkegaard said, we don’t know what experiences those people in Jesus’ time had. To see this, all you have to do is explore the Resurrection narratives and discover that they are extraordinarily disparate and virtually impossible to correlate with each other. Yes, something happened to those men and women who came to believe that this man’s life really was validated by God, that this man’s career is the archetypal human career. That’s what we are called to believe, whether we saw the risen Jesus or whether we didn’t see the risen Jesus. The difficulty for that kind of faith is going to be the same for them as it is for us. That’s the point.

One final kind of pedantic footnote. This statement of Thomas, put in the mouth of Thomas: “My Lord and my God...” I just reread Raymond Brown’s commentary on this passage. (Brown, a Catholic priest, is probably the greatest contemporary commentator on the gospel of John..) He points out, together with most scholars, that when Thomas is supposedly calling Jesus, “God”, he, Thomas, is not making a claim about Jesus‘ divinity. I won’t go into Brown’s explanation, because you can read any commentary on the gospel of John and find the same thing. But why is this important? It’s not just a pedantic little footnote. You could say...Well, Jesus was God., so He had to rise from the dead. It’s all pat, settled, self-evident. As such, it does not challenge me, really. But to believe in the Resurrection is rather to confront the humanity of Jesus. Jesus, this man, who lived in this

place. That's where faith is founded and is to reside. Not in some kind of facile escape whereby we can say, well He's God and I'm not. He could bring that off, live in that way - I can't. No. We are to be moved by this text, as I said, to examine who we are. How we are. What we want to be. What we think is successful living, a successful human career. That's what we are called to do as, we are always called to do by the gospel.

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Think of who we are

3rd Sunday of Easter
Acts 2.14, 22b-28; 1 Pet. 1.17-21; Lk. 24.13-35.

First of all, just a little note about the first and third readings; they are both from the same person, whom we call Luke, who wrote the book of the Acts of the Apostles which was intended as volume II of his Gospel. And what Luke does is to create a theology of history. This means that he understands all human events in terms of some great overarching theological scheme. And he does this in order to accommodate the scandal of the cross. As the apostle Paul put it, the cross is simply nonsense, one of those indigestible, unpalatable things that, in general, we simply escape or ignore. But, when people knew what crucifixion was and what it meant socially, then this was a very difficult thing to do. They had to try to make sense of it. So, Luke speaks of the cross as an historical inevitability, in the sense that God had determined its occurrence. "Was it not necessary that...": this is the line that we find over and over again. The problem with this way of talking is that it appears to deny, or at least certainly to downplay the fact, the necessary fact, of Jesus' freedom. Indeed, if Jesus had been fated to die, his death would be humanly insignificant, and surely would not have been the central salvific act of our faith. In fact, Jesus did not have to die., that is, His death was not necessitated. Rather, Jesus chose to die. Why? Because that is the way he chose to live. His death was the cost of living the way he did. So, if you talk about this great Divine plan, it is certainly possible to justify that way of speaking, but that justification needs to be made. That is, it is anything but self-evident. We need to begin by asking, what was God's plan for Jesus? It was the same as it is for all of us human beings: namely, that we grow up; and this means, that we somehow construct a life faithful to God. Now, how that works out in particular, of course, is different for each of us. This is the way it worked out for Jesus, given his time and place. So we have to be really, really careful when reading these texts. To understand Jesus' death as necessitated, or inevitable, just puts it altogether outside

the human realm, at a nice, safe distance from us. And being quite beyond us, it does not actually impinge on our real lives.

This famous passage from Luke: the trip to Emmaus. Luke constructs this much in the same way as we saw, last week, John constructing that identification passage with Thomas. In Luke's account, we have, as its climactic phrase, " and they recognized him in the breaking of bread". Now what does that mean? Luke takes the very words, "he took bread, blessed and broke it," from what we call the words of the institution of the Eucharist. But much more is entailed here. What was the significance of Jesus breaking bread? In the course of His life, Jesus' meal partners, those with whom he broke bread, were a cause of great scandal. The claim, made

throughout the Gospels, that "this man eats with sinners, was the cause of the scandal: that this apparently good Jew should consort with low-lives. This man has opened the table, that great symbol of human sharing, of human community, and made it available to everybody. So that became a byword, "this man eats with sinners". And when we are talking about Jesus taking bread, blessing it, and breaking it, all of that stands behind the Emmaus scene . Somehow they became aware, in the gesture of the breaking of bread, of the identity of this stranger, because it was Jesus is the One Who opens up, with absolute generosity, to everybody in the world. So, when you recognize that same generosity, wherever we meet it, then we are in the presence of the risen Jesus.

A theologian friend of mine said that the Christian life is not lived in the light of Easter. Rather, according to him, we live in a kind of protracted Holy Saturday. It is a state of waiting, a state which therefore is going to necessarily entail more of Good Fridays for us. It is within this context that I want to talk today about the Church. A couple of weeks ago, in the New York Times, there was a cover article, in the magazine section, on the second biggest seminary in the United States. And what struck me, in this very long article, is that these seminarians, were prepared to confront the world as the enemy, as altogether inimical to God. So they, as priests, were to be in the world as some grand, crusading figures, because the division between themselves, and everything that was not ecclesiastical, was

absolute. Finishing the article, I felt enormously saddened, and for days, I couldn't figure out why. Until it dawned on me that what the article described is a reconstruction of the ghetto kind of Catholicism that I grew up with, one in which you never went into a Protestant church, much less to a synagogue., because they were enemy territory. You knew who was who and what was what. And you knew where all the good was located and where all that menaces that good was located as well. What is wrong with that? First of all, this is a massive reversal of what was supposed to happen in the second Vatican Council. If you can get a copy of it, re-read John the XXIII's opening address. First, the Church is to be open to everybody, it is to embrace the world in its totality. Indeed, that is supposed to be the very distinctiveness of the Church. In other words, the relationship of the Church to the rest of the world, was radically altered. And by implication, the boundary lines are radically redrawn between what is good and what is bad, what is Godly and what is ungodly. Then, a new role for the Church was encouraged at the time of the council. We were to be able to recognize, as John XXIII said over and over; "the signs of the times". And this means what? That the absolute boundary of the ghetto has now been perforated and that the action of God and God's spirit is not circumscribable in terms of what only goes on in the Church. But as John said over and over, that we are called to recognize the Spirit of God in all kinds of events, peoples, realities outside, as well as within, the Church.

But, what seems to be going on in the seminaries, to a frightening extent, is the re-erection this great filtration system, whereby we can say where God is and where God is not. But, if you go to all of the documents of the council, for the first time ever in our history, we are to be honest enough to say that the Spirit of God operates among the Protestant churches. The Spirit of God operates in all of the great religions of the world and indeed in the world at large. And therefore what is called for, is not some absolute exclusion but some refinement of our powers of discernment. And only if we do that can people recognize in us the presence of the risen Jesus.

Let me enhance all this with a small anecdote. I just came back from a memorial service of an atheist Jew, who wanted no funeral. Martin Seidman and I had been very good friends for years. His wife, an Irish Catholic, and he, made me part of their family. For three years, I ate with them every night. I got involved in the lives of their eight children. At the request of Anne, Martin's wife, I spoke at the beginning of his informal memorial service. After I spoke, a father-in-law of one Martin's kids came to me and, in effect, consigned Martin to the outer darkness, because he was not a Christian. But Martin was a man more generous, who spent his life more for the causes of peace and justice and the poor, than virtually anyone I knew. Yet this little Jew from Brooklyn couldn't get a job, when he got his Ph.D., because he was a Jew. Yet despite this (Christian) exclusivism we call anti-Semitism, Martin was extraordinarily care-full for the world. And here was this "Christian", quite ready to know who was what, and who was where. Now this is an extreme form of the very thing that I am talking about. How is love possible if we are blinded? And are the seminaries producing a clerical caste, men who are so certain of their vision, and so ready to declare who is, and who is not, an appropriate companion (Bread-sharer)? And do they see it as their mission , to convey that same, exclusivist, and quite possibly, self-righteous vision to us? What the reading from Luke enjoins us is this: we need to use the open table fellowship of this man Jesus as the model for who we are and what we say we believe.

Holy Saturday, we live in the Holy Saturday period. What suffering will be necessary for us, who are the Church? The theologian on whose work I wrote my dissertation , said that the Church is the cross from which we suffer, although Romano Guardini's first, and his last books, were about the Church, and they were a paean to the beauty of the body of Christ and the Christian community. . So it is enormously important: that we think of who we are, of what we want. And that when we raise our voices in the Church, we are aware that we are, often enough, unfaithful to the Jesus who was met, and recognized on the road to Emmaus. And that we truly repent for that infidelity.

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Don’t be afraid

4th Sunday of Easter
Acts 2.14a, 36b-41; 1 Pet. 2.20b-25; Jn. 10. 1-10.

This week I propose what a theologian friend of mine has suggested about where we are in history right now, we “would-be” Christians. My friend has said that we’re still in Holy Saturday: Jesus is dead but signs of the Resurrection are fairly hard to come by. I didn’t think this week would bear out his description so adequately. Anybody who has watched the news this week can’t help but feel that that is a very apt description of things. One has thousands and thousands of refugees, buildings being bombed and then you have this monstrous event in Colorado: two teenagers, murderously planning for a year, to destroy their entire school and its population. Anybody who is attentive to the world, anybody who just simply watches the range of things going on today has to wonder, Where are the signs of the Resurrection? Well, we can take a cue, I think, from the Resurrection narratives themselves. The risen Jesus, in these apparitions or whatever they were, says two things in all the four gospels: “Peace be to you,” or, what is even more telling, “Don’t be afraid.”

“Don’t be afraid.” An extraordinary statement, I think, because I believe it is true that fundamentally, it is fear that makes the world go around, and I don’t think that’s an expression either of hyperbole, or of cynicism.. The fact may be difficult to discern, because we wear our fear as we wear our skin, I think, so familiar, appropriate, and natural is it. Well, if that’s the case, then Jesus’ injunction not to be afraid is extraordinary. It is, as so much of the gospel is, simply an impossibility, to put it most bluntly. Don’t be afraid. So this can move us to look for those intimations of the Resurrection which do appear in our lives. And those are instances, I would like to suggest, of courage.

Courage is not, not being afraid; but courage is a matter of being afraid and not being overwhelmed and paralyzed by one's fear. And so it is apt that we celebrate the memory of Bishop Gerardi today, the Guatemalan bishop beaten to death just after the Catholic Human Rights group in Guatemala had presented its report, which accused the military and the wealthy factions of Guatemala of the murders of thousands and thousands and thousands of Guatemalan citizens. Nothing has been done of course. It's been a year tomorrow that he is dead. Nothing has been done. Two judges have withdrawn from the case by reason of death threats. So what I'm suggesting is that, in the presence of this man... and thank God he is not a totally isolated figure... we have some intimation of the reality of the Resurrection. In our world. In our time. In fact,

Central America has provided a whole crowd of witnesses. The nuns and the workers raped and killed. Oscar Romero. The seven Jesuits and their housekeeper in El Salvador. And then, of course, Steve Biko and the multiple Steve Biko's who were murdered under that murderous regime in South Africa.

But it is very important that we understand even more precisely, what courage is. Courage is not some kind of Sylvester Stallone cold bloodedness or nervelessness. And courage, from the Christian perspective, is not for one's own sake. So, it's only half right to say "Oh, that one was really brave." Bishop Gerardi didn't run away. Oscar Romero didn't run away under death threats. Nelson Mandela did not turn into some venomous, vindictive monster after his treatment. But to see these people as moral virtuosi is to misunderstand courage from the Christian perspective.

What we have to understand is, why they did what they did. They acted as they did, not simply in the name of their own integrity or to show their coolness, their grace under fire. No, that's not it. In every single case that I've mentioned it is a matter of somebody acting to uphold the humanity of other people. So we are celebrating

courage, we are acknowledging the interconnectedness of us human beings. That's what courage is about. And of course, again in Littleton, Colorado we have precisely its obverse. What happens when people do not stand with each other? What happens when people really are excluded as these poor, sad kids were? We become murderous, and the world falls apart.

So, are there hints of the Resurrection today? Yes, there are. Thank God. Otherwise I don't think the Resurrection would have any plausibility at all. We'd see Jesus as some great solitary figure, ascending skyward and we would say, "Well, that's all very nice for Jesus, but what about us?" We have to carry on with business as usual, covering our backsides, looking out for number one, in order to survive in this world. But, Nelson Mandela did not stay in jail for twenty-seven years for the sake of Nelson Mandela. Bishop Gerardi did not propose that the army, probably funded by the CIA , had murdered thousands of people, and Oscar Romero did not espouse the cause of the poor for their own sakes. That's where courage is to be found. In our interconnectedness, and no place else. I mean we are not celebrating Sylvester Stallone, a Van Damme or Humphrey Bogart or John Wayne or any of these great, wonderful, solitary mythic characters whom we have created in North America and whom we love so dearly. To do so would be to enroll in the self-improvement , or self-fulfillment school of courage. No.

Their deaths and the measure of their courage is the measure of their interconnectedness, their sense of co-responsibility. In a words, it is their positive answer to the question "Am I my brother and sister's keeper?"

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The loneliness of Jesus

5th Sunday of Easter
Acts 6.1-7; 1 Pet. 2.4-9; Jn. 14. 1-12

The texts today are wonderfully dense ones. Just a small note about the first and third readings, which I'd like to address more directly next week. (The Hellenists , were Greek speaking people and were either non-Jews who had joined the Jesus movement or Jews who had grown up outside of Israel). What we see in these text from the Acts of the Apostles, is an initial tension, in the very beginning of the Jesus movement, between those Jews in Israel who had accepted Jesus and the Hellenists. The tension is already there, in the matter as to who gets served what. The integrity of the community is threatened by this question. So they appointed seven Greek speaking people to get the community put back together, by attending to the needs of the neglected Hellenists. In other words, what is at stake here is the same thing that's at stake in the gospel reading, namely, the plurality of forms of belief, about which I want to talk more next week.

But today, I'd like to take the second of the two things I mentioned last Sunday, namely those two bywords of the risen Jesus that we run across over and over. Last week we talked about this injunction not to be afraid, and how impossible that is. Today I want to take the other one, which is also in all the resurrection stories . "Peace be with you." Or, as we have it here, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." I want to look at this notion of peace in the light of the resurrection.

The first thing that needs to be said is that here, peace is not some kind of inner contentment. It is not peace of mind. It is absolutely not peace of mind. This is really important today, because as a bunch of quite perceptive sociologists of religion have pointed out

over and over, our modern emphasis on spirituality is basically understood by our culture, in North America, as just this kind of inner contentment. I'm at peace with myself. Okay. That's fine. But that's not the peace that Jesus is talking about. It is not, and we need to be very, very clear about that, both because that form of peace is so alluring and so needed. But it is not what the resurrected Jesus is talking about when, over and over again, he says "Peace be with you."

Secondly it's not the kind of peace that we are trying to work out in Kosovo, which can stand as a really good model for what we normally understand as peace between people. It's a peace that's ultimately brought about by intimidation. Everybody will get along well as long as all the mechanisms of fear are in place. We'll all be alright. We'll all form this nice, harmonious whole, but only as long as everybody knows both whom to fear, and everyone operates under that fear. And it is true, that this is the normal understanding of peace. We didn't need NATO and 600 bombing sorties yesterday, and pictures of Albanian refugees, to substantiate this proposition. All we had to do is look at the way families are built and operate most of the time. As one psychologist put it, most human relationships are, at bottom, power games. Who's in charge here? What leverage can I use to manage things? And such calculation works: if you can organize fear patterns well enough, then there's not going to be any trouble. One of the most peaceful places in the world were the Nazi concentration camps, to put it at it's most grievous, or plantations in the American south in the era of slavery. There was plenty of peace there, at least most of the time. But, it was peace that was simply the result of everybody knowing who could do what damage to whom. Therefore, it required tailoring one's behaviour along those lines. And it's really important that we keep that in mind, because it is this arrangement which underlies so much glib talk about peace. Peace, then, is nothing more than a set of strategies for fear management. We talk about anger management so much these days, and that's useful. But we don't talk nearly so readily about fear management.

Well, if this form of peach is not what Jesus is talking about, then what in God's name is He talking about? Well since, Jesus was a Jew we have to look at the Jewish notion of Peace, "Shalom", as we get it out of the Jewish scripture. Paul VI put it fairly succinctly when he said, "If you want peace, work for Justice." In other words, peace is essentially, in the Jewish view, a social phenomenon. It is not some kind of private, interior condition that somehow is immune to all the wear and tear of our interactions with other human beings. The only thing that can go by the name of peace, and that is faithful to the risen Jesus, is the peace that comes from being able to live with each other fear-free...fearlessly. Fearlessly: that is what peace means when Jesus says "My peace I give to you." We people, so diverse, so weird, so self-engrossed, as we all are, are called by Jesus to that kind of peace.

Let me try to get to this from a markedly different angle. There was a great German theologian earlier this century, who used to write regularly about the loneliness of Jesus. Why should Jesus be lonely? Why is anybody lonely? To begin with, I think that loneliness is an absolutely foundational, fundamental experience for every human being. Why is that? Because we send out these little tendrils of ourselves and hope they grab onto something and grow, and nothing happens. They reach only into air and so they wither. So the sense that I am never going to be really connected, at my deepest and most true point, with anybody else is why there's loneliness. And this is just a generic statement of loneliness. There is more.

How many people, do you think in Jesus' own life really understood him, what he was all about? Even his mother, we have in the gospel of Luke, was walking around scratching her head. "She did not understand what he said but she treasured all these things in her heart." Who really understood Jesus' way of looking at the world? To read the gospels, even with all their theological overlay, there are all kinds of indications that no one, even his closest companions, had much of a clue about Jesus. There's more than a touch of exaspera-

tion in the Gospel of John, when Jesus asks, “Have I been with you all this time Philip and you still do not know me?” How many people was Jesus able to share his vision of life with? Nobody. Was Jesus lonely? I suspect an enormous part of his life was lived with a felt sense of isolation.

What sustained him the in his life? His belief in God. This is not some kind of nice, cozy continuous presence of some warm embracing figure. Faith does not work that way. Faith, as the gospel of John says, is a struggle. Once again, the gospels make is clear that this was not Jesus continuing awareness, in faith, of God And we, how are we to believe in a God who says we are called to each other, and do so in a world in which we are ruled by the law of competition, whether we are talking about sibling rivalry between our kids, grades to get LSAT tests to get into law school, or climbing the corporate ladder or making sure your promotion and tenure application, is well in place. That’s where we are. And you can go much further than that. In the midst of all this, how many of us really share what is most real to us, even with those people with whom, presumably, we are the most intimate.

And I’m not saying this as kind of some sarcastic, jaundiced criticism of life. For who of us is big enough to receive the reality, the full reality of another human being? Who of us is even able to gather ourselves up into our own hands and donate ourselves to another human being? Who can do that? And these are the most fundamental realities of human existence. So, was Jesus, Who was nothing if not fully human, lonely? And the fact that He was a non-started in the “rat race,“ as we so often call our lives, would appear to aggravate his loneliness. There was no question of His being lonely, on a number of counts. But it is also true that . His solitude was somewhat differently constructed than ours, I think, because it was solitude that was always open ended. It was open to this mysterious other that he called Abba, Father, God, upon whom he was content to wait, and whose manifestation and presence, whatever form it took, he did not try to manufacture, the way we do.

Peace. Peace. Peace. What is peace? How could Jesus be peaceful therefore? Or is this all more religious blather, of which we've all had too much? The only thing that gave Jesus peace is his belief in God who really did construct all of us, timorous, distrusting human beings, for each other. And the God was a God who was going to bring us all together, all the counter evidence notwithstanding.

So, how does this work with regard to the resurrection? The Jesus that these writers believe had been raised by God from the dead, is precisely the Jesus who was absolutely open to everybody and before whom everybody could be open. This got him into trouble. It got him killed. Because that manner of life is dangerous. That kind of vulnerability is fatal. But then they proclaimed: It's this Jesus, it's this Jew who lived this kind of way that God validated by raising him from the dead. And that's why you get the risen Jesus saying to all these people....peace....peace. Are they incredulous, therefore, because there was a body walking around? Or are they incredulous because the likelihood of us human beings ever being able to stand as Jesus did with each other, is so remote. This is really important, because we need to locate, very carefully, places where peace belongs. So, we human beings, on the micro scale - within the family - or on the macro scale, among nations, know and engage in wars raging violently right now. That's the context for our lives. That's the air we breathe. That's our description of reality. And still, here we have this man saying "Peace be with you."

So it is very important that we understand, first of all, what this peace is all about and know that it always is going to be tenuous and threatened because it is a peace based on faith. There is Jesus' peace. It is available, or present, not because "I have it all together", or "I love myself adequately", or "I'm self-affirmed by my boss". No. We ought to have learned, from so many distortions and miniaturizations and falsifications and disguises of the Christian message, to be very wary when people say "Oh there's peace." So, I hope that we are brought to our knees, to seek this God. To seek this God who alone is the source of what we can legitimately call peace. At least peace the way that Jesus talked about it.

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We are only on the way

6th Sunday of Easter
Acts 8.5-8, 14-17; 1 Pet. 3.15-18; Jn. 14.15-21

I'd like to summarize and expand on those statements given to the risen Jesus, in the readings we've seen since Easter. They are "don't be afraid", and "peace be with you." There are a number of ways of doing this. One very simple way, in direct way, is to point to a book. It's simple but it may not be the most useful way, but the title of the book at least is helpful. The book was written by one of the premier New Testament scholars in the world, James Dunn, and he entitled it: Unity and Diversity in the New Testament. What Dunn does in 400-500 pages is to point out the wide variety of understandings we find present in the New Testament, understandings of who Jesus was. There is, in fact, an extraordinary number of ways in which the New Testament writers understood, interpreted Jesus. Almost every gospel and letter in the New Testament proposes its own peculiar view of Jesus. The Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus the "pioneer of our faith". The Book of Revelation talks about Jesus as the great Amen - the great yes to God. Mark's Gospel says that the only real Jesus is the Jesus who suffers. Paul talks about Jesus as the New Adam. The titles and understandings multiply all over the New Testament. What's more, and more important, is these titles are not reducible to each other. But it's not just the interpretation of who Jesus was, which are so numerous and so varied. There are all kinds of other diversities in the New Testament as well. What does the Christian community look like? How is it organized? Clear, in the Book of Acts, it is presbyterian. It's made up of a group of elders, "presbyteroi" in Greek. Or in John, the organization is congregational. Or in Matthew, Peter has a prominent place.

And even more important than their understandings of the structures of these little communities, is the meaning of Jesus' impact on us - what the theologians call "soteriology". What does it mean to be saved by Jesus? Numerous answers are given to this central question, as well Paul alone uses a dozen terms or models.

So, at the end of his book, Dunn asks whether there is anything that holds all this diversity together. He concludes, by saying that , at bottom, it is the figure of Jesus. But, please note, we can appropriate that figure only through these multiple understandings, and indeed, even more than these, as subsequent history shows. So to put it in summary fashion, one of the effects of the Resurrection is that we human beings are supposed to be able to live in a pluralized world, that was not present before the Resurrection. It sounds fairly pedestrian to put it that baldly - pluralism as the upshot of the Resurrection. But that is exactly what is at stake here: religious pluralism, theological pluralism, a plurality of spiritualities. The history of the Church is constituted by the continuous emergence of different spiritual disciplines, theologies, ecclesial forms and practices.

What is going on in all this? It is the fecundity of the Resurrection producing this great, wild diversity. So why is this not central to our understanding of the fruit of the Resurrection? Perhaps a better question: why are we human beings so uncomfortable with the notion, even more, the reality of pluralism, diversity? We surely are. All you have to do is look at the history of the Church. Over and over the lines are drawn between heresy and orthodoxy, between those who are in and those who are out. But look again. Some years ago, the theological project of Martin Luther was validated by a French Catholic theologian, Louis Bouyer. And this is anything but a unique instance.

We have, in fact, always had this wild diversity in the church. Yet we have also had this counter-move, insisting that everyone walk in the same pattern: tidiness and uniformity have been the order of

the day. But plurality, of its essence, is untidy. So let me again ask the question: Why are we so unnerved by this disorderliness of pluralism? Or to put it in the language of Derrida, and some of the deconstructionist philosophers: Why is the other a source of intimidation for us?

I don't think the answer is very far to seek. The other, in their very otherness, is felt as a threat. Their very difference discomfits us. The underlying problem lies in the basis of my sense of who I am. And that sense is more often than not, founded on the base of self-differentiation. But that self-differentiation is almost never neutral, neither in its origin , or in its effect. But it becomes the occasion for a qualitative discrimination between myself and the other: being thus, I am better than those not as I am - or I may even be worse than the other. But the other, as other, is threat.

So we look at the figure of Jesus for whom the category of the alien, threatening other, the absolutely excludable other, seems not to have existed. All you have to do is get behind these wildly diverse depictions of Jesus in the New Testament, whether Jesus as the New Adam, or the suffering servant, or savior and benefactor (these were in fact titles typically given to the emperor, and which were appropriated by Luke.). There were no alien others for Jesus. This raises the question: how could that be? How is it possible? I think the answer is there in the New Testament, where we can find the ultimate source of Jesus self-understanding, his identity. I understand myself by being able to point to my enemies. So the other is menace to me. Whereas Jesus grew up to believe that God is the great Other, with whom Jesus was to discover who he was. And the God in Whom Jesus believed was a God Who embraced everyone. This God makes his rain to fall, and sun to shine, on the just and the unjust. And so if I am who I am in relationship to God, then I cannot be intimidated by those others whom God embraces as Jesus was not, Therefore, to the extent that I, like Paul, become an imitator of Jesus, I then don't have to be afraid and can have peace – as well as a good deal of confusion, perhaps. But who said peace and confusion were incompatible? In fact to say that they are incompatible is to be a non-starter in life. We

can't take step one if we want absolute security at every moment of our existence. There's no place to go. I'm dead in the water. There's nothing I can do. And, of course, this "mix" is pointed to in a number of aphoristic statements in the New Testament. "Love your enemies; do good to those who hurt you, pray for those who persecute you." The enemy as the other, construed as absolute and unalterable opposition, menace, threat. But Jesus, as a good Jew, is saying I can love any enemy, because God loves us all. So does the enemy stop being an enemy? No! That's the whole point. The enemy can be embraced precisely in her enmity by my love.

This is enormously important not just for the spiritual life but for the life of the Church today, as well, because we are becoming more and more a Church of exclusions, I'm afraid. We are re-ghettoizing ourselves. We are restoring something which John XXIII had, we thought, demolished: this Catholic notion that "error has no rights". So John XXIII said, there is no such thing as error. There are only people. And yet the Church I grew up in failed to make that fundamental distinction between people and abstraction positions.

So it is extraordinarily important to respond to the call of the risen Christ - this Jew whom God validated by raising Him from the dead. This Jew who was absolutely non-exclusionary in His relationships- only this response will secure my existence. And God will do this despite my fears, despite my confusion, my uncertainties. I can even love my enemies. So we are called even in this further sense to a radical pluralism. And this should be true, not just in terms of my personal relationships, but this should also be true, in the most technical sense, in the life of the Church. For instance, can we articulate the figure of Jesus on the basis of Chinese philosophy, or Hindu thought or Buddhist thought? As a number of theologians are attempting to do right now, some of whom are being condemned for their efforts.

What is ultimately at stake here, I think, is the belief in the future, the future, which is God's. And therefore final full truth is, as Jesus said, retrospective. "By their fruits you will know them." In other words this means we essentially live in a condition of obscurity

and incompleteness. But how often have we thought we have trapped the truth? Prematurely announcing our final and full possession of it and silencing other voices, perspectives, expressions. We must recall our history, with its de facto pluralism; and our history of failing to recognize the partiality of our vision; our history of fearing and excluding the other. Finally, we must recall the amplitude of Jesus' embrace, confirmed by the Resurrection. All of this calls us to a sought-after, and lived pluralism. I believe that the edge could be taken from most of the neuralgic points in the Church's life today, if we would see in the Resurrection a call to pluralism.

It is to know that God is drawing us to the future, that God will do what the Gospel of John says over and over "I will send you the Spirit who will lead you in to all the Truth." We are only on the way. Therefore, we ought to be considerably more modest, patient, less assertive, ready to tolerate uncertainty, ready to question our own boundaries, borders, than we typically are. For to be able to do this is itself the effect of the grace of God: enabling us to live that way now.

Finally, to conclude with the words of one of my favorite New Testament scholars, who has a great gift for creating the apt and memorable phrase. He is here commenting on the passage in John read in the Gospel last week - about there being many rooms in God's house. Stanley Marrow has this comment: "In the Father's house room is always available, because room is a function of love not of space."

Feast of the Ascension
Acts 1.1-11; Eph. 1.17-23; Mt. 28.16-20.

Today is the Feast of the Ascension and I'd like to propose that it's the one feast of the Church year that is supposed to call forth, with the loudest and most insistent voice, our powers of "Christian imagination".

What am I getting at? Well, when I was a little kid, they said the Ascension was a matter of Jesus, who was God, having done his business. Then he just sort of zipped up back to where he belonged, and that was the end of it. But that is not faithful to the scriptural witness, because at that point in the development of the following of Jesus, they did not believe that Jesus was divine, but rather that Jesus fulfilled, in his own life, everything that God had intended for us human beings to be. And this is why Jesus was raised from the dead by God. And then later Christian thought clarified this, as we believe, to claim that Jesus was divine. But as far as the New Testament writers were concerned, here was just a man who exemplified the fulfillment of human destiny for all of us.

And so what we are called to imagine is precisely the completion of that human destiny. What does it mean? What does it mean to have lived this life fully faithful to oneself, to God, to other people, and then, to go to God? This is what I mean by calling forth the powers of imagination. Because, unless we engage those powers, this feast day is not going to make much impact. As I've fretted over these texts for weeks, that's the conclusion that I've come to.

It's interesting that Heaven, Jesus' destination, or some surrogate form of heaven, seems to be modish today. We have these 2

current films “What dreams may come?” with Robin Williams and , by far, the more interesting and certainly the more substantial, “Meet Joe Black”. They both have to do with what happens after we die. The Williams film strikes me as a kind of infantile, sensate extravaganza, in which God is not involved at all. Well God, interestingly enough, is not involved in either of these films. Except at the end of “Meet Joe Black”, (although the introduction of God by Hollywood, would, of itself, by no means make a film more substantial!) I think there is the clear intimation that the central figure, Anthony Hopkins in this case, and the way he lived his life, is not going to be exterminated after death. Rather, beyond his death there the film more than merely suggests the very real sense of completion of a human life, beyond death. It’s interesting. It’s very subtle. They don’t mention God at all. There is no explicit religious reference throughout the entire film. But sure enough, in the last conversation between Brad Pitt and Anthony Hopkins there is the intimation that this man’s life is going to continue in its own integrity and honesty and courage.

So, other peoples’ imaginations are being engaged on this subject, and it’s a reasonable thing to ask: what are our images of a completed life? I think the biggest obstacle to coming to that, is the sense that, oh well, we need challenges all the time. At least we say we need them, to be really ourselves. Except, more often than not, we don’t behave that way. Sounds good, but we are not all that Nietschean in fact. We would all really rather be on the beach sipping pina coladas, I think, most of the time. And that’s our most constantly desired sense of completion. But to return to the notion of challenge, there is this element of truth in it, that becomes evident in our reaction to a view of heaven that owes more to Aristotle than it does to the Bible. The Aristotelian citizen of heaven says that we’re just supposed to sit around and look at, contemplate, God. Boring, as the kids would say, and most of us would echo them. And that’s why we need to find some kind of imaginative energy to try to make sense of heaven, remembering all the time, as Paul said, that “Eye has not

seen nor ear heard what God has prepared for those who love him." We take that as a given. But even with that as a parameter, what images can we bring to bear to this notion of human perfection?

This question has engaged me for the last couple of weeks. So I had to ask: where in my life can I point to some kind of experience where it seemed to me every cell of my being was activated, when I seemed to be doing what I was made for. The event was as surprising as it was easy for me to discover. I had the great joy of directing an orchestra, not a very good orchestra, for four years. And it is absolutely the case that directing an orchestra involved me totally. Noting existed outside that world and everything in me was going full bore within it. It was an extraordinary experience. When you talk about being fully alive, alive to your fingertips, attentive, aware, in contact with other people, for me it was that experience, and it was literally, quite extraordinary. And then I started casting around. Well, I suppose you know my oldest son N'gandwe, whose birthday it is today by the way. N'gandwe had polio when he was 5. He's 29 today. What would it be like if, somehow, N'gandwe could build muscle on those pencil thin legs and run and play football, and above all, as a good African, dance? What would it be like for him to have that experience? It is difficult to imagine and the difficulty, I believe, lies in the fact that our lives are so imaginatively constricted. We live at such minimum levels, I think that it's necessary, if we are gong to think about what completion would be most like, to look at those counter-instances in our lives, to find when we were most completely alive. Because that's what God intended: God wants us to be fully alive.

But the danger in using these images, of course, is that they can be totally God- free. Do I need God, as well as a baton, to direct an orchestra? No. So it is, whether it's sailing or surfing or whatever it is that brings you the absolute sense of acting, with every ounce of who you are, in your life. So what was it with Jesus? What was it that

the ascension meant for Jesus, besides being both the completion of his mortal career as a human being, and the beginning of his resurrected life with God? Well, you go back to the fundamental religious reality which is, of course, gratitude. Gratitude. To be religious is, by definition, to be grateful for one's life. And this is necessary to recall, because too much of my life is lived in pain or disappointment or frustration or resentment or anger, so that gratitude gets all-too-readily, eased off the map. Or rather, shoved off the map more often than not. But imagine: what if we could, each one of us, understand our lives in this way? To fully acknowledge that God gave me that orchestra, that God gave me the arms to wield that baton, that God gave me the communication that happens between musicians when they're trying their best to create something beautiful and wonderful. And imagine having that awareness, with gratitude as the context of the whole enterprise. Then, I propose, then heaven begins to really make sense.

Even more, what if everyone in this room were to look at each others' eyes and say, "I'm grateful that you exist." And see that gratitude for their own existence reflected in the eyes of the other. We don't. We can't. We're too needy. We're too circumscribed by our histories, by our diminished expectations of what is possible for us as human beings. We don't need Kosovo. All you have to do is go to a divorce court or a therapist's office to see, spelled large, how badly we get along, how unaware of who we really are, and therefore, how remote gratitude is. But now imagine a massive shift, which freely and fully acknowledge God as the source of all this. Then I think that we can begin, in some useful way, to imagine what it would be like to ascend to God. Because that's the way it will happen.

And it will happen all together. That is, it will not happen in some kind of private, or individualized fashion. Imagine what it would be like existing in utter gratitude for everybody and for our own life, which condition we can only really enjoy in the presence of God. Of course, on this side of that presence it is, as the Gospel of John says, a struggle. To try to be a real human being is simply hard work. That's why so few of us are very good at it. At least I'm speaking for myself. There's a wonderful statement to this effect by the

great Caroll Houselander, (who ought to be canonized). This wonderful British lady writer said “No one is safe who is not constantly at war with oneself.” This, the view of an great, ardent, Christian, Catholic woman. Well, what if we could be safe, without being at war with oneself? But rather, simply to luxuriate in the absolute certainty that we are gifts to ourselves and that everyone else is a gift to us. And to do this in the presence of the Gift Giver. That’s what I mean by applying our imagination to this feast, and, that the feast is the feast of the celebration of our imaginations as Christians.

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To be able to take the other seriously

Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2.1-11; 1 Cor. 12.3b-7, 12-13; Jn. 20.19-23

Today is the culmination of the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus. It's the conclusion of what the biblical writers have to say about it. It is also a response to the question, given our belief that God raised this man Jesus, of how his presence, his influence will be felt in the world today.

Of course these Jews, who for the most part, produced the writings of the New Testament, have to go to their own heritage to find language in which to express that influence. The Jewish word used is "spirit", which is, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, a way of speaking about God's activity in the world. Spirit simply means "breath". So, in Genesis, God animated Adam by breathing life into him;; God animated the prophets by breathing in, "inspiring" them, thereby humanizing them. For that is the work of the Spirit of God: it makes us human. So if we want to talk about Jesus as the paradigmatic human being, and how we can experience his presence and influence, then we use the hallowed language of the "spirit" of God; and we speak of the descent of the spirit.

As I said, Pentecost is a summary of everything that happens in the wake of the Resurrection. For the past six weeks I've tried to spell out those effects in a variety of ways. The spirit is that which keeps us, and the Church at large, from becoming a ghetto again. (Ironically, unlike the original ghettos, which kept the Jews in, the Church as ghetto has laboured mightily to keep the world out.) There is something drastically wrong with the Church as ghetto and the spirit is supposed to inhibit that tendency, which is always present in the institutional dimension of the Church's life. (We need hardly emphasize that this tendency marks the existence of all human institutions.) The spirit is supposed to keep us from being afraid, being paralyzed by our fears of each other, of the world. The spirit is to

bring us to the peace that, as the biblical message has it, enables us to live naked and unashamed with each other, before each other.

But the best summary statement I know of the action of the spirit comes from Karl Rahner. It arose in an answer to the question, "Well, how do you tell when the spirit of God is around?" In one of his essays he says that you can detect the presence of the spirit whenever one human being takes another human being seriously. So, I'd like to look at that extraordinarily insightful and rich statement, as a way of talking about Pentecost.

What does it mean for one person to take another person seriously? The fist step in answering this question is to note that this process, this must be carried on mutually; it cannot be fully done one-sidedly. If I can't take another person seriously then they're not going to be able to take me seriously. So I'd like to suggest a list of those inhibitors of our being able to take each other seriously, which are characteristic certainly of the world I inhabit.

Maybe the most devastating is the way we functionalize our relationships with each other. "You exist in so far as you are a function in my world. You are real because you can type, or collect my e-mail adequately, or send my faxes on time, or show up for work, or do your assigned job. In a word, you are real when you do what I want you to do." What happens when we treat each other that way - as we normally do? We reduce the other to being no more than a function in my world. "I need you to do this: I need you to love me, to clean my clothes, or my house; to prepare meals; to bring home a paycheque" - fill in the blanks, the possibilities are infinite. And to the extent that we do this, we do not take the other seriously in their own humanity or in our own. We simply reduce each other, truncate, miniaturize each other; deny each other's humanity, see each other only as parts in some great cosmic machine, of which I am, or hope to become, the principal operator, if not the creator and sustainer. And this is normal in our world.

Now we have to be really careful here, because there is today a kind of Romantic counter-position to functionalizing each other. This position assumes that we can see and appropriate the personal center or whole of the other, with no reference at all to what the other does - or to our own needs. Such inter-personal transparency is impossible. And in believing one can penetrate the mystery which is the other, or of one's self for that matter, the would-be penetrator takes neither the other, nor themselves truly seriously. To entertain the possibility of relating to someone in this way has nothing to do with truth, or reality, or the spirit.

To return to the functionalized world. We have the functional economy, the functional society, the functional political system - and yes, there is the functional church. All these constitute, as Karl Marx, that great atheist ex-Jew put it, a spiritless world. It is literally that. And one further symptom of that kind of world is its humourlessness. Worse, its joylessness. Because I think we can only rejoice with each other, at any level, if there is a human being there with me, and not just some abstract function.

What's another instance of the spiritlessness of our world? The world as spirit-free zone? Well, we can take up the matter of fear again: the fear of the other which is based upon a kind of ideological fixity. It expresses itself in such statements as, "if you do not fit into my idea of how things are supposed to go then you are obviously a threat and alien to me. Clearly then, I can't take you seriously as a human being." And as I've said, this is one of the great dangers in the Church today. The battle cry of orthodoxy rings out over and over again. One may very well wonder what is in play here, and whether there's not some kind of ideological filter, some sort of checklist which people must go through to see if this other one measures up, is respectable, or admissible to the range of my attention, consciousness, acceptance. Unfortunately, the evidence for this frame of mind is massive and it seems, omnipresent. You must fit my idea of proper colour, gender, sexual orientation, culture, language, way of seeing things, odour, wardrobe, education. These represent the multiple filtration systems that we use to exclude the other, or to reduce the other to a quantum which is recognizable or unrecognizable on the

basis of my criteria of acceptability. To that extent we live in such a spirit-free world, or, to use Marx' much more telling phrase, a spiritless, a dispirited world, we cannot take each other seriously. We can't do it because we've reduced each other to some kind of abstraction. "You are this position; you are an exponent of this ideological attitude, understanding, view of the world."

Of course, ultimately in such a context, we cannot have peace, except the peace of death camps or prisons, which requires as a condition, the dehumanization of the other. We keep everybody else in line. It's a tidy world, much loved by bureaucrats, but it's also a dead world; dead both for the keepers and the kept. Because neither can take the other seriously in that environment and to some extent that is the environment, internal and external, of all of us. In one place or another: in our families, in our jobs, every place where we live.

To be able to take the other seriously means a radical demolition of these borders produced by all these filtration systems that we establish in order to preserve what we believe, out of fear, is our own integrity. Well, the spirit of God disturbs things. In the passage from Acts which Catherine read, if you read a bit farther, you find that people thought the apostles were drunk. They are disorderly, all these people who were able to address all of their hearers. It likely did not actually happen as described, but what Luke wanted to say is very clear: that for us human beings, who hear so selectively, and often not at all, the spirit of God operates to alter that, so that, again in Rahner's words, we can take each other seriously in our full humanity. Because that is the basic fact: not how intelligent you are, or how efficient, or how much money you can give me, or whatever.

Finally, we're going to have a baptism. We've had dozens of baptisms in this chapel. I think I've baptized most of the kids in this room. It's a joy to see them. And what we are doing here, too, is breaking boundaries, borders. That is, this child, Dylan Robert Elliott Francis, is not just the private possession of these two human beings who have biologically generated him. This child's family is supposed to be all of us. God's first of all, and because God's, everybody's. In

other words we're breaking the boundaries of families, in the sense of opening them up, by welcoming this baby into this group. But, concretely, what does that mean? Do we feel responsible for each other's kids in this room? We're saying that the boundaries of this child's nurture, and attention and love, however imperfect, is not marked by biological parenthood, but the boundary is supposed to be marked by God, and it is to include all the rest of us. Baptism, like everything we do when we celebrate the liturgy, is a challenge to our own narrowness; a challenge to our own obtuseness, a challenge to our own indifference, a challenge to our own unwillingness to admit that the world is larger, richer or more wondrous than we typically imagine it to be. So, we want to welcome your baby among us, which is what we'll try to symbolize right now...

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In their relatedness

Trinity Sunday
Exod. 34.4b-6, 8-9; 2 Cor. 13. 11-13; Jn. 3.16-18

In the 37 years that I've been ordained, no day has terrified me, and I think most priests, as much as Trinity Sunday, and the prospect of trying to say something useful. So this is a benchmark day because it is the first time ever that I don't feel totally hapless.

The Trinity : I want to say two things. First of all, about how we came to believe in the Trinity, and secondly, what kind of implications this may have for the way we live.

The Trinity is not present in the Bible. That is, it is not a biblical belief. This is commonplace among scripture scholars. There are intimations of it, clearly. The thing that Rob just read is one of several. But to talk about God is always, for a good Jew, - and all these texts are Jewish - is to talk about one God whom we know as God the Father. Jesus, especially as seen in the gospel of John, is certainly seen as very intimate with God, but not divine. And the spirit, of course, as I said last week, is simply the normal Jewish way of talking about God's activity. It was not really until the Council of Nicea in 325 where the trinity was absolutely brought to clarity as part of Christian belief. It's not surprising, because if we so-called Christians, began as a Jewish reform movement, the central pillar of Judaism, of course, is that God is one. "Here, Israel. God your God is one." the great prayer that the Jews say daily today. And so it would be rather unlikely, even in the wake of the career of this Jew, Jesus, to move from there to some notion of God as Triune.

The point I want to make is fairly simple. It's the one that's imbedded in the text from the Pentecost reading from John: that God does not do magic tricks; that is, God does not plant ideas, full formed, in our heads. Rather, the one thing that is the hallmark of this Jewish God is enormous patience. So that we move, grow, under-

stand slowly, slowly, slowly. We do so much more slowly than most of us would like to think today, when we live in a world of so-called instant communication. A lot of instant stuff. But real human growth, real human understanding, as well as real human communication, takes time. And so what we see as one of the beauties of the Feast of the Trinity, which finally dawned on me after all these years, is precisely God's patience with us.

Even with regard to the central religious position, namely, an understanding of who God is. It's amazing to realize that this understanding was not always present. There are indications of this, and of our slowness to come to it, even in the scriptures. Scripture regularly talks about people never having heard of the spirit, for example, in the Book of Acts. They were baptized believing in Jesus, yet never having heard of the spirit.

So all of this says what? That it takes a long, long time for things to grow for us, Even to marginal intelligibility: about ourselves and about the most profound realities that we say exist, namely, the reality of God. That's heartening, it seems to me. It's heartening, but also unexpected, because we talk so readily about instant information, communication, and comprehension.. We talk a lot about instantaneous movement of all sorts. Whether it's as real as we seem to think it is, is a whole other question. Now, we can in fact communicate, in an instant, columns of figures, statistics, graphs, charts. But, I think we are mistaken to take that as a model for human interaction and human communication. Anybody who has been married for longer than two months knows exactly what I'm talking about.

So there's that. It is remarkable, from many points of view that it took three hundred years after the death of Jesus, to sort out the doctrine of the Trinity. And then, what have we sorted out? That God is one; that God is one - but TRI-une. Now, is having this word a great advance? I leave it to you to think about whether it is or not. But I believe that there are certainly all kinds of useful things in the early attempts, by people such as Augustine, working in the late third and fourth centuries, trying to make sense of the Trinity. And saying such

things as this: that the Trinity consists of God as a family. There's only one God, but that God is a society, is a family. And it's only as a family that God is God. That's the first fairly astonishing deliverance, I think, of the doctrine of the Trinity.

But then, the early theologians went further and said some very interesting and, I think, useful things. They said: the Father is the Father only because there is a Son. The Son is the Son only because there is the Father. The Spirit is the Spirit only because the Father and the Son love each other and the Spirit is the subsistent love of the Father and the Son.

What does that mean? And where does that get us? In God's only reality, these three persons who constitute God, are real only in their relationship, only in their relatedness, only in their total sharing of themselves with each other. And that is fairly astonishing. Nothing is held back. Nothing withdrawn. Nothing concealed. But the Son is there wholly with and for the Father, and the Father wholly with and for the Son, and the Spirit is that very bond. That sounds fairly abstract until you begin to imagine what it would be like for us. Is that the way I am constituted? And as you read the biblical texts, that's exactly what is proposed. I am myself, only in terms of my relationships. I am my relatedness. Here too we fly very much in the face of the good old western ideal that: No, by God, I am bloodied but I am unbowed, in that I am, here, in solitary grandeur; here in my incommunicable, precious, singular reality. I think that this is clearly the way that most of us feel and think about ourselves. At least that's the tradition, at least since the Renaissance, if not before then, in and into which we have been brought up.

But it's interesting to ask why it is that this sense of solitary grandeur, as the very nature of who we are, has such power and seems all but self-evident. I'd like to make a suggestion. Is it because we have so little experience of an utterly shared existence that it is inconceivable? I really believe, as I've been thinking about this for weeks and thinking about myself and my own life, that that's the reason which is dead on. Where in my experience do I withhold nothing from someone else? Where do I not substitute all manner of

alternative self-presentations with the other, and call that connection? Relationship. I don't think it happens. If it does I think it's an illusion. I remember in adolescence a couple of notable times when the Mother of a friend and I were talking, and I thought, " Oh my God, all the barriers are down. Oh, boy, this is wonderful, and we have interpenetrated "- and I'm not talking about sex. I'm talking about what seemed to be an absolute melding of myself with this other human being. But it was a fluke. And I'm not even so sure now that it was real. And it certainly didn't have much durability. On the other hand, if I look at myself and see my relationship with everyone else, the world is by and large a fairly ominous place. And this is my sense of things even with those people with whom I am the most intimate. I remember a friend of mine, married now for 50 years, who said to me once... and this when I was a very young priest and I was fairly shocked when she said it...that there is no solitude so great as that which you experience when being with someone with whom you are supposed to be the most intimate. And they're still happily married after all these years.

So where do we end up celebrating the Trinity? First of all, by trying to appropriate that this is what God is, and this is what I am called to be. And yet, in fact, my reality right now is so circumscribed, so truncated, with so many surrogate "me's" set out before other people.

Well, all of this makes a great deal of sense of this feast to me. At least it gives me an agenda, a way of understanding myself, a way of looking at the world, which is actually quite discomfiting. Because it is much easier to say that we are all these little monads, that everybody is solitary. It's much easier. It's more plausible. On every hand it's easier, because then I can cut myself free in instance after instance, and feel "I'm doing the right thing." Whereas here, in the light of what we say is our Trinitarian faith, all that is put in question. An alternative quite beyond my reach and certainly beyond my own capacity, is presented to me as who I really am. For that we can be grateful.

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Understanding of the Eucharist

Corpus Christi
Deut. 8.2-3, 14-16; 1 Cor. 10. 16-17; Jn. 6.51-59

The feast of Corpus Christi is fairly late. It only goes back to the 13th century, so a great amount of water had gone over the theological dam by that point. What I mean is that, what we call the Eucharist pretty clearly goes back to Jesus and the supper he ate with his friends the night before he got killed. But this supper has been interpreted again and again. It has had, in other words, a number of meanings attached to the original event. I'd like to suggest that there is a danger in that. The event can easily become, and in the history of the church has become, more and more abstract, and in the process, it has lost a good deal of its original significance. For instance, if you look back at the 13th century, it is then that Thomas Aquinas, who wrote the whole Corpus Christi liturgy, came up with the notion of transubstantiation, using the philosophy of Aristotle in order to do that. And, especially under the weight of later liturgical piety and above all, in response to the reformation, the Eucharist became a kind of holy thing, just an object, however sacred, to be venerated. And this kind of abstraction, whereby Jesus' gesture at the Last Supper is thus abstracted, is even symbolized in the form of the Eucharistic wafers. At least when I made my First Communion, we got these little white things that were about as similar to bread as I knew it, as is this carpet that I'm standing on, is. And of course this little white thing was so holy, you could not touch it, and its reception was surrounded by a number of prohibitions. The nuns warned us against chewing the host, which would be a king of desecration. And we had to fact from food and water from midnight, on the day we were to receive Communion, and everyone literally panicked if the fast was broken. And we had to wear our little white suits and dresses so as to provide proper receptacles for this holy thing.

Well, besides creating a really intimidating atmosphere around the whole business, which many of us have not quite outgrown, there is a real problem in understanding the Eucharist in that way. And so I would like to undertake a kind of archeological expedition, tracing the Eucharist backwards, from the time when it is primarily seen as that holy thing, enshrined for example in a monstrance for benediction and 40 hour devotions, to see if we can't make some more profound and human sense of it.

There are multiple layers of meaning laid onto the Eucharist as I said. With Thomas Aquinas, we have his clear statement that in the Eucharist, we have the very substance of the physical reality of Jesus, mysteriously present. The notion that the Eucharist is this holy thing is reflected in the sermons of some of the fathers of the church, who referred to the Eucharist as the "medicine of immortality." The Eucharist is like a pill we take. Again, there is in these metaphors a real sense of distance, of abstraction.

Even in the New Testament itself, as in this passage from John, which is clearly a creation of the authors of the fourth Gospel, we have the large theological overlay, whereby the Eucharist (which the authors don't even mention in their version of the Last Supper) is symbolized in the context of the Exodus. So the Eucharist here, functions like manna did in the Jews' wandering in the desert. So it is the food needed for survival. That's why Jesus is made to speak of the "living bread." This interpretation instances a lesser degree of abstraction, which yet doesn't quite get us back to the original meaning of the Eucharist. And even in the even earlier text from Corinthians - probably written around 60 CE - we have Paul talking about the Eucharist as the bond uniting the people. You remember the context for this passage: when the early followers of Jesus in their houses to celebrate the Lord's Supper, this was preceded by a regular meal. Paul found out that, in Corinth, the rich members would bring very good food, and they would sit by themselves and eat everything they had brought, while the poor people would have to sit there, presumably watching all this, waiting for the rich to finish. Then they all would celebrate the Lord's Supper. Paul makes the

extraordinary comment, “you rich people who do that don’t even know the Body of Christ.” And what he’s referring to are the poor members of the group, as much as he is referring to the Eucharist. But for Paul, the Body of Christ (Eucharist) was the means for expressing and creating the Body of Christ (the community). In other words, Paul said that the members don’t even recognize themselves as members of each other, as members of Christ. So here too, we see the earliest level of trying to make sense of the Eucharist. But, I’d like to suggest that behind even that understanding is the figure of the historic Jesus and the primordial meaning of the Eucharist. And in looking to that, we come to an understanding of the Eucharist that is, I propose, more humanly intelligible and which must support these further levels of meaning: the bond of the community, the new manna, this holy object.

So, Jesus at the time of the Last Supper, most likely knew he was in trouble. Shortly before that supper we have Jesus rampaging through the Temple, obviously upsetting all kinds of people. His intention was to purify the Temple, restore it to its original purpose: that it be a place where people encounter God. So here, at his Last Supper, he was with his friends, a very motley crew, knowing that he most likely would be killed very soon. He wanted at that moment to do what he had been doing in a variety of ways throughout His life, namely, to extend Himself to them. “My life has been lived with you and for you. And this is essentially what I am about.”

Now, how does one express, symbolize that intention? The meal, of course, which for the Jews was the most important form of social intimacy. You only ate with your close friends, with those with whom you literally shared your life. So how could He extend Himself, at this moment, to them? What words could He say, to express what a man who is soon to die, wants to say to His friends?

And that question leads us to the most fundamental reality of what we are dealing with today. “This is Me for you. This is My body, which is Mine because it is altogether given to you.” The gesture which expresses this is the breaking of bread and its distribution to these people.

Now we must be really careful not to romanticize all this. There was Judas; there was Peter, yet another betrayer, yet different; there was Philip, who never got anything quite straight; there was Thomas, the skeptic. Yet it was to these people that Jesus wanted to make this gesture, to whom he wanted to express Himself through that gesture; to whom He wanted to donate Himself absolutely in that gesture.

You see, I'm completely convinced that if we don't appropriate that level of the Eucharist, then all these other levels of understanding are simply castles in the sky, with no roots in our experience, nothing familiar, little that is recognizably human, and therefore fundamentally insignificant. Abstraction is a danger, of course, in all institutional life. How much of church life has suffered from that kind of danger, when, quite often, everything takes place over our head, in some vague realm that we really can't appropriate, or even understand, often enough. I believe we have to try to enter imaginatively into the situation of that man Jesus, at that point in His life, into His passionate connection with his friends, and His intensity, His earnestness, probably even His sense of exasperation I mention exasperation, because it's clear that anybody who has tried to say to another, "I really do love you," knows the inadequacy of all words and all language and all gestures and all symbols. But, the breaking of the bread is a pretty good one. "This is my body for you. This is me, for you." So then we can start talking about the community, because we are all fed by this man, all of us, in our wild diversity, separateness, isolation. Then we can talk about all the theological themes from the Exodus, about the manna. Then we can talk about the holy object out there someplace, exposed in a monstrance with which we can then have Benediction. But until we understand that all these further meanings are rooted in this foundational meaning, then those further meanings lose their significance.

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About ministry

11th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Exod. 19.1-6a; Rom. 5.6-11; Mt. 9.36-10.8

I think there are multiple ways to connect these 3 readings, but I'd like to take a cue from this passage from Matthew. It is the beginning of the co-called "mission discourse," in which Matthew has Jesus establishing the ministry of the Jesus movement. So, I want to talk about ministry.

Matthew gives us a lead for talking about ministry when he speaks of "harvest". This is the standard biblical term for the final judgment. It refers, then to the fact that God is going to assess us on...what? And that is what I'd like to look at today, within the context of ministry.

We get an intimation from the first reading. Moses is reminding his people that God "bore them up on eagles' wings." So they are to be judged on their response to what God has done for them. But I'm not so sure that this Jewish memory, of God's liberating action in the Exodus, is ours, even though it ought to be. Then, Paul, in Romans, is talking about somebody dying for other people. I think this comes closer to us Christian wannabes, namely that we're going to be judged on our response to our belief that Jesus did die for us and so, that his death is of ultimate significant for us.

But I would like to come at this from yet another angle; namely from the ministry as it is exercised in the Church today. What word is being given to us, by the ministers of the Word? I've mentioned the article in The New York Times Sunday Magazine, about a large seminary in the States. The article has spawned a fair amount of comment elsewhere as well. Recall that the seminarians described in that article look at the world as alien, and more than that, as dangerous and opposed to Godly living. So they see themselves as needing to shepherd the faithful into this safe enclave that

is the Church. I suppose those priests-to-be understand that they are to be judged on how well they do that, and I suppose they think the people inside that enclave will be judged on how well they resist everything outside the Church, obeying the bidding of the priests. But, as I said, this way of looking at things is frankly contrary to what the Second Vatican Council was all about. This is to say that, "no, God is not confined within the sacristry. God is abroad, all over. And ministry, therefore, ought to be the job of trying to point out the activity of God outside the Church as well as to be a minister of the Word and sacrament inside the Church.

So, there is another way of looking at ministry and judgment. This sent me back to a book published in 1996, Who's in the Seminary? Roman Catholic Seminarians Today. It's a study done by a former Oblate priest, who worked for years in their vocation program, It was, in fact, his doctoral thesis. The study looked at seminarian attitudes in Canadian seminaries. It is a totally local product and I want to read to you some statistics. I want to read four of the same questions this study asked seminarians in 1995, 1985 and 1970. The author then has a chart comparing the answers given by seminarians in these successive years. I hope I'm not wasting your time, but I think both the answers and the emerging pattern of answers, is extremely significant. (The questions take the form of several assertions, to which the seminarian is to respond that they strongly agree-the first left-most column, or agree-the middle column, or agree somewhat-the right-most column.

Theological Attitude Scale

Today's Christians must emphasize more than ever openness to the Spirit rather than dependence upon traditional ecclesiastical structures.

Percent Agreeing (Strongly or Somewhat)

1970 - 89% 1985 - 78% 1995 - 27.5%

For me, God is found principally in my relationship with people

1970 - 78% 1985 - 78% 1995 - 23.8

Salvation is total liberation from both individual and collective sin, from injustice and inhuman conditions in the here and now. (This was not asked in 1970.)

1985 - 65% 1995 - 26.9%

Faith is primarily an encounter with God in Jesus Christ, rather than an assent to a coherent set of defined truths.

1970 - 92% 1985 - 86% 1995 - 10.4%

There are times when a person has to obey his or her personal conscience rather than the Church's Teaching.

1970 - 80% 1985 - 84% 1995 - 21.8%

There is an introduction to this doctoral dissertation by Andrew Greeley. He is, among many other things, the best known, and perhaps the best, sociologist of religion around, and himself a priest. He writes: "Their piety, alas, is alarmingly out of sync with that of other priests and the educated Catholic laity. This could become a very serious problem as the years go on, because the laity, who are already losing respect for priests, may well go into open revolt against them."

And there is evidence that this cleric/lay division is growing wider.

Why do I bring this up? Because it is my Church. It is your Church. And I think there is a terrible problem embedded in those statistics, a problem that dogs the Church now, and has done so for some time. It is a problem contained in the claim that, basically to be a good Catholic is to believe the right things, with far less attention to whether or not you did the right things. Orthodoxy was notably separated from orthopraxy. (In my seminary, at Mundelein, Illinois, this separation was expressed in a sharp independence of the dogmatic theology classes from the moral theology classes.)

Again, all this has to do with the harvest, the judgment. Are we to be judged on knowing the right answers? Or is judgment to

take a different shape, both broader and deeper? I think this is a crucial question, crucial for me as a minister and for all of the Church. (It is also crucial for what it intimates is going on in the seminary.) I'd like to propose an alternate version of judgment. And from my experience of the Church it has to be based on a negative example. The Church I grew up in was a Church in which the central value and virtue was obedience. That awful statement, attributed to Pius X, that "the laity are to pay, pray and obey," describes the Church I grew up in. And a senior pastor in my diocese, repeated that statement to me, as a newly-ordained priest as also describing the task of the clerical ministry. And both I and the people to whom I ministered would be respectively judged on the basis of that statement. What's wrong with that Church? It is, at bottom , a Church which infantilizes people. And there are all kinds of serious implications of that. It keeps us from taking responsibility for our own lives. In a very real way, it shuts down intellectual discourse between people, or within one's own mind. But unquestionably, the most nefarious consequence of that Church, is that it makes community building impossible. You cannot have a human community in a nursery school. You cannot realistically talk about people being open to each other, listening to each other, hearing each other, attending to each other, responding to each other. In a word, you cannot have a community in which the vast bulk of its membership are not permitted to talk, to express themselves, (The Latin word, "infans," from which we get "infant," means one who can't speak.) Unfortunately this has been the situation within the Church for far too long.

Greeley, who by no means is alone in his assessment , and he is, I believe, dead right. We are headed for very difficult days if the ministers of the Church, and the Church at large, are going in opposite directions, as we seem to be doing. For one obvious thing, such a situation obscures that upon which each of us is, in fact, to be judged, both the minister and those who are ministered to. And this situation radically obscures our condition, if we are, as a Church, called to be a community. We cannot avoid thinking about these matters, because that is our responsibility as Christians, indeed, because thinking about them is what, in large measure, makes us Christians. Surely,

we must first be aware of them. That's why a recitation of these statistics is a homily - a conversation. We are supposed to converse with each other before God, in the light of Christ.

There are problems in place. Which lead us to what? To a cheap despair, always so ready to hand? Or to more earnestness in our own lives; and for me, a closer examination of my own ministry. And for all of us, these problems cry out to all of us, for a closer examination, both of our participation in the life of the Church, and a closer examination of what we think the Church is today, and what it is to become.. We are not a bunch of mindless objects. If a homily works, it leads us to prayer and these considerations have surely done that for me. I hope they do it for you, too.

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What it is to minister

12th Sunday
Jer. 20.7, 10-13; Rom. 5.12-15; Mt. 10.26-33

The gospel reading is a continuation of the famous sermon on the ministry, that Matthew put together, as a kind of job description if you will, of what it is to minister. And as I said last week I think we have real reason to be concerned about what the would -be ministers of the church are coming to when 90% of them see orthodoxy as primary before any kind of other religious allegiance, any other basis for religious allegiance. After reading those statistics, and for a variety of other reasons, I have been thinking a great deal the last few weeks about the question of ministering. So, I'd like to talk about it some more today and next week too, when we reach the conclusion of this passage.

The occasion for talking about this comes from a phone conversation I had two or three weeks ago, with a woman who is sort of on the edge of the church, as many of us feel ourselves to be. The reason she is on the edge of the church is this: she felt that church membership, and the character of church throughout the world, is often enough defined by inoffensiveness. To be a Christian is to be inoffensive, she said. It's as if it were an eleventh commandment. "Thou shall not be offensive." " Thou shall be innocuous." She didn't think that squared with the gospel, and I think she's exactly right. And I would like to try to address this, in the context of the ministry

It's too bad that they skip the 10 or so verses that preceded this passage that I read today because without them, ministry sounds safe and abstract. "Don't be afraid." "Oh, okay. Thanks." No, what is going on in the 10 preceding verses is the detailing of the reasons for being afraid. In other words, this injunction not to be afraid is not some sort of abstract comforting or encouragement Rather, it is a

response to the fear that is engendered, according to John, that's called forth, both by the message itself, and by the proclamation of the message: you will be rejected. And so suffering is at the very heart of the consequence of preaching the gospel. And this is, note, Jesus' injunction to the preachers, to the ministers, to the apostles: suffering is essentially attendant on ministry; They will hate you; father will betray child, child will betray father. Read the tenth chapter of Matthew today if you get a chance. It's fairly grim stuff.

So the question has to be asked, "Why?" Certainly suffering and rejection cannot arise from one's being inoffensive. It certainly cannot arise from being innocuous, being adjusted to the status quo. And more than that, although these words are addressed to ministers, and provide the shape of ministry, as we know all this is not uncharacteristic of the gospel at large. Paul will say: with Christ I am nailed to the cross of the world, and the world is nailed to me. That stunning passage is in the letters to the Galatians. Now Paul may have spelt this out in very large letters in his own life, but anybody who has read the gospel knows that the carrying of the cross, the dying of the seed, the losing of one's life, is at the heart of the lived reality of the Christian life. I've said this over and over through the years And the longer I live, the more I'm persuaded that, the two things that the church, ours and everybody else's, seems to sidestep, are the matters of suffering and of poverty. And the two are obviously interconnected. We don't do very well. We don't proclaim that. We do proclaim a kind of anodyne, pacifying Christianity and we do that fairly well. But in doing that, we have denatured the message.

Finally, I'd just like to finish with a set of questions. How does one sell Jesus? How does one promote Jesus? Not like selling cars or pantyhose or headache remedies. How does one sell Jesus? I mean this is not just a question for me, as an ecclesiastical bureaucrat. It's a question for everybody. If we are to try and find some integrity for ourselves, for our lives, not just our preaching but for our lives, how does one sell Jesus?

This inevitably puts us back to why do I believe at all? Why do I believe at all? I bring all this up because it is central. Not because it just showed up in the reading, but this is a central issue. How do I promote the cause of Jesus? God knows Jesus has been sold along with snake oil and all kinds of devious things. But how do we sell the real Jesus? The Jesus who says you will suffer, you will pay dearly for this kind of commitment. And so I think about that, and it's not just because I am a cleric. It's everybody's job. Although Jesus' words are supposedly addressed to the apostles, they are, by implication, addressed to all of us.

A footnote on suffering and ministry.

Jesus talks about the penalty for pronouncing the gospels. But all this is not supposed to be some sadomasochistic thing. He doesn't say that. But He does say that you must make some discrimination. For example, you go to preach in a place, and if they can't hear, you leave. And that is a theme in the gospel. If you go someplace and you make the judgment that you can't be heard, then using the Semitic metaphor, you shake the dust of that town off your feet and you go away. So, rejection is not some kind of indiscriminate or groundless suffering. That's the kind of church I grew up in: if you felt bad it had to be useful…religiously, you know.

No!. That's not what he is talking about. He's saying, you have to make prudential judgments as to whether you can be heard or not. If you can't be heard, then you leave. You simply walk away. That's part of the ministry and that's part of the suffering too.

In fact, it occurred to me, as I was preparing for this sermon for this week, that there is one passage in the gospel which is never preached on, either by me or anyone I've heard. Now hear it again in the context of what this lady said, "Thou shall not be offensive." There is Jesus' line, "Don't cast your pearls before swine." Fierce language. Now, it's very difficult, because, our self-interest being such as it is, we are too ready to declare "swine" those people that simply don't take to us. But that does not invalidate Jesus' words. You have to use your brains when you are proclaiming, when you are

ministering the gospel, when you're trying to say the word. If you can't be heard, you leave.

So, this is a crucial part about talking about ministry and talking about rejection. And we have to think about it in those terms, because rejection is the "punishment" for proclaiming this message authentically. But we don't like to think about, because we don't like to be offensive. I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. Not me. I want to be nice. Well, Jesus was not nice otherwise he wouldn't have ended up on the cross. In the immortal words of Daniel Berrigan "To be a Christian, you have to look good on wood."

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Can we speak the truth?

13th Sunday
2 Kings 4.8-12a, 14-17; Rom. 6.3-4, 8-11; Mt. 10.37-42

Today's Gospel is the last of the sections of the big missionary discourse in Matthew's Gospel. This is the sermon that Matthew created, assembling it from a number of disparate sayings of Jesus to describe the ministry. I suggested last week that there is a certain problem in the fact that Christianity has been tamed in a variety of ways so that we can talk about the eleventh commandment being "Thou shall not be offensive." This is really important in terms of how we are going to talk about the ministry because there are a lot of very big complications for ministers in general. Remember that film, "Mass Appeal," with Jack Lemmon. Ministers, quite often, I think, tend not to lead with their chins but rather to seek to be acceptable. And there's even that tendency in the choice of the readings.

Today is an example, where the passage immediately before the assigned passage is much fiercer than the reading we get. I mean, this is fierce enough; "Whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me." That's strong stuff. But at the same time it can be volatilized into a sort of general warning, I suppose, about nothing in particular. So, I'd like to read just a couple of lines before this verse which I think offers an appropriate context for this verse and put to us the interesting question as to why whoever chose this reading, did not include these two verses in today's reading. (Because in the lectionary there are a number of instances where the text are softened.)

So Matthew has Jesus saying, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I've not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I've come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law and

one's enemies will be the members of one's own household." And then he moves on with the passage I just read. Now, these words of Jesus are not the remark of someone who is, by intention, inoffensive. But we have to be very careful though to figure out where the offence lies.

As I said from those melancholy and dreary statistics that I quoted a couple of weeks ago, there is a tendency to say the offence is to be found in the collision of some kind of doctrinal position, let us say birth control - which is not dogma of course - , and people's behaviour. Is that the sword? Well, maybe a dagger, and some might even call it a butter knife. But I'd like to propose that if you take the gospel as a whole, the storm that Jesus attempts to raise is of a different nature.

First of all, it is important to remember that Jesus was a lay person in his world. Furthermore, you have to always keep in mind, when you hear these readings from the Gospels or from Paul, that they didn't think Jesus was divine They thought he was a prophet. But prophets were lay people. They were non-bureaucrat, not parts of the official religious machinery. In fact they were counter bureaucrats more often than not. And it's really extraordinarily important to appreciate that in Jesus, namely, that here's some guy off the street, coming and saying these things, saying that the religious bureaucracy can suffocate people instead of liberating them. As a footnote, we Christians think that, well, Jesus has already come, and we're all washed in his blood, and he's raised from the dead, so we're all home free. That is, we're somehow immune from all those nasty problems that were there, present at the time of the writing of the New Testament. Well, we are not, and church history gives us enormous amounts of data attesting to that effect.

So Jesus will say these totally outlandish things, for example, that the Sabbath, which is one of the most important religious observances, was made for the sake of human beings rather than human beings made for the sake of these religious institutions. So it is not surprising that Jesus' upsetting the bureaucratic tidiness offended His fellow Jews.

And, as I just said, we get all kinds of evidence of this in the New Testament But basically he was killed by the political, as well as the religious bureaucracy. The Roman Empire was, if nothing else, a very firm, full developed, fully defined, political bureaucracy.

From here, we can go to a number of places at this point, but I think one of the most useful, is to talk about that great danger that besets every bureaucracy: the abuse of power. Bureaucracies can be, I think, realistically described as a system for the distribution of power. Those in charge of the bureaucracy can exert their will on the lives of the people who are subject to them in some way or another. And in light of this fact, we get these outrageous statements from Jesus: the one who wants to be the first must be the servant of all. Beware of those who have power because they precisely will make their influence felt and get people to do, by violence, what they want done. Among you, that must be totally reversed. Now, no bureaucracy can withstand or tolerate such views. No bureaucracy, whether then or in our own day, can operate on the basis of Jesus' view of things. So it is not surprising that Jesus became, not just an irritant, but a threat to the way power is distributed.

And then I'd like to update all this with a third reason wherein Jesus was offensive. The older I get, the more I am convinced that the hardest thing to do in the world, in life, is to tell the truth consistently. It's embarrassing. I should have learned this by the age of three. But I really believe that truth-telling is the great testing ground of our integrity and of our humanity and it's the most difficult one. And yet, as you look at this fact in terms of the Christian life, which has love as its absolute priority, love is either based on truth or it is impossible. To love anything fraudulently is to not love. And this refers to whether I buy somebody else's projection of who they want to be or whether I buy my own. Jesus had this extraordinary capacity it seems, to let everybody be with him so that they didn't have to fake it. Therefore room was created for them to be themselves, for their own truth, however mottled that was.

I had, this past week, an extraordinary experience of truth telling. It amazed me. I went to New Orleans to visit some artist friends who work at a university down there The head of the art department and a friend of his, a long time member of the department, took me to this enormous space which they had bought to use as a studio. There were massive metal sculptures, and very large canvases. We were there for about an hour. I saw a variety of their work and some other people's work too. (It's a black university, and this fact certainly added something to the nature of the art that I saw.) I had the overwhelming sense that, in this space, these people told the truth. To be an artist, as they were, is essentially to say the truth. I was dumbfounded. I truly was. In this space these people are doing the truth. Now does that mean they are wonderful human beings? I don't know. But at least in that space, doing those things, creating their sculptures, their paintings, they were telling the truth and drawing from the deepest recesses of themselves, and the bureaucracies be damned! No, they don't have to be damned because they don't even enter into the consciousness of the artist who is truly working at her or his craft really seriously.

So I offer this instance, not just to take you down memory lane, but because we live in a world where truth is a rare commodity. I shouldn't say commodity because we "commodify" everything. It is such a rare reality that it's hard to figure out where we can find it. And in the lives of these two artists at least, there was a palpable sense that they were telling the truth.

So, what is the ministry supposed to look like in the church? Can we truly speak the truth to power - that great Protestant summary statement of what the gospel is supposed to do? Can we speak the truth to power? Whether the power of the church, or the power of any other bureaucracy that we have to deal with. Can we speak the truth? Do we speak the truth to power? Because if we do, I really think that the doing of it is going to very closely match this self-description of Jesus, namely that we will be bringing not peace, but

the sword. So, the ministry is cruciform, just as the Christian life is cruciform. And we are all, by reason of baptism, called to ministry, to priesthood. The priesthood of all believers is not some Protestant deviation but is standard Catholic doctrine. And so what Jesus said about the ministers he said about all of us. We need to avoid, I think, at all costs, the taming of the gospel., the rendering of the gospel as innocuous or inoffensive.

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What is at stake here

18th Sunday
Is. 55.1-3; Rom. 8.35, 37-39; Mt. 14.13-21

I think that one of the most underrated aspects of the writings of Paul is his literary gift. Granted his intelligence, his ability to make sense of Jesus, and the movement which originated with Him, his ingenuity; all these are very important. But virtually nobody talks about his literary genius, and yet we see it in a variety of places in the letters: for example, the famous hymn to love, in the first letter to the Corinthian Church. And today we have this climatic statement at the end of the eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans - Paul's most pacific, composed and serene letter wherein he talks about nothing being able to separate us from the love of God in Christ.

It is beautiful. Neither death nor life, angels or rulers.... But we need to understand that the context out of which Paul came to feel this way, think this way and write this way.

Those who chose this reading left out verses. Verse 36 is a citation from the Hebrew scriptures. Paul, as a good Pharisaic Jew, would have known them well. That verse says that we are being killed all the time, daily, for the sake of God. And these words are crucial for understanding the rest of the text. Otherwise it could be understood as saying that, "Well, God's there all the time and God's going to take care of me all the time and it's all going to just be swell." But clearly that is not Paul's experience, and that's not what he was talking about. He was talking about his own life. When he talks about hardship or distress or persecution, these are not abstract possibilities that exist somewhere, for somebody, at some time, all of which are indeterminate. No. Paul's talking about the sword or peril or famine or nakedness out of his own experience, his own life as a follower of Christ.

Now everybody has catastrophes. I just came from a third world country. People live very close to the bone and there's a lot of hunger. And we know that that's the situation for most of the people on the planet. Life is hard. Physically hard. Food. Clothing. Housing. But that's not what Paul's talking about here. He is talking about trying to live in Christ and having Christ live in him. He is referring to his enormous generosity and openness to the world, concern for the world. But that is what cost him, and what moved him to say that he lived his life like a lamb being led to slaughter. And it makes an enormous difference if we are aware of the concrete realities of his world and his experience, and then, hear this text. You think... "Ah. Paul's off on another lyrical flight again. We all indulge our selves once in a while with this sort of rhapsodizing, shingling off in space with our feelings or our words. But that's clearly not what's going on here, when Paul says that he was convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers, nothing in the world, all the powers in the world that exist, the opinions of other people will separate us from God.

So the fear that encumbers us, surrounds us for so much of our lives, not even this power, he says, is going to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. So Paul will say, over and over, relative to this, that even when he is being crushed, he is still hard at it, because it is the power of God, the grace of God, driving him, as in another text from his Corinthian correspondence, he speaks of the love of Christ compelling him.

So we have to be careful that we don't romanticize Paul's words because it's so easy to make religion a kind of anodyne, or safety hatch out of which I can get out of any kind of tight situation in life. Cancer. The death of my mother, or my dog. Or all the hard things that we have to go through. All of the pain deriving from these events, don't constitute the Cross for Paul. And attempting to escape such and similar pain: that's not what religion was for Paul, and it should not be that for us. It is important to bring up all this upon the occasion of a baptism.

Raising a child, as everybody knows, is the world's most difficult job and the one for which we are the least prepared. All of us who are parents know that very well. You can't take a course to equip you for the job, and even good old Dr. Spock leaves hole after hole after hole. In raising a child in the Christian tradition we as adults ask from the heart, how do you get from this innocent, totally helpless entity that is a baby, to the condition of a mature person who would make this kind of claim Paul makes? That's the question. That's the leading question. Most of us, I think, grow up and come to the point believing, that the world is, in the end, an inhospitable and dangerous place. I think at the deepest point of our lives we know that we are menaced and that we have to look out for ourselves. (I think that's even proved obliquely by all those programs that say: "No, everything is wonderful in it's own way." Such programs don't work really, and they seem to work, only at the cost of enormous self-delusion.)

So how do you deal with a baby and bring her up to say that this world, and her life are God's? How do you make this the fundamental act of consciousness, which will then enable this child to come, sooner or later, to the point that fear and the menacing quality of the world does not so encase them that they feel they must look out for themselves above all, and at the cost of everything. I really believe that is the eternal question for those of us who are parents. How do you give the child the sense that the world is safe to live in but that it is not "Bambiland"? Rather, that it is fraught with dangers. Not just the dangers of disease, or natural catastrophes, but the dangers resulting from everybody's self-seeking, including my own. How does one operate so that one's children do not simply consign themselves to occupying the same kind of, self-enclosed, self-protecting role in life that we see at work everywhere? How do you do that? I do not know. But I'm persuaded that's what baptism is all about. Baptism is simply the awakening us would-be adults, to the stakes. And what is at stake here? What are we to do ? What vision of life do we have, fundamentally, and how in God's name can we, if you will allow the language, instrumentalize that in the way we deal with our babies, with our children? How do we keep them from being either

terrified by life or go out into life as if it were some pastel painting by Renoir or Monet, where there are no sharp edges, where there are no hard surfaces, where everything difficult can be emulsified and made somehow comfortable. How do we do that?

That's what you parents are undertaking. That's what we are all undertaking at one point or another, in receiving this child into our community. So that the child will come to see that nothing in life is going to close her in on herself, ultimately. So that nothing in life is going to make self-preservation the ultimate and foundational reality of every impulse I have. It is our job as Christian parents, to put it in Pauline language, to convince our kids that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor life, nor death, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God, Christ Jesus, our Lord."

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Here is Paul, the Jew

19th Sunday
1 Kings 19.9, 11-13; Rom. 9.1-5; Mt. 14.22-33

Today is one of those rare and happy occasions when the readings, all three of them, are really powerful. However, there is no obvious connection between them. So what I'd like to do is to focus on the central reading, which is from Paul to the Romans, because it says something to us of which we in all of the Christian churches, have only within the past 20 - 30 years become even modestly aware. It is that we are really reformed Jews. Contrary to what I was taught as a kid, and in the seminary, Jesus did not come to found a new religion or found a Church. Jesus, in His life, worked to reform the Judaism of his time. That's what he came to see as his life's work. That's what he did and that was one of the reasons why he was killed.

One of the reasons that we are not aware of this is the fact that, historically, most scripture scholarships, the most powerful scripture scholarship, was done in Germany. And, of course, Germany has a long history - together with the rest of Europe - of anti-Semitism. And this is certainly one of the major contributing factors whereby our Jewishness simply got eclipsed. We in the Roman Church, of course, have worked out our own strategies for denying that. The supercessionist school of thought, for instance, says that the Jews, as deicide, are basically God-damned, and that Christianity has made Judaism an empty, fruitless relic. Therefore there is no help for them (and so we can declare open season on them.)

So that's the context within which we read Paul. But what in fact Paul is talking about here, in one of the most poignant passages in the entire Bible has to do with his new kind of Jewishness and his cutting himself off from those Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Remember last week's reading, where we heard those stunning words: nothing in the world - death, life, power, principalities...nothing is going to separate us from the love of God in

Christ. This was Paul's sense of himself. But please note that it is immediately after those stunning words, that he looks to his fellow Jews. This is what he is anguished about: if nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, what about my fellow Jews?

An extraordinary response from this man who said "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me." and " I seek to know nothing among you but Christ and him crucified and the power of his resurrection." Here is this same man saying, I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ.

Astonishing. It is astonishing that this man would say that: " For the sake of my own people." Amazing. Here is Paul, the Jew, wondering about those other Jews who did not see Jesus as Messiah and certainly, above all- and this was the crucial point- as a suffering Messiah. Because the image of a Messiah who was not triumphant, victorious, but who suffered, and who was executed like the meanest of criminals, was the great neuralgic point.

Remember that, at the time of Jesus, the Jews were an occupied people, and would have relished a grandly triumphant hero, who would liberate them. And then Jesus comes along and complicates the situation, wherein people might see he was the Messiah. But He didn't make messianic sense, because the Messiah was not supposed to suffer and die. So this created a problem. A problem that I suggest, and have suggested for years, that we Christians have never really come to terms with ourselves. I mean, we too want a triumphant Jesus . We want a Jesus who wins, who beats up on His, (our?) enemies. We don't want a suffering Messiah either, either as individuals or as institutions.

So what happened? And how did all 19 century and 18 century German scholarship say little about the Jesus the Jew until Albert Schweitzer, in 1901, wrote his remarkable book about the search for the historical Jesus? Well, all you have to do is look at the New Testament. Look at the gospels, above all, of Matthew and John which were basically written to address this great fissure in Judaism: some Jews took Jesus as Messiah, some did not. So you have the paradoxi-

cal depiction of Jesus in both those gospels, where in Jesus is the most Jewish of Jews, and, at the same time the “Jews” are hypocrites, a brood of vipers etc. etc. You remember the gospel of Matthew has the Jews saying at Jesus’ trial - “His blood be on us and on our children.” And according to the gospel of John, we have “the Jews” saying -”We have no king but Caesar.” Which is to say that we simply abandon our own religious heritage. Did the Jews say that? No, they did not. It is simply a device used in the first century to discredit the Jews who did not understand Jesus as the Messiah. But the situation gets worse.

Let me go back. This is not a history lesson, but unless we understand this we are going to miss a lot of our own would -be Christianity. In the year 54, the emperor Claudius threw all the Jews out of Rome. Why? Because they were fighting over some guy named Christos. This is evidence of the very thing that I’m talking about: Jew struggling against Jew over the question of who was a real Jew, the Jesus-Jews, or the non-Jesus-Jews. By the year 313 of course, Constantine, for whatever reason - largely political I suspect - declared Christians legitimate and not only that , but they became the official religion of the Empire. So we were winners. We were winners and that’s why Christianity takes on all kinds of coloration of the Roman Empire. The pope, the Bishop of Rome, is given the same title as the Roman emperor - the pontifex maximus. The great bridge builder. The church is divided as the Roman political world was divided - into dioceses, with an overseer in each of the diocese.

The stakes were raised when Constantine said that the Christians were legitimate. Let me read you a couple of passages from a set of sermons preached by St. John Chrysostom, , Bishop of Antioch in Syria, about the Jews: “Of what to accuse the Jews? Of their rapine, their cupidity, their deception of the poor, thieveries, and huckstering? Indeed a whole day would not suffice to tell it all. How can Christians dare have the slightest converse with Jews, most miserable of all men? Men who are lustful, rapacious, greedy, perfidious bandits. Are they not inveterate murderers? Men possessed by the devil whom debauchery and drunkenness have given them the man-

ners of the pig and the lusty goat. They know only one thing - to satisfy their gullets, get drunk, to kill and maim one another. Indeed, they have surpassed the ferocity of wild beasts where they murder their offspring and immolate them to the devil. “

This was preached in his cathedral church at the end of the fourth century. And further, he said, “The synagogue. Not only is it a theatre and a house of prostitution, but a cavern of brigands, a repair of wild beasts, the domicile of the devil, as is also the soul of the Jews. God hates the Jews and always hated the Jews. And on judgment day he will say to Judaisers - depart from me because you have had intercourse with my murderers. It is the duty of Christians to hate the Jews. He who can never love Christ enough will never have done fighting against those Jews who hate him.” (You can find the original Greek in the Huron library, if anybody is interested.)

And Chrysostom’s tirade is neither unique, nor without consequences. In the middle ages, of course, Jews were famously libelled as well poisoners and ritual murderers of Christian children. This is our history. Even today, synagogues and Jewish cemeteries continue to be desecrated. Anti-Semitism is not dead. And anti-Semitism is the pure creation of us, reformed Jews.

And I’ve asked over and over in many of sermons here, how much we have lost by not understanding our Jewish past. The Jewish notion of truth for example. The Jewish notion of authority. The Jewish notion of community.

So where do we go? What do we do with all this? Just feel bad? “I don’t hate Jews. Some of my best friends are Jews.” Well, just a couple of little suggestions. What we see here in Christendom is the terrible danger of demonizing those who disagree with us. It is a normal tendency. This is one thing, I think, which we learn here. But perhaps more to the point, there is this further matter. The crucial issue with Jesus is that he was killed by Romans who saw Him as a threat to imperial power. “Is this the king of the Jews?” And he was a threat to some Jews. Why? Because he opened up Judaism in a way that it had not been opened: to prostitutes, to women, the handi-

capped, sinners, the poor. This man was available to all these people, who were considered impure. So, what I'm getting at is simple. What we can also learn is, to be warned, by that example, against our normal tendency to exclude the other who is different from us. God is known now, as in today's passage from the Book of King's, in the silences; not in our self-righteous propositions and laws and routines and sets of order and procedure. God is known in the silences and therefore that God is not nearly as accessible as canon law would appear to have us believe. Or even systematic theological tracts would have us believe. Are they necessary? Yes. Canon law, theology and dogmatics? Yes. They are necessary. But what we have frequently done, is to use them to erect barriers around ourselves and of course demonize those who stand outside those barriers.

So, we're going to hear Paul's frail attempt to make sense of this terrible problem Paul will say: "They are my people. God has come to them. The Messiah has come from them. The law has come from them. Everything good. God's will to save everybody has come through the Jews." And so, here he is stuck with this enormous problem of the status of those Jews who do not see Jesus as Messiah. And next Sunday, we skip to the eleventh chapter of Romans to see Paul strenuous attempt to make sense of this. But that's next week. Now we have to think about these texts.

"I would willingly be cut off from Christ." And this is the last thing that we can learn. That kind of sensibility. "I would willingly be cut off from Christ for the sake of my fellows." Amazing.

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So have we made Jesus inoffensive?

Assumption
Rev. 11.19a; 12. 1-6, 10ab; 1 Cor. 15.20-26; Lk. 1.39-56.

When I quoted what a friend of mine had said to me a few weeks ago, several people came back to that statement. It was memorable for them. The statement was that, “Thou shall not be offensive” seems to be one of the pivotal laws of Christian behavior. I’ve been thinking a great deal about that. Where all that comes from is interesting, this kind of domestication of the Christian thing, this blunting of the sharp teeth of the Gospel. So I have some proposals to make in terms of this feast.

I don’t know which comes first. Whether our making of Christianity, a position wherein nobody gets disturbed by anything. Whether that came first or whether we’ve domesticated Jesus, our made Jesus, as my great “bud” in the sky. (There is so much evidence of this. The 19th century portraiture of Jesus showed this nice, benign, quiet, sweet looking fellow you couldn’t help but like once you saw him.)

Because if we first made Jesus inoffensive then everything else follows logically. But, it’s the priority I’m uncertain of, but the pattern is well in place. Then I started thinking, because we have all these passages from Matthew’s sermon on the kingdom and the ministry, that we have made the ministry inoffensive. I mean, when you think of a priest, how far is Bing Crosby from your head? Many of you are lose enough to me in age... Well a few of you are close to me in age to remember “The Bells of St, Mary’s,” and “Going My Way.” “Oh good old Father, he solves all the problems. “ Just this sweet fellow, who is kind of hanging around all the time. Fr. Mulcahy in M.A.S.H. is another good example, I think. And that’s a recent incarnation. We have the same image of the priest as this kind of nice, inoffensive character who won’t bother anybody. So you see where the pattern plays out.

Then, of course, we're celebrating Mary today, Mary's assumption, as a reunion with her son and with the Father. And then I think the pattern I've been talking about certainly includes her too: Mary seems to be the absolute archetype of inoffensiveness. You want something from God? The sisters told me when I was a little kid, God's kind of tough you know. The old man. The thing to do is get a hold of Mary and then she could sort of bribe God to get her way, so if you can just enlist Mary in your favour..... Mary is just a sweetheart. You think of all these nice pictures of Mary. " Just lay it on me. I'm just here. Hanging out. Waiting for you and then I'm just going to be all nice and pleasant."

And I don't think this is an exaggeration. This is certainly the Marian picture that I grew up with. It is very much a part of Catholic sensibility. In fact, as I said last year, Rosemary Ruether got into big trouble in the Vatican when she tried to propose a different idea of who Mary was. A talk she was to give at one of the Vatican universities was cancelled because they didn't like that kind of alternate version, of Mary as a woman of energy, strength, a capable woman.

The context for seeing Mary in this way is the hymn, the "Magnificat". We know it through Vivaldi. Bach. There are all kinds of settings of the Magnificat. All those wonderful Bachian trumpets coming out with "My soul magnifies the Lord." But then, beyond all the sweetness and light, go further to the text, and you hear stuff like this: " He has shown the strength with his arms by scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

Now, how do we read that? Do we read that in the context of Bachian glory? Or is Mary about something that is profoundly disruptive? Is she celebrating something, that is anything but inoffensive? Is she celebrating, in line with the Hebrew scriptures, what God is about? This disruptive, upsetting, non-accommodational God, who will not take the status quo as normative. Who rather reverses it. "The last shall be first and the first last." The very thing we see over and over and over in the parables of Jesus and in Jesus' own life.

As I said last week, the great problem for some of the Jews was the idea that they were going to have a leader, a Messiah who would suffer. And why does he suffer? Because he was interested in God's program, which is precisely to bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away,- empty.

So we need to be very careful about a number of things, and above all about our inherent desire to make the Gospel harmless. This is yet another reason why we must pay attention to the Saints, all these people whose images surround us in this chapel, In one way or another, they were in big trouble. Francis of Assisi who married Lady Poverty. His friend Clare whose feast we had just a couple of days ago. These are not pacifying types. They too, are basically disruptive.

The mother of Jesus, judging her by the words of the Magnificat, was fundamentally disruptive, fundamentally offensive. Again, that texts says that God has shown the strength of his arm by doing what? By scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts and by bringing down the powerful from their thrones and by lifting up the lowly. Filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away - empty. That's anything but inoffensive as a program.

And of course we are celebrating what? Mary's entry into heaven. What is heaven? Heaven is a place where we don't have these divisions which separate us from each other. It is the situation in which the rich and the powerful cannot throw their weight around as they always do. Where the poor really do get justice. Why? So that there can be a human community. That's what it's about. Not the restoration of some kind of economic or social or political or economic justice but, rather, that we people can face each other without all the regular boundaries which separate us: the boundaries of power and above all, of wealth. That's why God's interested in destroying those. We are to retain the figure of this heroic woman. This offensive woman. This woman who acted as God's agent who we believe is bringing us all together.

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Failing to really be God's new Israel

21st Sunday
Is. 22.15, 19-23; Rom. 11.33-36; Mt. 16. 13-20

For those of us who grew up in the Roman Church, this passage from Matthew is all too familiar. At one time we could have substituted Peter for Pius XII, putting the triple crown on his head and having the ostrich fans waving over this peasant fisherman.. And we would have claimed that the substitution was warranted, because it's all there in the scriptures. The problem, of course, is that it's not there in anything like this imaginary substitution would suggest. The problem is that we have tended to ossify one state of the Petrine ministry-that of Pius XII for me- and simply declare that that state that is normative. This is simply not the case. And so it is really important that we realize that there has been a long history of development which has given us the papacy as we have it today. The relativity of the form of the papacy is clear when we have the present incumbent asking the world to help him figure out what the papacy is supposed to look like in the next millennium. We have John Paul II's the encyclical letter on the papacy, "Ut Unum Sint," to which a number of notable people have responded, at the invitation of the Pope. That is one of the things that will help us, even if obliquely, to figure out what really is going on in this text.

One of the first questions we can ask of it is, is this text the report of an historical event? Did the historical Jesus say to this to Peter? I suspect not. Scholars vary on this but I think that the majority of scholars would say that this scene is a retrojection of their later understanding, into the career of Jesus.

But what is happening here then? Well, a number of interesting things. Peter, whom we also saw in the gospel of Matthew, is

anything but a rock. He's the one who starts falling under the waves when he starts walking to Jesus on the Sea of Galilee. He's the one who explicitly betrays Jesus three times. So this notion of Peter as rock needs to be seriously qualified. Even this business of giving Peter the keys to the kingdom needs to be qualified too, because later, in the same gospel of Matthew, the keys are given to the entire community, not just to this one person. All of these data are important for us to try and understand what the Petrine ministry might be.

But I'd like to focus most of all on one of the most peculiar things in this text. It is the only time, in all the four gospels, that the word "church" is used. Now Paul will talk about the Church. It is very clear that for Paul, as I've said over and over, the Church was the body of Christ, another Pauline figure, and was simply another form of Judaism, the most authentic and the latest and the most appropriate form of Judaism. So when Matthew uses the word "church" we need to be very, very careful that we understand what he is talking about. The Greek word is "ecclesia" means "called out". It is an almost literal translation of the Hebrew word, which I'm sure he had in mind, Qahal. It also means "called out". In other words, this group of people was "called out" by God, as a community. The problem, of course, is filling in the details. What does it mean to be "called out" by God?

First of all, it's almost certainly that the historical Jesus saw himself to be creating a new Israel. There were the 12 tribes which constituted the old Israel, so Jesus picked 12 disciples, consciously imitating the initial form of Judaism. It is also clear that Matthew wants to cast Jesus as a new Moses. Remember, Moses was miraculously spared when Pharaoh wanted to kill all the little Jewish boy babies. So Matthew has Jesus being miraculously spared when the King of the Jews, Herod, wanted to kill the Jewish boy babies at the time of Jesus' birth. The Jews escaped from Egypt for their safety. Jesus had to escape into Egypt, in what was for Matthew, a conscious reference to, even if, a reversal of the first Exodus. In all this, Matthew is doing his regular thing, which is to say that Matthew's Gospel was written to make the point that the Jews who do not accept

Jesus as Messiah were not the real Jews because they did not respond to what God was doing in Jesus. They're not keeping up with God.

So, our the text has to do with the creation of a new Israel. What was the destiny of the first Israel, and why were they "called out?" Why did Jesus try to create a renewed Israel? First of all, they were called out, to use the phrase that occurs over and over in the scripture, both Old and New Testaments, to be a light of revelation to the Gentiles. This means that they were to be the agency of God's mercy to all people. The Jews, therefore, unlike every other religious group in the ancient world, were not to exist for their own sake, but they were to exist as a channel for God's mercy for everybody. And that was supposed to be the uniqueness of the Jews, and the whole point of their being called. The problem was that many of the Jews, for all kinds of good reasons, instead of opening their arms to everybody, closed their arms and created all manner of barriers between themselves and all other people, and they created a variety of hoops which people had to jump through, should they want to join this people, chosen and formed by God. Jesus, the Jew, was about precisely reversing that whole process, removing and ignoring those barriers. So we get that familiar litany of Jesus' odd behavior: with women, the handicapped, the poor, public sinners, crippled people, ritually impure people. Therefore, when we talk about the church, we need to be very, very clear about what it is we are talking about. We will misunderstand what a church is if we do not understand it in this totally Jewish way - as the Qahal Yahweh, the assembly of God which exists not for its own sake, but for the sake of the entire world.

That is the unique mark of the church. Among all other institutions on the face of the earth, including religious ones, the Church exists for the sake of the world, not for its own sake. Or to put it in more modern theological language, it exists, essentially, as a mission, it is sent by God to announce God's forgiveness, God's mercy , God's love. To point out to a world, that often enough seems to be quite God-free, the presence of this God Who desires above all, to reconcile the world to itself, and so to Him.

We can take another passage from Matthew to fill this out, by asking: where is that presence to be found? “I was naked and you clothed me. I was in jail and you visited me. I was hungry, you fed me. Etcetera, etcetera.”

Now, in general, the naked, the jailed, the hungry, can be safely ignored. And in fact, are. But the uniqueness of the mission of the church is precisely to see them, to acknowledge their reality, and so to respond to them. But then, Matthew does a very interesting thing. If you remember this same famous judgment scene, the people who did respond to the naked, the stranger, ask: “When did we do all that to you?” We would like to say that the Church is, above all, that institution which shows active and effective concern for the hungry, the naked. But, often enough, that’s not true. In fact, quite often, we are indifferent, indiscernibly different from the rest of the world. The Church, like all institutions, tends to feed itself, and simply seek its own self-preservation. Matthew’s view of things is that the Church is called by God to be the new Israel, God’s elect. But Matthew points out, and he does this in a number of places in the gospel, that the Church will fail, as did the first Israel, to be faithful to that election.

There is another very important passage, also peculiar to Matthew, regarding the Church “ Call no one father. Call no one teacher.” And finishing up, he say that those among the pagans who hold authority make their power felt in acts of coercion and the violation of others. But that’s not the way it’s supposed to be with the Church. But why did Matthew make a point of insisting on that? Precisely because the church about and for which Matthew wrote, around the year 85, had become so organized and institutionalized that the danger of the abuse of authority had already set in, in its earliest stages. It is a danger, normally, that we all experience, in every sphere, namely, of wanting to overpower the other. It’s not to be that way in the Church.

We can, finally, connect this text from Matthew with the passage from Romans. What moved Paul to his exulting in the depth of riches and knowledge of God? This passage occurs in the eleventh chapter of his letter to the Romans. It concludes his long discussion

about his fellow Jews that we heard part of a couple of weeks ago. Recall his agonizing about the Jews who did not accept Jesus. We see today Paul's attempt to make sense of non-acceptance within the providence of God. If God calls these people, if God goes to all this trouble to get these people tooled up to be God's agent in the world, why have so many of them failed? And so these famous three chapters in the letter to the Romans are Paul's attempt to make sense of that. And at the end of that he says... I can't figure this out. So he's not just throwing up his hands, and abandoning what was for him, a heartbreaking problem. Rather, and again as a good Jew, saying that God's ways are not our ways and that, ultimately, we can't figure out how this is supposed to work. Nevertheless, Paul concludes with a confident assertion that God has not withdrawn His "calling out" of the Jews. So there is a connection, however remote it may seem, between this passage from the letter to the Romans and the passage from the gospel of Matthew.

We will see next week, Peter makes his big confession regarding Jesus' identity, and Jesus says: "Okay, Peter, you're right" But Peter immediately starts arguing with Jesus over his statement that he will suffer and be killed. In this, we hear the message, so often given to the first Israel, and which here is to stand for us, the New Israel. I it the warning we too are in danger of being unfaithful, of failing to really be God's new Israel.

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Without trust, truth cannot emerge

22nd Sunday
Jer. 20.7-9; Rom. 12.1-2; Mt. 16.21-27.

What we have in these three very grim, even menacing readings are intimations of the inherently tragic view of life, of the human condition, that comes out of the Jewish and the Christian heritage. We really don't want to believe it. We want to say, "Ah, well. Tomorrow will be better." "Time heals all wounds." "We can manage." "I'll try hard."

But the word here is "No": I'm not going to be better. And at an absolutely certain, foundational level, we human beings are not going to make it, together. We have Jeremiah in great pain because he has to tell his fellow Jews that they're not making it. That they're failing, failing in their humanity. This is the crucial notion of sin among the Jews. Sin is always deformity. A deformity of one's humanness. A failure to hit the mark of one's humanness.

Paul, late in the letter to the Romans says "Don't be conformed to this world." What is "this world"? It is the normal world, that is fear-driven, self-seeking. He says we are to avoid it. Then this stunning passage. If you just finish with 16:9, you might say : Oh good. We're all fixed up now. We've got this church, the gates of hell are not going to prevail against that. We have all this, and then what happens? The rock crumbles. It doesn't just crumble, it becomes a stumbling block.

So, all this is very hard. This is precisely the crucial place where the gospel runs into all kinds of opposition in the world, in my life, in the church, everywhere else. Because we always want to say that sooner or later we will manage. With enough good will and enough effort, enough intelligence, enough careful planning, we'll bring it off. And the stark and even terrifying message here is... No. We are not going to bring it off. God will bring it off ultimately, but

God will bring it off, we can't. This is nothing more than the meaning of such statements as "unless you lose your life you will not find your life." " Unless you carry your cross you cannot be my disciple." It's this that we resist vehemently. I know I do. I mean, I want to have some confidence in myself. "Yeah, Trojcak. Just stick with it, man, and you can carry this off." Uh-uh. Because the psychologists and the major part of the communication media seek to enable us to adopt this attitude, anything other than this affirmation of self-competence is a counsel of despair. You're going to collapse. You're going to be useless. You're not going to have any energy. Well, from the Christian point of view, the matter is anything but that simple.

So what I would like to do today is to go through this passage from Matthew to see what exactly he's after, because I've been talking in generalities so far.

In a word: where does the cross hit? The extraordinary thing about the figure of Jesus as it comes both out of the tradition, and out of the lives of the saints, and the scriptures, is that He seemed to have been uniquely capable of trusting people. Therefore, he entrusted himself to people too because trusting and being trusted are simply the same phenomenon seen from different angles. He trusted people. He trusted Peter with his identity and notice how Peter came to know Jesus' identity. If you remember from last Sunday's reading, Peter could only know who Jesus was by the grace of God. "Flesh and blood does not reveal this to you but my Father who is in heaven..... " That's what it means. Our vision, our capacity to receive another one, is also the work of the grace of God. Otherwise, we keep slipping by each other or taking the part for the whole, or somehow deforming what we believe is our trust in each other.

So Jesus trusted himself to Peter, and of course, Peter blew it. I think we can recognize in Peter's betrayal of Jesus an instance of our own incapacity. To really, receive the other, to fully receive the other, is to take them seriously, that is, in their own reality, in the fullness of their reality. Not to filter out those parts that we don't like. This is exactly what Peter did: deny that Jesus was to be a crucified Messiah. No. The Greek word here is extremely strong - rebuke.

That is the way you talk to a little kid. “Listen! What’s wrong with you? You can’t do that!” Peter rebuked Jesus. “What are you? A boob? A bonehead? This is not going to happen.” And then Jesus rebukes Peter, calls him Satan, who by this time was understood to be the great adversary of God.

So, this is the problem. Jesus entrusts himself to Peter and it blows up. Now, Jesus certainly entrusted himself to other people and got killed. Indeed, that’s why he got killed. And so trust is very dangerous, as we all know anyway. To entrust yourself to somebody else we presume to be hazardous to our health.

But apart from all that, there’s an enormously telling connection between the words “trust” and “truth”. Linguistically they came from a common root. Without trust, truth cannot emerge. Without truth , trust cannot emerge. The truth of myself. The truth of the other. Who we really are. And that’s why T. S. Eliot, who was no mean Christian, could say, in “Murder in the Cathedral,” that “Human beings can’t stand too much reality.” And we can’t. We live in “Forrest Gump City”, as a friend of mine describes London. “Where never is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day.” And clearly, this is not just true of London, Ontario. This is the world in which we live.

Do not be conformed to this world, we are told. In other words, what these texts are doing is what they always do: they push us back into ourselves further than we’d rather go. To come to finally see what is our own, ultimate resourcelessness. “Apart from me you can do nothing”... We hear over this and over in the gospel. In the Bible, God’s ways are not my ways. Cut off from me you are useless, feckless. And it’s essential for us to hear this because we are constantly tailoring , adjusting these texts, making them palatable, manageable. We’re constantly saying...” Well, so much. But surely not quite all the way.” We want to reserve these little corners of ourselves where we don’t have to make ourselves absolutely vulnerable to God or to each other. And the starkness, and the terrifying power, yet the beautifying message of these texts, is that the overcoming of our incapacity is possible in God. This is a great theme pervading the

Bible. For example after Jesus said “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom.” Peter asked, “Well, who can be saved?” And Jesus says that with human being this is impossible but with God all things are possible.

So this is tough, but this is the real stuff. And everything else that does not grow out of this stark and tragic vision of human life is ersatz, some terrible delusion, and falsification. Because we don’t live in Forrest Gump City. Nice guys, in fact, don’t win ball games. They get nailed to a cross.

My typical response to all this is to blind myself to it, and to keep working under some illusion that it will somehow be okay that somehow, I’ll muddle through. This illusion works both on an individual and collective level.

With the churches we call it triumphalism. What’s triumphalism? Triumphalism is the belief that we can manage all by ourselves. God can give us an initial nudge and then we’re rolling downhill and picking up speed and getting better and better and bigger and bigger and that we’re going to manage it.

But faith demands that we ask: is the church ready to lose it’s life for the sake of the world, for the sake of its election, by God. Indeed there’s a terrible tension inherent in the notion of election. How can you have a religion that’s ready to sacrifice itself? Yet how can you have an institution that’s going to call itself religious, if it’s not ready to freely sacrifice itself? It’s the same problem for me. How can I be a human being who’s fundamental impulse is to self-preservation, yet be freely ready to sacrifice myself?

The only thing that differentiates this from a kind of recipe for neurosis, or worse, is the conviction that we really are loved by God. And being loved by God, all things do become possible. That’s the stunning instance of all these men and women, the saints, who make this whole thing credible, plausible. Francis of Assisi a man who was certainly not interested in institutionalizing his own life, who married Lady Poverty, and was ready to have the whole thing fall apart if need be. And then Brother Elias gets elected after Francis’ death,

and the “can-do mentality takes over: “Now, by God, we’ve got to get organized here. We’ve got to have brown uniforms for everybody to wear etc, etc.”

And so I was really shocked when a Franciscan friend of mine told me, a number of years ago, “I don’t care if the order dies.” He was right. Because the order is not to exist for itself. The order exists for God. I don’t exist for myself. I exist for God. So, here we are at the edge of mystery again. Yet that’s the only authentic place for us to be if we say that we are Christians. Everything else is some kind of fakery, and God knows there has been, and continues to be plenty of that around. We need to clear our eyes. Clear our minds and our hearts with this astringent Isaiah, Paul, Matthew.....Jesus.

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We can be who we are

23rd Sunday
Ezek. 33.7-9; Rom. 13.8-10; Mt.18.15-20.

The readings today are unusually coherent with each other and have as a common theme, our mutual responsibility to each other in the Christian Church. But first, I would like to point out one small thing in this passage from Matthew. Remember that a couple of weeks ago we had the recognition scene..."You are Peter, upon this rock...." Well, here you'll notice that forgiveness or the binding of sin is given, not just to Peter, but to the community. That's really crucial, because it leads us into what is the central result of forgiving, and of forgiveness. To forgive, is to unite the one forgiven to the community. To be forgiven means to be rejoined with the community.

So, I'd like to talk about community and forgiving and being forgiven, in the terms I suggested last week, namely the relationship between truth and trust. Typically in the Church, at least in my experience, if somebody doesn't like what's going on, if they feel offended by someone, they call the bishop. Then the bishop calls the putative offender and says "Stop!" Thus, the process of people coming together is short-circuited, and instead, something evil is occurring.

Why call the bishop? Because we don't trust the person, by whom we feel offended, enough to express our discontent with them to his or her face. This is the crucial issue. If you do not trust this other you cannot announce the truth. You cannot be the truth. Because, if there is an offence separating you from somebody else, the truth of the relationship is this offence: the truth is that you are the offended one and the other is the offender. Now the only way the separation is going to be resolved, is through an act of trust.

The offended one, as we are told in our text, is supposed to go to the offender and trust himself or herself to that one. In trust, the offended one can announce the truth, make the truth present, the

truth of their reality, which is the brokenness of their relationship. So the truth - trust thing is illuminated again. We see that truth only happens where there is trust. In this, an enormous amount of light is cast on the entire gospel and the whole Christian life.

As I said last week, this is exactly what Paul says is the heart of the redemptive work of Jesus: namely, that we can now speak the truth to each other. The Greek work that he uses over and over is "parrhesia': it means that we now can talk to each other and, above all, that we can speak the truth to those in power.

(Parrhesia is basically a political term, referring to the right of a citizen to be able to speak freely to their political leaders.) But Paul says that that is what happens in Jesus: we are able to speak the truth, even the truth of our own sinfulness, both to each other, and to God That's the fruit of the redemption. That is the process by which we are transformed: wherein we can say the truth; wherein we can be the truth. In a word, it is where we can be who we are to, for, and with each other.

If I really am an offender, if I really am offended, the truth of this relationship is only going to become present when I trustfully encounter the other. If this encounter does not take place, of course, the problem between us, and more important, we ourselves, becomes abstractions, both for each other and even for ourselves. And the space between us condenses into some thick, murky, and impenetrable distance. Our response to each most often takes the sick form of vindictiveness, or resentment, or anger. This is, of course, what typically happens.

But see the way this relationship of offender and offended as laid out here in the Gospel, we are to trustfully meet the other. We are to do that person to person. And if that doesn't work, if we really do not meet each other, we are to make more effort, taking others with us, so that truth and trust can resonate in a larger circle. And if the offender is not going to entrust himself or herself in that circumstance, that is, to be reconciled, then we are to tell the community. What follows from this, the separation from the community, is not

the result of a juridical procedure wherein I condemn the other, excluding him or her. . No. As we see all through the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament too, the offender's rejection of this trust-based truth telling, and their exclusion, is simply an expression , a recognition of the way things are. This person who has resisted the truthful, trustful encounter, has chosen to stand outside the community. And that too, is the unhappy truth . Unhappy, but truth nevertheless. Because without that trustful exchange of truth, we go no place. We're stymied and above all, as Paul says in this passage from the Romans, love is impossible. This impossibility is the heart of the matter, literally, the heart of the matter. You cannot love except in truth. Truth-trust is all a function of being available to each other. In the glorious words of Genesis, it is to stand naked and unashamed before each other. With each other. That's supposed to be the hallmark of the church.

Just as a footnote. The Globe and Mail reported that the Pope is taking up a suggestion, interestingly, that he made two or three years ago to the College of Cardinals. The suggestion is that the Roman Church should start the third millennium penitentially, truthfully. In other words, we are, as an institution, to entrust ourselves to the world as the sinners we are. (The Cardinals didn't think that was too good an idea at the time, so they dropped it.) But happily the Pope is pushing it further himself. Now let us hope that he details our sins, because it doesn't do to say... Oh, I'm a sinner in general. I'm really rotten in a vague, indeterminate way. We need to acknowledge the specifics of our evil-doing. Otherwise there is no truth.

Let us be illumined by that example and hope he takes it further and helps us to do it too.

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Larger than the vision we have of ourselves

24th Sunday
Sir. 27.33 - 28.9; Rom. 14.7-9; Mt. 18.21-35.

Like the readings for last week, the three readings today are amazingly integrated. They have a common theme which is explicit and very clearly articulated. That theme is, of course, the matter of forgiveness. So, I'd like to talk a little bit about that today.

The first and most obvious point, even if we don't bring it to consciousness, is that forgiveness makes absolutely no sense. Forgiveness is, on the face of it, irrational. Someone places an act, offensive to someone else...that act exists. The act perdures through time. All we have to do is look at the Congo. Rwanda, Northern Ireland. Sarajevo. East Timor. What is being played out in all those horrible scenes is simply the result of one human action as it ripples forth into history. This, of course, makes perfectly good sense: you can't cancel an historical fact. You cannot pretend that it does not exist. And therefore it has to be somehow... handled.

We see the way it's typically handled, in the piles of dead bodies, of burned houses and looted stores. That should not surprise anybody. Logically, it makes eminent good sense. But then, of course, we sit back and say "This is chaos." (And it is chaos. I'd hate to be living in Dili, East Timor today. Or one of the cities in Kosovo.) People will sit back and say "Oh well, folks. We must do something about this. Life is unlivable when nations behave this way toward one another."

And so we arrange some sort of response to the fact that peoples are offending each other, violating each other. We set up the U.N. to deal with that .

But even between individual persons at war with each other, we make adjustments in a variety of ways. I think probably one of the leading ways runs like this... Well, if I let this go in some way, this

person is going to come back and do me double dirt. So I'm going to be in even bigger trouble if somehow I cannot dissolve, in one way or another, the fact of this offence. I can just pretend it didn't happen. Thus, cowardice is one major strategy for dealing with the fact that we offend each other. And I think that it's a pretty normal one.

Or there is this purely pragmatic solution which argues in this way: if we don't somehow walk away from a battle, such as one that took place in Serbia 700 years ago, life is going to be unlivable. So attempting to ignore that past, is a strategic adjustment, is another way of dealing with that. We "get on with it." Forget it. Life goes on. Time heals all wounds. And we can pray nightly that we have the power to forget.

But neither of those strategies, and there are many other similarly evasive ones that we can come up with, are forgiveness. None is them is forgiveness because forgiveness is... what? Forgiveness is basically the serious admission of something wrong having been done to me, yet also saying that that historical moment is to be somehow absorbed in a larger and richer future. It is an act of hope, note, not optimism, but hope.

Okay. But then it gets a little more complicated than that, because we know ourselves too well. "I, or they, offended once. The chances of our doing it again are very good." We can use the future as a dodge. "I'll do better next time." Often enough we don't do better next time. So what on the face of this earth will enable us to really come to the point where somehow we are not stuck, like a butterfly with a pin on a board, on our own pasts?

There is no philosophical solution. There is no psychological solution despite how many are typically offered. There's only a theological solution to the problem of forgiveness. Namely, that God is the God of all of us, and God wants to call us beyond where we are now, and who we are now . And here we've introduced something drastically novel into the human scene. Forgiveness becomes really possible. It takes on it's own authentic colours. It is not an act of cowardice. It's not an act of strategic adjustment. It is certainly not

the Pollyanna hope that, somehow, things will (automatically?) get better. Rather, forgiveness becomes a claim on us, which is a wholly different thing. I have come to believe in God, the God of Jesus, Whom, in Jesus, we've come to know as the God Who is unambiguously the God of us all. I choose to live a life faithful to this God. Then forgiveness means that I bring this offending other with me, together, into God's future. I choose my future to be a future with God, who can transmute me. God who can transform us so that we really can, in that glorious phrase that I repeat over and over....stand naked and unashamed before each other. And once God is introduced into this human equation, numerous things become clear.

(Something I talked about a couple of weeks ago- the essentially tragic character of the human condition-here becomes clear, because without forgiveness, it is absolutely certain that life becomes unlivable.)

But it must be real forgiveness. It cannot be an act of cowardice or fake-psychological adjustment, or a politically canny, strategic move. None of these are forgiveness. They're dodges. They're evasions. Falsifications. But once I come to believe in this God, hope in this God, then I can say to the other, I want to move toward God with you. For my hope in this God is real only when it is a hope for and with all other people. And the only way to come to this hope is to say that what is most important, what is ultimately most determinative, is this God Who calls us forward out of this past, however deeply flawed it has been , however much violence has been done, however much we have damaged, wounded, injured and truncated each other. And this is, of course, is what enables me to forgive.

Jesus, as we have it in the Gospel of Luke, died with these extraordinary words: "Father, forgive them." Why? Because he didn't think his murder was real or serious? No, I don't think so. Rather, he had a vision of people, even of his own murderers, larger than the vision that they had of each other or themselves. And that and that vision gives rise to forgiveness. Only that vision gives us the real form of, and possibility for forgiveness. And we need to be very clear about that, so that we don't confuse genuine forgiveness with some

kind of substitute, ersatz, phony form of forgiveness, which really leaves everything as it is, and very much safely in place.

Finally, I'd like to appeal again to the example of the pope, in the hope that he will articulate this vision I just spoke of in a variety of ways. The church should be unique in the world in that it stands before the world publicly confessing itself as sinful, as needing to be forgiven, as penitent, as in need of reform. And by reform I don't mean some casual or cosmetic adjustment, some tidying of the edges cutting off loose strings and sharpening of corners. No. It is us saying to the world.... we have failed you. We have betrayed you. And the only way, as I said, that the pope or any of us can make that statement is that we believe in a God who in the glorious phrase of the first letter of John... is larger than even our meager, narrow, often enough, unforgiving hearts.

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That God's ways are not our ways

25th Sunday
Is. 55.6-9; Phil. 1.20-24,27; Mt. 20.1-16

One of the beauties of this normal Jewish way of teaching, namely by telling little stories, is that the stories have multiple levels of meaning. You could make a good case, on the basis of this famous parable from Matthew, that what Jesus was getting at, was a self-justification in the face of the complaints that were made about him, namely, that he spent too much time with poor people, upsetting the so called social order. But I would like to take a cue from this first reading from Isaiah, and use that as a heuristic device to get to yet another meaning of this parable.

Isaiah is famous for this depiction of God as mysterious. "Truly you are a hidden God, O God of Israel" is one of the great Isaian themes. The view of God pervades the Bible: "My thoughts are not your thoughts nor my ways your ways, says the Lord."

Certainly the procedure that we see in this little parable from Matthew seems pretty alien to our way of seeing and doing things. It's downright weird. The parable, therefore, seems an unlikely reading for the beginning of the academic year, because we are in the business, of course, of making sense of things. Of discovering, uncovering, meanings. Yet here we're confronted by a story that says that the ultimate way, the final reality of the world, the cosmos, us.... is not penetrable. It is mysterious, which is just a Greek word for "hidden". We have to be really careful here, because mystery does not mean, at least in the Jewish and Christian understanding, something spooky, something that is simply remote and likely, even meaningless. Rather "mystery" means that there is so much meaning that there is no way we can get our heads or our lives around it. That is what I would like to address: the mysteriousness of God and, consequently, the mysteriousness of ourselves. Because if we are the creatures of God, if we exist in God, then somehow part of that mysteri-

ousness must be part of us as well. One philosopher argued that, by saying that we can't jump out of our own heads to look at ourselves, we can't fully understand who we are . And so, on these grounds, we are mysterious to ourselves as well.

God, if God exists, cannot be reduced to some item on my intellectual agenda, something for a learned article or a dissertation, something I can talk about exhaustively in a classroom. God is always larger, not just than our hearts but our heads as well.

So in that sense we are confronted with the mysteriousness of God and of ourselves... the hiddenness. But there's another aspect that comes out of the tradition that complicates this whole business of mystery and that's this: from the Jewish tradition we learn that the primary human fault is a fundamental lie people told to themselves.... you shall be as God...and then being found out to be liars by God and by other people. Remember Adam saying, "the woman you gave me made me do this." What I'm getting at is the reflex of what we call "the fall": a sort of self-absorption whereby we are closed from each other and to the world. What I'm further proposing is that, because that is the case, we are really not even particularly open to the notion of mystery. Even of ourselves, much less that the mystery of God, or of the world.

This view of things is hugely important, especially to us who work in academics. I was talking to a well known, highly published academic just a couple of days ago and she said to me... "You know, that's the besetting sin of the academic guild: Self-absorption," and this for all kinds of reasons. I mean those of us who have done a Ph.D., know we have spent endless hours all by ourselves, focusing on something littler and littler, about which, finally, few other people in the whole universe are even remotely interested. And yet we have to somehow justify our existence to ourselves. Such an enterprise readily leads to self-absorption, which, when it is in play, all kinds of other things can follow. That self-absorption can become, very easily, the basis for a sense of power. And here I mean power understood in the normal way: as the capacity to work violence on other people. That is in fact the way power is typically understood by me and by

the world I live in. I can make somebody else do what I want them to do. It's extremely important for those of us who stand at the beginning of an academic year to reflect on this. Because, as one of my colleagues put it last week when I was talking to him, if academic means anything, it should means that those of us who are teaching feel a claim made on us. This claim doesn't derive from the salary committee, or the promotion and tenure committee, or the administration, but in the very search of the good, the true and the beautiful. That is the authentic claim that is made on us. Yet, so often we reverse that and look at ourselves, not just as the seekers after, and the custodians of truth. It is not unusual to find academics who see themselves as the absolute arbiters of the good, the true and the beautiful. And when we do that, of course, the students suffer. They are victims rather than our collaborators, co-workers in the search for truth.

So what is the "cash value", as William James would say, of all this? A salutary humility of what we are about, and a genuine, and not just a rhetorical, but a real reverence not only for the material we are looking at, but for each other. For our students. For our colleagues. Having taught for over 30 years, competition rather than collaboration seems to be the working model of much of what goes on in academia, in the schools. And competition is more often than not the outworking of self-absorption, both in personal and institutional form. So it is essential to our work, that we think about this humility before each other, our subject matter, or God, and to do this in order to try to achieve a real openness and availability to each other, and not just on the first day of the school year. Because a routine is going to start. The meeting agendas are going to start flooding our mailboxes. We're going to worry about whether the bookstore has what we want. The students too, can be beset by another set of matters: can I afford to pay for my books? What are the hours when the "Spoke" is open?. What should I do, since I can't stand my roommate. All these little pedestrian details of life, they always threaten to overwhelm us, to derail us from what is supposed to be our essential job, to somehow encounter the mystery of the world, of God, of ourselves, of each other.

So, I hope for myself and for you and I pray for myself and you, that we not be submerged under all the trivia that constitute so much of our existences; that we be founded on keeping in mind that God's ways are not our ways; wary, that we have not insulated ourselves against God's way. Knowing that danger, we can counteract against the narrowness of our own visions, our hearts and our minds.

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He became obedient to his own humanity

26th Sunday
Ezek. 18.25-28; Phil. 2.1-11; Mt. 21.28-32

The 3 readings today form an ensemble revealing the whole story of the human situation as it was seen by the Jews and is to be by us Christians. A prominent element is sin, the nature of sin, and what to do about it. But we have to be really careful because there are all sorts of ideas about what sin is today. Bad hair can be a sin. Or bankruptcy. All sorts of catastrophes. Cancer of the spleen can be seen as evil. But in the biblical sense, they're not.

So, what does constitute sin? What is real evil? Well, if we take a cue from Matthew's gospel, he was able to reduce it to one word when he presented the picture of Jesus. That word was hypocrisy. In the Hebrew Bible upon which Matthew depended, idolatry was the central sin: i.e. to give to some human artifact, ultimate importance.. Like my bank account. My academic degrees. Jesus takes this further: he says that these people who say they worship one thing really worship something else of their own devising. In the way they run their lives...they are sinful: hypocritical and idolatrous. That's why he could say that the prostitutes and the tax collectors are making it into the Kingdom of God before the "good", "pious" people are. You'll find in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus embroiled in arguments with some of his fellow Jews. And the absolute criticism he makes is to call them hypocrites. Brood of vipers. To say one thing and to do something else is the problem.

So, we can then look at this passage from the Philippians to see how this played out in Jesus' life. What did he do, living in a world in which hypocrisy is normal? (Everybody is - for all kinds of reasons. What other people think about us? The impression we want to make on other people. There are all sorts of grounds for hypocrisy.) We have this extraordinary hymn which Paul used. So I thought it would be useful to see how this hymn deals with Jesus' response to living in a world which is marked by dishonesty and hypocrisy.

The hymn starts out by saying that Jesus, as all human beings, was in the form of God. (Remember that Genesis text... “Let us make human beings, male and female, in our image.”) So Jesus, as a human being, was made in the form of God. (Note that the hymn doesn’t have anything to do with Jesus as divine. It is simply looking at Jesus as a human being.) But now, remember Adam’s great temptation. Just do this thing and you’ll magically become divine. You won’t have to be human anymore. You won’t have to depend on anybody. You won’t have to wait for anything. You can have everything instantaneously. You will be as God. And we all have had that temptation.

Who does not want to simplify, expedite, life in that fashion? Who doesn’t want to be able to basically tell everybody else to “buzz off” and leave me alone so that I can cut my own swath through the world. Well, Jesus had that temptation, as do all human beings. But he did not take his God-imaged-ness in order to falsify his humanity..

But what did he do then? He emptied himself and took the form of a slave. What does that mean? If you know Paul, he regularly talks of us human beings as slaves to sin. What does that mean? That we live in a world in which the hypocrisy, the dishonesty, the cowardice of everybody else, constitutes a powerful force, which impinges on us and ends up determining our behavior. There are some very simple question to ask in order to check this out. How much of my life is really lived on the basis of fear of other people or of what they can do to me?

Well, that’s exactly what Paul says is the power of sin in this world. And so Jesus lived in that kind of world. Taking the form of a slave born in human likeness. But then it says he humbled himself and became obedient. What’s going on there? Most of us, living in a world in which we are afraid of everybody else and don’t trust many people, and nobody consistently, of course, we respond by defending ourselves in a variety of ways, usually by violence. Or by hypocrisy or some form of cowardice, dishonesty. The emptying and obedience that we’re talking about here is that Jesus continued to be obedient, faithful to his own God-created humanity. And so he would not let himself and his life be determined by evil, but resisted it.

How? By telling the truth all the time. By not being driven by fear. Or cowardice. Or hypocrisy. But that's very dangerous. Jesus humbled himself, became obedient to his own humanity and thereby to God. Faithful may be a better word than obedient here. Of course that got him into fatal difficulties, because the world cannot run with such people on the loose. They make us feel bad about ourselves for one thing. And we know that business cannot continue as usual, whether in academia, or the business world or in families or anywhere else, when someone will tell the truth all the time.

So Jesus needed to be destroyed. And that's exactly what happened. He became obedient to his own humanity to the point of death - even death on a cross. He resisted the pressure of evil even to the point of dying. And therefore God exalted him. Because God saw that here was a human being who lived out the fullness of his human reality. Who did not lie. Who was not hypocritical. Who was not driven by his own fear. Or self-promotion. In other words, God finally had a human being who worked, who did what God intended human beings to do when he made them in the first place. And that's why God was so pleased with Jesus and exalted him and gave him a name above every name, "so that at the name of Jesus every knee would bend on heaven and earth and under the earth., and all tongues proclaim that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." And that's what the lordship of Jesus consists in, according to this hymn.

So, it is within this context that we can understand how the prostitutes and the tax collectors were somehow more clear-sighted about what was real and what was important and what was truly human. As opposed to religious people who thought they had it nailed down already and therefore could hold everybody else, who wasn't as they were, in contempt. That is, often enough, what we do as well. I mean, if we look at the history of the Church - is the Church free of hypocrisy? Is it primarily the place where we feel safe in our sinfulness? Any of the churches? Or have the churches created their own kind of sick environment where we have to hide from each other? Where it's not safe to be who we really are with each other?

So, we have this very mixed situation where the prostitutes and the tax collectors are going to make it ahead of us nice people. The problem is, of course, that we anticipate too quickly our own perfection. We are too self-satisfied, or to put it in Matthew's terms, we tend to be too hypocritical about who's who, what's what and where's where.

So, that's why we're here this morning. To purify our eyes. To get a kind of astringent in our vision so that we can look, not the way that the Globe & Mail, CFPL or the Bank of Montreal or King's College or anybody else tells us to look. But the way God tells us to look. In other words, what we are doing here is of enormous value. Enormous importance.

We are members of each other

27th Sunday
Is. 5.1-7; Phil. 4.6-9; Mt. 21.33-43.

The three readings make a curious ensemble. The first and third readings are obviously like bookends. This metaphor, that goes all through the scriptures of the Hebrew bible and the New Testament, of Israel, of the Jews, as God's vineyard, plays itself out in Isaiah and this little parable from Jesus. The problem in the vineyard, is the same problem that the prophet Isaiah and Jesus complained about, namely, people doing violence to each other: the vineyard has become a jungle.

But they are a funny kind of set of bookends because between them you have this seeming island of peace and tranquility. "Don't worry about anything. And everything that you request be made to God. Peace of God which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts. And whatever is pleasing, commendable and excellent...." It's so beautiful and elegant. And how does that fit with the surrounding readings? Well, I'd like to take some time this morning to see how these things might be connected.

It is important to remember that when Paul wrote to the Philippians, he was in jail and fully expecting to be killed for preaching the gospel, for behaving in a way, just as Jesus did, that upset all kinds of people. In other words, the violence and the terrible disintegration of the human family that we see in Isaiah and the parable from Jesus, also underlie this seemingly placid surface of Paul's words to the Philippians.

So all this sweet talk about the peace of God, and not worrying about anything, did not come cheaply. And this is, of course, what I think is the whole point of this exercise, even if you take all this wonderful stuff...whatever is pure, honourable and just, pleasing, commendable. This, by the way, is the standard litany of virtues that

any good Roman citizen would have recognized from Stoic philosophy. But the interesting thing is the way Paul can absorb all that aristocratic gentility into a world that is marked by profound violence. And then, that he can distil, out of that combination, this marvelous vision of the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

This text from Paul is one of my favorites. Every time that I had to preach a sermon for a graduation and I could pick my own text, I always picked this. “Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise...” That’s great stuff. Before I knew more about Paul and his letter to the Philippians, it meant for me and for most of us today, a manual for a kind of self-preservation. I look for the noble and elegant life. I look to be in line with nature and the way things are really supposed to be. But what happens with Paul is a radical shift of that in a couple of extraordinarily important ways. That is, Paul will say that this self-perfectibility now is only adequate for the Christian in so far as it joins us to each other. So, we have a radically different horizon over against which we hear all this. This is an amazing kind of shift. Because I’d like to know, I’m interested in, what’s noble and honorable, although today those words sound funny, slightly old-fashioned, out-of-date, to our ears. So we might change the language to: whatever is cool, whatever is decent. Whatever is awesome. Above all, whatever is self-fulfilling. But somehow Paul makes this enormous leap of imagination. Because he can somehow combine that all elegance with the fact that life, for the Christian, is going to involve bloodshed. The shedding of our own blood. Suffering. The cross. Here is then, an extraordinarily different constellation of things. Now, I can be quite content thinking of what is pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, as long as all these are construed in the mode of self-aggrandizement: the self-help and the self-perfection stuff. Bookstores have rows and rows and rows of books about how to achieve my full stature, and do that without any thought of anyone else and certainly without any thought of suffering, except maybe the self-discipline that I have to endure in order to sensitize myself to whatever is self-fulfilling or cool and all the rest of it.

So there is something wonderful that emerges in this. First of all, as all kinds of other people have pointed out, this passage is one of the great testaments to Christian humanism. To be a Christian is to be fully human. To be fully human is to be absolutely devoted to all these ennobling things... honorable, just, pure, commendable, excellent etc. etc. But unlike everybody else and certainly unlike the Stoic understanding, all these must pass through the alembic of the cross. They have to be distilled out of the painful effort to break open my eyes and my heart to the reality of everybody else, above all, to the poor, above all, the marginalized, above all, those who suffer. So that the transformation of all these lofty realities, these noble aims, is not apart from them. But there are to be seen in a context which radically relativizes them, so that they are not an end in themselves: my self-perfection. Rather, they are essentially shared. They become parts of a whole new kind of life which Paul, will describe in another place when he says that, “We are members of each other.” Or, if you remember in last week’s reading in that famous hymn earlier in the liturgy to the Philippians, where he would say : “Make my joy complete. Be of the same mind. Be in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing of selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourself. Look each of you not to your own interest but to the interest of others.” No Stoic would sit still for that.

But that’s what Paul, baptizing the Stoic vision, is saying to us. And of course the cross is that great transitional moment whereby all of this wonderful human stuff is not abandoned but transformed.

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Our lives are gifts to us

28th Sunday
Is. 25.6-10a;Phil. 4.10-14, 19-20; Mt 22.1-14

A little note about this familiar parable from Matthew. It is part of Matthew's program throughout the whole gospel to depict the great contest between the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and the Jews who did not. He took a regular Jewish metaphor for the kingdom of God, namely a banquet, and pointed out that the Jews who were invited originally – representing those Jews who didn't' see Jesus as Messiah - didn't come. In fact they killed everybody, like the prophet Jesus, and thereby opened up the kingdom to everybody. But it's interesting to look at, this mysterious figure in the end of the parable. What was his problem? Or what was the King's problem? I think it's possible, especially in the context of the holiday tomorrow (and other reasons too) that what Matthew was trying to get at was the matter of ingratitude. Here this man had received this gift of an invitation but did not properly respond. If we were all first century Semites, I think that that significance would be much clearer.

So we're talking about gratitude in that reading and in the first reading as well, where Isaiah is promising to the people of the southern kingdom - who had been conquered by the way and were basically a captive people - that God was going to restore the base of gratitude. Namely God who is faithful, was going to wipe away every tear and even death, was going to be overcome.

Now, the whole biblical notion of the career of human beings can be understood as the working out of the question of gratitude. As the Genesis text has it, creation is a gift. Our lives are gifts to us. It is we who have so distorted the world that gratitude becomes very difficult for us. And not just us. We who are ungrateful, raise kids we are ungrateful, and they go on to have kids who are ungrateful too, because the base of gratitude seems not to be in place. So I want to somehow spread all of this out.

The fundamental human problem according to the Jews, of course, is that we are all self-encapsulated. That great line from Martin Luther...that human being is curved in on itself... Homo in se incurvatus. That we live in a world where we don't trust anybody else, or we are afraid of everybody else. Therefore we are continually covering our backside. Self-preservation, is the fundamental law of human existence. And the way the Jews see it, is that we have mucked up, and continue to muck up those people that we deal with. We thereby make gratitude very difficult if not impossible. But, to repeat, the Jews say that the absolutely foundational religious stance of the human being in their life is gratitude. So we have this terrible problem: we're supposed to be grateful and yet because of our real experiences gratitude is extraordinarily difficult. And we have to be really careful here because there are numerous problems. There is the philosophical problem, of course, that we are self-conscious beings. I am aware of myself. I do not live in anybody else's head. In fact, I find out who I am by seemingly separating myself from other people.

And so this would seem to make gratitude, in the biblical sense, difficult. Again the biblical understanding of gratitude is not some kind of transient thing, as when somebody opens the door for you, or doesn't run over your dog when he could have, or a whole variety of things like that. Thanks! Thanks a lot! Thanks! Religious gratitude is not a peripheral or transient response to life. It's supposed to be an absolutely foundational one. The absolutely foundational one. But as I said, precisely as conscious beings we are aware of our separateness. We are aware of our separateness all the time. However that philosophical problem is aggravated by far, by the ethical or moral quandary that we find ourselves in. Namely, that we are raised in a world where fear, the fear of the other, is the hallmark of our life. For instance I would love to have raised my kids so that they would be fear-free in regard to me. I would love to have been raised that way by my parents so that I didn't have to be afraid of who I was, to feel shame for myself in any number of ways. But unfortunately it is not that way. And since it is, as Nietzsche said, that greatest of injustices that we all work on each other: to make the

other ashamed of himself or herself; and since we all both suffer from and inflict that injustice upon each other, the possibility of gratitude is pretty remote.

And gratitude in the biblical sense, which is precisely the awareness that my life is received, that I'm essentially, in my deepest reality, connected to God and to be connected to everybody else, is very difficult.

If we don't have that sense, then gratitude is going to be some kind of trivial, superficial, transient kind of thing. Thanks! Thanks a lot! All the best! Thanks! And I know that for me, even at my advanced age, the toughest thing is to really understand myself, at my deepest level, not simply as a solitary consciousness, but as essentially having received my existence, as connected with my divine source, and as forming a community of people who have all received their existences from that same source, so that can be open - and must be open - to each other, to be related, in a way that is not menacing, not fear-inducing. And that, as far as I can see, is why gratitude is so difficult. It's counter-intuitive. Life is dog eat dog. It's a jungle out there. But as long as that is our base consciousness then gratitude is not going to be possible.

But, we can go back to this very thing that seems to isolate us, namely our separate self-consciousness, and find therein one of the elements of coming to gratitude. Because I am self-conscious I can come to know myself as interconnected with everybody else. To know myself as a self, also enables me to know myself as one with all other selves, the way a platypus, an elephant, a caterpillar cannot.

But then the ethical problem intervenes, and that's why Jesus is so significant a figure for us. Jesus can be understood, in a word, as the totally grateful human being. There's a lovely phrase in the book of Revelations, of all places, that speaks of Jesus as the "great Amen to God." Jesus simply says "yes" to God. Yes. Yes. Yes.

So where do we stand? I think we stand in the light of Jesus, knowing that we are ungrateful in the most profound and most constitutive sense of ourselves, and knowing why, at least to some ex-

tent, we are ungrateful. But, just because we know that, we are able to hope that we will come to gratitude. And to believe in Jesus is precisely to hope that I can fully appropriate and constitute myself as grateful.

So here we are at Thanksgiving. Great day. An extraordinarily important day. Complicated day. Difficult day. But that's why being here on this day before Thanksgiving is so important. To hear from Isaiah. To hear from Paul who could say while he was in jail ready to be executed "I know how to have a little and I know how to have a lot." That's the statement of a grateful man. And so he will attribute that capacity of gratitude to his being in Christ. That's why being here with each other, in this setting, is so crucial. Because I don't know of anywhere else where I could even begin to think seriously about this, much less try to work towards being grateful.

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This free zone to which we are called

29th Sunday
Is. 45.1, 4-6; 1 Thess. 1.1-5ab; Mt. 22. 15-21

In the course of my life I suspect that I have read tens of thousands of pages of scripture scholarship. Now it's astonishing, that this reform movement of Judaism, which came to be called Christianity, became the official religion of the Roman Empire within three hundred years. But what's more astonishing, in light of this mass of scholarship, is that you'd think the people who joined this movement were Oxford dons or the Harvard theological faculty of the University of Tubingen School of Theology, because it seems to be a totally cerebral operation. Christianity seems to be an operation that takes place from the eyebrows up. It's really puzzling. Who in God's name would be drawn to this thing? With all these footnotes. In German!

And then we come across this passage from the beginning of Paul's first letter to the Church at Thessalonica. He says "because our message to you of the gospel came to you not only in words but also in power and the Holy spirit and with full conviction". Clearly he's not referring to footnotes. Or Germanic scholarship.

What is this power that he's talking about? The word that he uses over and over in all of his letters is, of course, the spirit. As a good Jew, he takes that usage from the Hebrew bible where to speak of spirit is simply a way of talking about God's activity on the earth. The Jews used that as a mediatorial term. They did not talk about God acting here, they would say God's spirit acts. This is the usage all through the Hebrew Bible. What the spirit does, because spirit means breath, is to enliven. God breathes, inspires, gives breath to, gives spirit to the clay dummy that becomes a human being. The spirit hovers over the chaos and form emerges. The prophets say ... the spirit of the Lord is upon me. And that's exactly what Paul's talking about. That out of his belief that God had raised this Jew, Jesus, from the dead, something happened to Paul. It was not just

something above his eyebrows but some enormous vitality. some profound enlivening took place in this man, and in these people who joined this movement. Now if you read the Pauline letters, especially the Corinthian correspondence, you begin to think that this enlivening sometimes results in really weird ways such as people speaking in tongues.. Paul is very, very uneasy with that manifestation of spirit, that sort of enlivening. Rather his view of things, is that the spirit is the spirit of the God of Exodus. Who is a God who liberates. So the action of the spirit, the enlivening of the spirit, is experienced as liberating. That's the trick, word that the scholars don't have much to do with: the experience of liberation. And so, in this light, the gift of tongues, Paul will say in the Corinthian letter, is peripheral at best.

We're talking, then, about some sense of freedom. That is in fact precisely what Paul claims, "where the spirit is, there is freedom." This is Paul. "For freedom, Christ has made us free." The agency of that liberation is the spirit of God.

Now, liberation takes place in all kinds of ways. For instance, if you were black in a racist society, and came to live in a society where you were not despised for being black, that would clearly be a liberating experience. If you were a woman, and came to be treated as an equal by men, that would be a liberating experience. If you were a homosexual person and you were not mocked and made the butt of vicious and sick jokes, that would be an experience of liberation.

But let me take the other two readings and see if we can derive from them yet another sense of liberation. The first one from Isaiah is a very strange one. It helps to know the context. We're talking about the period of the Babylonian captivity. That is, Babylon was the major empire in the Ancient and Near East and in 587 they conquered virtually everything that was around, including Israel. Seventy years later, they in turn were conquered by Cyrus, the King of Persia. (It's astonishing that in this text, Cyrus is referred to as the messiah of the God. But Cyrus is pagan. Yet this pagan is called "The Lord's anointed." It's amazing.) And what I'd like to suggest, especially to those people of my vintage, who grew up in the period of

ghetto-Catholicism, that there's really a major form of liberation here. Let me put it in an aphoristic way. When I was a kid, they said, if something's Catholic, it's good. So of course, if it wasn't Catholic it couldn't be good at all. And what that does, of course, is blinker your life, narrow your world. One of the great liberative moments of my life came when I realized the reverse was true, that if it's good then it's Catholic. Not only does that makes a huge difference, but it is also is authentic Catholic doctrine. In other words, a reality's goodness marks it as part of God's intention for the world. And I propose, quite seriously, that to see the world this way, is an enormously liberating moment. To be able to reverse that optic, that perspective of the Catholic ghetto, and be able to embrace the world. To be able not to be driven by fear, as we certainly were.... Don't go there, don't do that, God will send you to hell if you go in that Protestant Church.

And even this familiar passage from Matthew, has unfortunately been used often enough, to say that the Christian lives in two worlds. There is the world of Caesar, the world of the "world", where God is presumably either absent or ignored. And then there's the religious world, this kind of super, second storey world, totally opposed to the other world. But that's not what Matthew in this text is about at all. The question of taxes was an important question - then and now. But Jesus was not dividing the world into this safe zone which was God's world, and this God-free but necessary world - the world of Caesar. Rather, Jesus was an ironist. And we get glimpses of this throughout the four gospels. In this instance, when he said "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" ... well, this tax, whatever it might be, is fairly small beer. However, everything belongs to God! Everything belongs to God!

So, if you have to do the Caesar things, know that that happens in a creation that is all God's. So you do not have this nice little separate section where you have politics and this other separate section where you have religion.

But what I propose is that this is an enormously liberating thing as well. We are being liberated from the belief that we are, ultimately, at the mercy of all institutions. The government - we're talking about taxes here. But the government, and its power over me, is radically relativized here. And not only the government because the government stands for every institution, and all the bosses which come with them. King's College is not God. The Bank of Montreal is not God. Price Choppers is not God. My family is not God. Even the Church is not God. God is God. That's liberating. And it's not just some cerebral exercise that we're talking about. We're talking about being given room for my life, the room in which I can live my life. All these institutions which seem to have so much determinative power over me, because I endow them with the kind of quasi-divine aura and significance, do not deserve it. God is God. Yes. Pay taxes, etc. But know that you're doing it as a free child of God. It's the world that's God's.

See, I can read that scholarly matter and, from the eyebrows up, I can understand it without too much effort. But, I confess, I have a much harder time with this massive, experiential sort of liberation, this radical relativizing of everything else. But, that is clearly what was meant in the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus dead and raised by God. Thus these people, in their socio-cultural-economic moment, were able to relativize all of it, and transmute it into this free zone to which we are called. Where the spirit is, there is freedom. For freedom Christ has made us free.

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The seemingly accidental character of human existence

30th Sunday
Exod. 22.21-27; 1 Thess. 1.5c-10; Mt. 22.34-40

There are several interesting themes in these readings. But I'd like to try to take the first and third readings, with their insistence on love as the centrality of religious life, as a theme. And I'd like to come at it from what might seem at first blush to be a fairly long distance.

These are clearly the ruminations of a guy who is entering what society, not-too-sincerely, calls the "golden years". The more I think about my own life and the world in which I live, the more all of life seems to me to appear fortuitous, accidental. I know this is a bad thing to say in a university, where we're all supposed to be getting things organized and making these big rational plans about how this or that event is to happen, what this reality means. And we, particularly in the west, in North America, love that kind of stuff. But more and more I really believe that the "real" reality is quite other than that, and all our organizing and explaining and planning is a kind of self-indulgent luxury. That we make the effort, makes all kinds of sense. But more often than not, it all has very limited validity.

From my own life: I spent two years trying to find a teaching job after I left St. Michael's at the University of Toronto. So, I sent out close to two hundred letters to that many universities in North America. Got one answer. King's College, and so I've been here for 27 years.

And then I think about how much of my life has been the playing out of some real decisions: I think I've made 3 decisions in my life. Real decisions. From what I read from novelists and some philosophers, I don't think that, in that, I am a fluke.

I know the history of music better than most areas of human life. The music of J. S. Bach was lost for 200 years. It was found accidentally with the performance of the Matthew Passion by Felix Mendelson, a converted Jew, in the 19th century. J. S. Bach! Nobody knew about J. S. Bach for a couple of centuries! How many Bach's are lying around in somebody's archives. You know, Sotheby's just sold a 51 second string quartet movement of Beethoven which was recently discovered. Is it great music? I don't know but the point I'm trying to get at is "What is buried where?" "What greatness is lost?"

Arturo Toscanini, the greatest conductor of this century, was playing cello in an opera orchestra. The conductor got sick and they handed him the baton. And out of that totally fortuitous event, this massive career! Bernstein the same sort of thing. Somebody got sick, they called him up. A couple of hours and he shows up. I don't think his case is peculiar. My favorite instance comes, not from the world of music, but of art. Vincent Van Gogh sold one painting during his life, and I think it was to his brother, an art dealer. Today, we know, Van Gogh's paintings bring in more money than almost anyone else's. So what's rational? What's logical?

I didn't choose to have the intellectual capacity that I have. I had nothing to do with it. Absolutely nothing to do with it. I didn't choose to be born white. I didn't choose to be born male. And yet how much of my life and the benefits that I enjoy from my life, are precisely from these totally fortuitous things? And I really would propose these ruminations, with their implied question, to you . I don't want to frustrate the younger people, moving them to begin to say that.... therefore whatever I do is feckless, although the book of Ecclesiastes might suggest that. But certainly what we call luck, that wonderful kind of garbage can category, accounts for an extraordinary amount of who we are, where we are and what we're doing. And more and more that realization has borne in on me. The seemingly

accidental character of human existence. If I wanted to push this harder, I could take the whole business of the biblical stuff. There's a little couplet of G. K. Chesterton which is cute but also very telling. "How odd of God to choose the Jews." Where's the big plan here? Where's the big design? If there is one, it's certainly lost to us.

I think it was probably in the anticipation of Thanksgiving and trying to say something about gratitude that prompted these thoughts. But also I think it's just age and a more relaxed and open approach to my own existence, and the existence of everyone else I know in the world. We'd like to say our lives play out on the basis of merit. It's all our own effort. Moreover, we also want to be in control- or think we are-and that accounts, I think, in very large measure for who we think we are. I am the person that can control and manage this sector of reality. We argue from our strengths, in other words. And we are so accustomed to doing that, that the fortuitous or accidental character of things is largely obscured. Even, at times, absolutely obscured. I am 64 and that has been the case for most of my life. It is literally inaccessible, because we have this great illusion that everything is organized by somebody. Not by God, of course! Forget God! Just bracket God through this whole thing. The way the world is, the way things unfold is somehow the result of my, or some other equally responsible person's, rational choice and organization of things.

Psychologically, why we want to do that is very clear: the alternative seems to be chaos and a kind of nihilism. But also psychologically what is in play- -and this is where I can connect with what Paul was talking about last Sunday, about the action of the spirit of God as enlivening us— the one thing we don't want to take very much account of is our own weakness. We really don't. It's something shameful there. It's something that must be ignored. The weaknesses only emerge when , I think....well, that's the question. When can they emerge? They cannot if we simply stand pat on our own achievements. Of course, the converse is true too. When you see people who seem to be failures in life, it is precisely because they consider themselves failures by measuring themselves over against this totally

organized view of existence. It is only then that they seem to be failures. That I'm really talking about, I think, is the smallness and limitedness of our own existences. The weaknesses of our own existences. Those things that we want to ignore, deny and, above all, the fortuity of life, is the great entree I believe, or one of the great entrees to the emergence of our weaknesses.

Now, what has this to do with being here on Sunday morning? I think everything. Paul, as I said last week, will talk about the spirit of God as somehow activating us in light of the life of Jesus, whose life in a sense was very fortuitous too. I don't think hanging up on the cross was any great shakes as a human destiny, or something Jesus planned! So Paul will say, over and over, that it is precisely under the power of the action of the spirit that we acknowledge our weaknesses, *that* our weaknesses come into view. In other words, it is this paradoxical thing, it is the enlivening power of God which helps me to see that I am weak. That is what being truly alive is. That kind of acknowledgement. And if you read the Pauline letters it comes out over and over and over again. We do not - in that great line from Romans - we do not even know how to pray. We don't even know what to pray for. We don't even know what prayer is about. But the spirit of God, with unutterable groanings, speaks in us.

So the spirit *is* there, indeed the spirit is all over the place. I glory in my weakness, Paul will say, that the power of God will be made manifest. This has a couple of other implications I'd like to spell out.

What is the consequence of our vaunted self-sufficiency? This sense that I am who I am by the dint of my own gutsy effort, by God! It is our inaccessibility to each other, I'd like to propose, and this, on several levels. At least 2 are important. One, because we just indulge the illusion, again, that I am somehow sufficient unto myself. That's the first illusion. That's the first level. But the other one is, of course, the fact that you cannot love except what is truth. And if we're all just faking it then nobody knows anybody else really. We know these

simulacra of ourselves, these projections of ourselves or of each other. And so we live in this goofy hall of mirrors where it's very hard to tell what's real. And so what do we end up loving? Whom do we end up loving? Indeed, whom do we end up loving?

And that's of course what Christianity is all about. That's where we finally land four-square on the first and second readings. All this stuff about love, being careful of other people. "Love your neighbour as yourself. Love God with all your heart. On these two commandments everything depends, which literally means, "hangs from".

In other words, I think, that you can get from considering the fortuitousness of life to, Jesus' understanding of what we are all to be about, which is to love. And it may even help illumine what love is all about, because the older I get the less I find I know about love, really. And much of what I see as having been given in the name of love by me is really something else. So, to be able to offer myself, in my own weakness, mediocrity, meagerness, I can only recognize because God enlivens me to the other. To receive the other. And the upshot of all this, which by the way is one of the beauties of growing older, you can relax more. Otherwise life is a terrible strain. It's a terrible stain – we suffer from the Atlas complex. "Yeah, by God, I've got to be in charge." "Yeah, by God, we've got to have our five year plan!" "Yeah, by God, we've got to have our strategic arrangement of everything." "Yeah, by God, we've got to get organized, folks!"

I'm not arguing for chaos but I'm arguing for the profound relativization and disillusionment of our lives, because that's where I think God is trying to lead us - kicking and screaming, against our own fears - to God's self and to each other.

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31st Sunday
Mal. 1.14-2.2, 8-10; 1 Thess. 2.7-9, 13; Mt. 23,1-12.

It's been said that the biblical message is explosive. If you read Paul with a kind of a fresh eye, a sense of novelty, it is of enormous power and almost leaps off the page. He says all kinds of extraordinary things: we are a new creation; the past is in the process of dying now, something drastically new is happening in the world. In the face of this, some people have said that the history of the Church has been, in large part, a process of defusing the explosion. We see it going on now. We see it even in the New Testament. Paul will say in his letter to the Galatians... that in Christ there is no longer this kind of social hierarchy. Male, female. Jew, Gentile. Slave, free. And then we have, 50 maybe 60 years later, the pastoral letter....let a woman learn in silence with full submission to her husband, etc. etc., etc..

What's going on there? Clearly there is a kind of domestication of this radically new suggestion, that all the social divisions which constitute society were to be dismantled. A since some of these Christian women were apparently putting this suggestion into practice, they were seen as dangerous. And so, smart money says "Cool it ladies." And that's pretty much why we get *all* these injunctions to modify, if not to tame and defuse the gospel.

But it is very hard to sustain the radical novelty of Jesus, for all kinds of reasons. That's why it's interesting to hear this prophetic voice from the Hebrew scripture, Malachi, and then to hear it echoed in the remarks of Jesus, both of them lay people. They stood outside the religious bureaucracy. And the target of their criticism was evidently the priesthood. You've corrupted the covenant of Levi. Why? Because you've shown partiality in your instruction. Turned away from "the way".

Then, here's this lay person, Jesus, making all these statements in this passage from Matthew, about nobody being seen, in any way, as better than anybody else.

Regarding this passage from Matthew, a little history is important. I think we can get to it by looking at the word "church", "ecclesia" in Greek. It is, as I said a couple of weeks ago, a translation of the Hebrew "qahal" which means "the assembly". God creates this people by assembling them. And "ecclesia" means simply to be called out and the caller of course is God. Those who are called constitute this assembly.

The word, "church," has a fascinating history in the New Testament. Paul uses it regularly, talking about house churches, which would have consisted of 15 - 20 people who met in someone's living room in Rome or Corinth. But as I said, the only Gospel that uses the very term "ecclesia" is the gospel of Matthew. What I'm getting at is this. Paul's understanding of "ecclesia" is sharply different from Matthew's. That's what we need to look at today.

If you know the Pauline literature at all, several things are clear. Paul, until the day he died, expected the imminent return of Jesus. (We don't know when he was killed. Perhaps in 65, 66....well before the year 70 in any case.) So, how were these communities that he founded to operate? Again, we have ample indication from the Pauline letters as to how he saw them put themselves together. They were "organised" charismatically. The Greek word "charisma" simply means "gift". And so Paul believed that God was going to endow people with specific gifts. Now, the gift was not a kind of stable thing. It was the ability to act in a certain way, always in service the community, enabling it to exist and to function. The gifts were always the gifts of the spirit and the spirit is the enlivening power of God. You have to keep in mind that the point of all these gifts was always for the sake of the community. So that we see, even in that famous passage of first Corinthians where he talks about speaking with the tongues of men and of angels, that speaking in tongues, one of the gifts, was to be done out of love, for the community. Otherwise it was a means of self-promotion, and so useless.

The letters of Paul are replete with his idea of the church as the body of Christ, in which all members function for the sake of the other. Any one particular function supplemented, complemented the other. Some are prophets, some interpreters of tongues, some apostles, some administrators. All these gifts were absolutely for the sake of the whole, which was the body of Christ, or the Church as Paul understood it. And that's crucial.

Alright. The gospel of Matthew was probably written 20 years, maybe longer, after Paul's death. What had intervened? Jerusalem had been destroyed by the armies of Rome, and the Jesus movement was still seen as a Jewish sect. Furthermore, it dawned on people, especially on the people for whom the gospel of Matthew was written, that Jesus was not going to return right away. Therefore they were going to need an organizational style or principle other than that of the Pauline churches, the charismatic one. Thus began an institutionalization of this movement. So we had people having specific offices. Later on, in the pastoral letters, we even see job descriptions, so much has the structure been solidified.

What happens whenever you get organization? There's always a power structure, and the danger of the abuse of power. Always. It comes with the territory. And so Matthew reacts to this development: "listen, you are all students. There's only one instructor. You're not going to be called teacher, instructor, father." Although Paul seemed to have had an absolutely egalitarian model for the church, Matthew was moved to add these corrections I just mentioned, because people "in charge" were beginning to throw their weight around as this group became institutionalized, bureaucratized.

Okay. But Matthew's fundamental understanding was the same as Paul's. We're all even-Christians, in the great phrase of Caryl Houselander, We're all "even -Christians".

And then, of course, comes Constantine, and two hundred years later, with the Edict of Milan, Christianity is legitimated. Christianity is made the official religion of the Empire. Not surprisingly, Christianity takes on the political structure of the Roman

Empire. So there is now talk about “dioceses“, a Roman political term for a certain jurisdictional territory. We talk about the Bishop of Rome as “Pontifex Maximus” - the great bridge builder. This, of course, was an imperial title, i.e. given to the Emperor. The colouration of the Constantinian church began to resemble, very much, the colouration of the Roman empire, which was a starkly hierarchical world. In other words, the bureaucrats, the priests, the elders, the bishops, began to constitute a caste in the church. Indeed, I grew up in a Roman church that was built on the caste system.

Let me go back. Why was the Bishop of Rome considered primary? Well, there are certainly indices, in the gospels of Matthew and John particularly, of what we would later come to call, the petrine primacy. But the famous reason, given by one of the Early Fathers, that the Bishop of Rome could take primacy was “ propter majorem caritatem”. That’s the Latin phrase that was used. It means, “Because of the greater love flowing from the Episcopal See of Rome.” And that was the basis, along with the intimations in the Gospels, for the Roman claim to primacy. And so we have this terrible, internal conflict: that is, we have the adoption of Roman political structures, yet we have the residue of Paul’s own understanding and Jesus’ own understanding of the Christian community. Church leadership began to look like standard-issue leadership, with the “bosses” forming a special class. Now, it is absolutely clear to me that Jesus had no intention to erect a caste system in the church. Absolutely none. And yet this is clearly where we are, even though we all are supposed to be brothers and sisters: equals.

Let me offer another term that may be helpful at this point. It is the word “authority”. The Oxford English Dictionary offers as its first definition of the word authority: “The power to enforce obedience.” No surprise here. That’s absolutely familiar. Somebody who is the boss can enforce his or her will, have other people do, willy-nilly, what the boss wants. Clearly a Roman model... an imperial model of the understanding of authority. If you look at the Latin word from which authority comes, however, the root is the verb “augere”. What does it mean? To help to grow. Now this sounds suspiciously like the

authority of Jesus. Sounds suspiciously like the authority of John XXIII. What was his authority? Was he in fact authoritative in the world? Far more than any pope of my memory. I grew up under the autocrat Pius XII. We now have John Paul II. Clearly he is making his power felt in any number of ways. In other words, the caste system again operates. But what of this notion of authority as that which makes to grow? How do you make to grow? Not by having the power to enforce your will, but by nourishing - by giving people room and space, and by looking at them in their humanity rather than seeing them merely as functions. That's the only notion of authority that is Christian. That's why the Gospel of Matthew is saying that, among the pagans those, in authority make their power felt . But among you it must be otherwise. Among you the first must be the servant of all. We have in the gospel of John, Jesus exercising authority by washing the feet of the disciples.

What are the implications of all this? I'd like to suggest two very important ones. They're interconnected. One is that the only real church of Jesus Christ is a repentant church, as the Pope is now reminding us with the coming of the new millennium, that the only real church of Jesus Christ is a repentant church.

Now what does that mean? It means that we acknowledge the violence we do to each other, above within the Church; that we acknowledge that as a group, we are continually failing to be the Church of Jesus, Put positively, it means that the church is to be a free zone. It's where people can get together and don't have to pretend that they're better than they really are. (And that's what repentance means.) This explosive novelty, which is part of the whole Jesus business, is supposed to be the characteristic of the Christian church. It is the experiential base of the Christian life: people feeling liberated. Clearly there are few things so liberating in life as to be able to peacefully admit one's own weakness and fallibility to another. And that's what repentance means first of all. But, there are further implications. It means that we are not a triumphalist church. We are not a self-congratulatory church, yet we have been and continue to be.

But it's not only the repentant church, it's also a Eucharistic church. And essentially so. The word Eucharist embodies the word "charis" from which we get the word "charisma", from which we get the word "gift". And Eucharist simply means "thanksgiving". Therefore, the only real church is a group of people who can get together in gratitude with each other, for each other. That alone is the real church. It is essentially a Eucharistic church. The only way we can be brought to gratitude is by being together to remember this man who says - this is my life for you. My body and blood. Everything that I am.

Now this is very difficult for us to grasp, because, especially since the Enlightenment, religion has become highly privatized. Richard Rohr, for instance, the great spiritual director, has pointed out that Christianity has for many people in many ways simply has become another form of therapy, of self-improvement. The evidence for this I think is undeniable and obvious. This is, of course the contemporary version of the privatization I just spoke of. But one can understand why this is so because, if the church is not a repentant church, then I am necessarily thrust back onto my own resources. Self-improvement and auto-therapy, or me and my guru, become inevitablel. But please note – this is at the cost of community.

The Church is Eucharistic in the sense that it is Mass-centered. It is a group of people who are ready to re-enact the parting gesture of Jesus, to renew its memory of that man, and to be grateful. Therefore all the accoutrements of the Liturgy – music or the absence of it, vestments, "ambience" – are to be judged by the extent to which they express and expedite that depth in people from which gratitude comes. Like the Church itself, the furnishings of the Mass are not there for their own sake.

We are either Christian together, or we are not Christian. We are Christians as repentant community, as celebrating our own sinfulness freely, openly with each other, in the memory of this man. The heart of the reality is gratitude: Eucharist celebrated together. That and only that makes us Christian. It is surely difficult to devise convincing Liturgical forms which can express and convey this gratitude. Even more difficult to bring them off. It is certain however, that

sheer energy, excitement, sense-stimulation won't do it; can't do it. They may even make inaccessible the depths from which gratitude comes.

To repent. To tell the truth to ourselves. To let us tell the truth about ourselves to each other. That's why we're here. And nothing else justifies this assembly. Nothing.

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The poor becoming real co-subjects

33rd Sunday
Prov. 31.10-13,16-18,20,26,28-31; 1 Thess. 5.1-6;Mt.24.36;25.14-30.

Just a couple of comments about the readings. We are coming to the end of the liturgical year and that's why the second and third readings have to do with the end of time. The first reading is a little more problematic, in a variety of ways. It would be much easier to deal with if there were a comparable reading about a good husband, some place in the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately, there's not. So, we simply have to put up with this patriarchal, somewhat patronizing view of things. (As always, the regular rule for reading the bible is that you cannot turn your brain off when you pick up the book.)

Meanwhile, I'd like to talk about the fact that King's College is twinned with a village in El Salvador. The reason for that, of course, is that we are rich and they are poor. It's very simple. And as I said yesterday to the group that was meeting here from all over the province - all those places that have twinned villages - we're not doing anything special in doing this. The very fact that it seems special is testimony to the fact of how inadequate our Christianity is. Because as Christians, we are twinned not just with the people in this little village in El Salvador, but with everybody. Nevertheless, given our present way of seeing things, it does seem unusual. In this regard, I'd like to refer to the words of a Belgian who'd worked in Latin America for years and years.... Jose Comblin. He made the point that it is only when the poor become visible to us, that we have really heard the gospel proclaimed. A stunning statement and absolutely true, and one that should be self-evident. But that's not the way that I was brought up to see the Church, and that may be true for many of you. Once more: it's only when the poor have voice, because they are generally inaudible, and take on three dimensional reality, because normally they are invisible, only when these things occur can we say that we have truly heard the gospel. Anything else, as far as I can

see, is an exercise in self-indulgence. It's religion simply disguised as another form of self-aggrandizement. And, God knows, religion, including Christianity, has been used that way often enough, and continues to be. So, it's extremely important that we have our twins from El Salvador here today, whether they live there, or they live in Toronto or wherever they live.

But the process of twinning is not simple, nor is it instantaneous. So I'd like to suggest a sequence in which that process becomes real, that is, the process of the poor taking on their own reality for us..

I think the first step happens in a kind of vague and indiscriminate way. It is that we see the poor as objects. "Oh, those poor people. Those distended bellies. Starvation. Stick-like legs and arms." At this stage, they become objects of our pity. Here, I'd like to distinguish sympathy from pity. As long as someone is an object of my pity, they are precisely that... an object. They do not emerge in their own subjectivity as real people, in other words. And that's alright, as a start. We human beings are, after all, slow learners. So, this beginning is not a useless step. In fact, it is an essential further move, when we realize that we have made them the objects of our pity. This moment of recognition is important, because another major step can be made from that point: this is to see that their poverty is, to a large extent, the result of our own greed. Poverty is not an accident, and international poverty is not an accident. I'm not an economist but I've lived enough places, with enough poor people, and have seen enough, to know that poverty is not usually self-induced. And I've read enough from people far wiser than I, who have convinced me that this is in fact the case. For example, in the Caribbean, where I go every summer, it is clear that we are pauperizing the people. In Africa, in the part of it I lived in, we pauperized the people. They did not determine what price they were to get for their copper, or their coffee, or their land or their labour.

So to see the major reason for poverty is a major step. I point this out, not to induce guilt, but to show us the shape of our real responsibility. I think that at that stage, we still see “the poor” this great, 4 billion member population, living on this planet, at this moment, as objects.

The next step is very difficult, and that is to come to see the poor as subjects. That’s much harder to do. I am surely very unpracticed at doing that myself.

But here, let me give you a little information about myself. I lived in Africa for a year and experienced moments of generosity that are just unparalleled in my life, on the part of people who had virtually nothing. For two years I worked in the States for the federal poverty program, the war on poverty that Lyndon Johnson declared and Richard Nixon dismantled. I ended up spending a lot of time with very poor people. One of the things I discovered is that there is a kind of freedom among those people that I did not find in my buttoned-down, upper-middle-class parish assignment. I wondered a good deal about it: this strange phenomenon, that when you are marginalized, as the poor almost by definition are, there are certainly all kinds of bad effects. But, amazingly, there are some good effects too. Such a condition gives you a kind of mobility and a kind of freedom that other people do not have that are too totally slotted into the bourgeois world that I occupy, where what other people think of you, and the rules of politesse are so firmly enforced.

But, I’d like to suggest there’s more involved here. To be in a place where nobody has cell phones or faxes or are on the internet, is to live in a really different world. I find more and more, that we who are so thoroughly “wired in,” are defining ourselves in terms of our technology. We more and more know ourselves as human beings in terms of the machines to which we are attached, like so many umbilical cords. (It reminds me of the Borg on Star Trek. These are the half-people, half-machine entities that walk around in perfect unity of purpose, because they are controlled by some mega-machine.) But it’s really important to see that this kind of life, with its mechanical rhythms is a strange, and not-very-beneficial luxury, as is the self-definition which emerges. I not only have voice mail, but I am my

voice mail. I am my email address. Most of the world does not and I must lean from that fact, rather, from the poor, to be very attentive not to say ... Trojcak you are Trojcak because of these mechanical connections to them.

The poor, I think, when you know them as subjects, can tell us, if we listen to them, that we are not really defined by our possessions. (If you don't have any possessions, or very few, then it is very difficult to define yourself by your possessions). Another example: in my neighbourhood, property values are the bottom line. In other words, I am what I live in, and woe-betide the woman or man who threatens that. But I am not what I own. The poor, if I take them seriously, can tell me that I'm strongly inclined to a serious case of mistaken identity.

Another thing that struck me in Africa is that nothing is ever wasted. The ingenuity of people who have nothing, to take that nothing and make toys or braziers for cooking, and are doing all sorts of such remarkable and inventive things, was astonishing to me. We who live in the "throw away" society, as it has been called, can very well assume that the world is an infinitely capacious larder into which I can dip at any time, at any point, for whatever I need, and then simply abandon one gadget for its newer-therefore, bigger and better-version. Yet global warming is not an accident. Massive pollution of our air and water is not an accident. And if the poor really are subjects to me, I really believe that the consciousness that I am impoverishing the atmosphere for all of us, can be borne in on me.

Finally, and in a somewhat larger way, the poor help to disillusion us. From what? From the notion that we are basically self-created beings. The poor cannot afford that kind of illusion. Nor can they afford the illusion that we are radically independent of each other, which again, comes with the territory of being middle class, here in North America.

In other words, the poor taken as subjects and not as objects, taken not out of pity but in sympathy, can help me define what it is to be a human being. And there's nothing more important than that. There is no kind of cerebral exercise that we can perform that is going to enable to redefine ourselves in that way. Until the poor become real for us, as our fellow human beings, our co-human beings, we truly do not know who we are.

So what is the upshot of all these ruminations? There are many. But I'm led to the question: who's indebted to whom? We readily talk about third world debt. It's monumental. It's more than, As everybody knows, in many countries it's more than everything that is spent on health care, education, housing, infrastructure in those countries. So, who is indebted to whom? When the poor become our co-humans, I think the equation has to be radically rewritten.

Finally for us, because this is not a class in sociology or history, much less economics, I don't think it is possible to know this archetypal poor man, Jesus apart from knowing the poor. He was self-described as not having a place to lay his head, who said that, if you wanted to be His disciple, you should sell everything you have and give it to the poor and follow Him . For the last time: I don't think that, prior to the poor becoming real co-subjects, with us, that Jesus will ever really be known. That's not some kind of melodramatic flourish with which to end this homily. It is the literal truth.

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Feast of Christ the King

Today, the feast of Christ the King, we are confronted with this extraordinary passage from the Gospel of Matthew: the judgment scene. Why is this passage so crucial? Because it is illuminative of the whole meaning of the Christian enterprise. What it also does, is give content to Paul's remarkable image of God being all in all. God is all in all when we human beings are, before anything else, aware of the suffering of our co-human beings. An extraordinary image. If you notice, there is no orthodoxy test, there is no measure of anything, except the need of our co-human beings and our capacity to respond to that, before and above everything.

This fills out a claim made a theologian friend of mine. And I think she's dead right when she says that Christianity, before it is anything....before it is a system of beliefs, before it is a moral code, before it's a way of behaving or a pattern of administration .... Christianity, at its absolute base, is a vision. It is first of all, a vision of human possibility. Moreover, the vision is not self-generated. By way of comparison, the Buddha would say that life is suffering. But where does that vision take people? The vision of human possibility that Jesus offers is different. It should, and can galvanize us into some kind of action.

If we go to the Hebrew scriptures, out of which all of this comes of course, where are the visionaries? They are the prophets. They are those extraordinary men and women who believed that God had illumined them so that they could see the world as God saw it. So we get, over and over, and in all the prophets, this visionary quality of religion. Before it is thought, before it is behaviour, it is first of all vision. In other words, what Christianity consists in a conversion of one's imagination, because it is precisely in one's imagination that

visions find a home. And the vision, of course, is that of these totally porous human beings, Jesus, the saints, who let others leak into their lives, and who leak into each other's lives.

An important footnote. Why does Christianity not work? It doesn't of course. We didn't need Karl Marx to point that out, or Friedrich Nietzsche. But why does it not work? I think there are lots of reasons why it doesn't work. But I'd like to suggest, in terms of its visionary nature, why it does not work. I think that we human beings in the course of organizing this vision, instrumentalizing (to use that barbaric term) this vision, functionalizing this vision in terms of structure, codes of behaviour or dogmatic systems, ten to blue, or even bury the vision. I think we do it for a variety of reasons, some innocent, some not so innocent. But, certainly, this much is clear. When we do instrumentalize the vision of Jesus, in terms of parish organizations, church hierarchy, or the code of canon law, the thing that they all have in common is that they are all in our control. We can take parish surveys, we can count heads, we can number and categorize sins. We can manage all that. We make the vision manageable. Why? Because we human beings are so insecure, it seems to me, that we need to do that to make sure that we are all alright, or even that we exist.

One of the striking things about the recent agreement, 500 years late, signed between the Lutheran Church and the Roman Church, is the reassertion that God saves us, by God's self, and not by dint of our effort. Salvation is by faith, which of course, is absolutely fundamental to Jewish thought. God is the One Who saves. We do not have to do anything to please God, to con God into saving us. Yet, we are so incredulous about that, that we think we have to keep measuring up. Am I alright? Am I doing it alright? Is this dogmatic formulation going to be alright? I think that's one of the reasons that the vision becomes blurred. Or it is reduced, often enough, to something that is the very opposite of what it was intended to be in the first place. This is very important for us to know on the Feast of Christ the King.

What next happens, if we seriously entertain this vision of human existence, is that a new sensibility arises from the vision. In other words, as I put it last week quoting Comblin, the Belgian theologian: as soon as the poor become visible to me then I've heard the gospel. In other words, , to be a Christian, is to be sensitive to the reality of those others: voiceless, faceless, invisible, even though they constitute the majority of the people on this planet at this moment.

Again, please note, there are no laws, there are no orders, there is no rigorous expectation in the vision and the sensibility. It is all very fragile, which means that we have enormous responsibility, strenuously exert ourselves in the face of all this. But then, even when one begins to seriously think about the kind of sensibility that would enable me to go through life, not thinking about bottom lines, but rather about the needs of my co-human beings, the move to action is difficult. If they were to become the true bottom line of my life, or if I do begin to believe in the vision, then what immediately comes into consciousness is the gap between this vision and sensibility, and the alternate vision of reality as lived by Jesus. Here is a further reason why the move from vision-sensibility to act is so difficult,. Furthermore, the tension aroused by seeing this gap, easily explains why I can blur and vision and blunt the sensibility with such ease.

All of which gives rise to the last and most salient aspect of the Feast of Christ the King. What this feast engenders, if it engenders anything authentic, is hope. Not a content-less hope but a hope in this God who envisions, in both senses of the word, us. Hope in the voices of prophets like Jesus, Isaiah and Paul.

Let me break off for just a minute to quote something that one of the greatest Pauline scholars writing today said. The Pauline churches, as Paul thought, operated by reason of the gifts of God; charisms. Although he said they were all necessary, the two topmost ones for Paul were prophecy and teaching. The prophet is the visionary. The prophet is the one who constantly reveals and renews this vision. James Dunn says that Paul ranked prophecy above teaching, which is the second great gift. Teaching preserves continuity but

prophecy gives life. With teaching, a community may not die, but without prophecy it will not live. So, this feast can arouse in us, hope in those prophetic voices of the Hebrew scripture, of the New Testament, of our own time. They give content to our hope precisely because they absolutely and indisputably demonstrate the gap between our reality and the vision to which we say we subscribe. That gives us the real grounds for hope.

And finally having that vision, we have all kinds of interesting consequences. We have criteria for judging everything. Everything in the world. In ourselves, first of all, in our church, in every institution which can abet, distort or obstruct this vision. That, I put it to you, is also a major work of hope

One theologian, who like most academics, uses language very badly, described hope in this way: “Hope is the positive non-acceptance of the unfulfilled present.” (I do not suggest you try to set that to music.) But what she was getting at, and I wish she were more poet and more prophet, is to enable us to live in the gap. She is teaching us to know that we are only safe when we live in that gap between the vision and its concomitant sensibility, and at the same time to be unwaveringly aware of how we really operate. Anything short of this is not Christian. So, we can co-opt a statement made by no less redoubtable an intellectual of this century than Albert Einstein, who said that imagination is more important than knowledge. He said that as a scientist. For us would be Christians, it has enormous significance. Christ is King in so far as Christ determines the shape of our imagination and engenders the sense of the gap and thereby draws us to himself and to each other.

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