

THE DAILY GOSPEL

Thursday, July 1, 2004
13th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Am 7:10-17

Gospel: Mt 9:1-8

Jesus got back into the boat, crossed the lake again, and came to his hometown. Here they brought a paralyzed man to him, lying on a bed. Jesus saw their faith and said to the paralytic, Courage, my son! Your sins are forgiven.

Then some teachers of the Law said to themselves, This man insults God. Jesus was aware of what they were thinking, and said, Why have you such evil thoughts? Which is easier to say: Your sins are forgiven or Stand up and walk? You must know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. He then said to the paralyzed man, Stand up! Take your stretcher and go home. The man got up, and went home.

When the crowds saw this, they were filled with awe and praised God for giving such power to human beings.

Commentary

THIS man is insulting God, they said. I think we can take it to mean, This man is insulting us! If God is our God, then to insult God is to insult us. In this way we make God our property. It is good to beware of the words my and our. In the Our Father, of course, we call God ours, but the very next thing we say is, Holy be your name. In Hebrew the word for holy is kadosh. Its basic meaning is separate, wholly other. We cannot put God in our pocket. God can be ours only in the sense that God is the One to whom we give ourselves. God is not subject to our will, but we to God's.

The practical meaning of this became clear to me recently when I heard a priest abruptly challenging someone to declare whether or not he was a Catholic. The man who was being challenged had by no means rejected his Catholic faith, but he was engaged in a tormenting search. Pushed in this way he eventually and painfully said, No. The priest looked at the two others present, with satisfaction in his face. He felt he had clarified something. But in fact he had only cut the rope by which that man might have drawn himself back later. He had forced him to declare his alienation before a priest and two witnesses. The next time that man is asked he will instantly say No. Nobody would force a formal divorce on a couple who were not ready for it; yet the priest had done just that to this man. Yes, let God do God's business, and beware of our clarity.

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Friday, July 2, 2004
13th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Am 8:4-6, 9-12

Gospel: Mt 9:9-13

As Jesus moved on from there, he saw a man named Matthew at his seat in the custom-house, and he said to him, Follow me. And Matthew got up and followed him. Now it happened,

while Jesus was at table in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and other sinners joined Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this they said to his disciples, Why is it that your master eats with those sinners and tax collectors?

When Jesus heard this he said, Healthy people do not need a doctor, but sick people do. Go and find out what this means: *What I want is mercy, not sacrifice.* I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.

Commentary

THE ancient world generally did not see compassion as a high value. The Romans despised it as weakness. Clemency they valued, because it showed you in a good light: you were so powerful and confident that you didn't even need to take revenge. But only slaves would feel compassion. When a new Eastern religion came exalting compassion, real Romans used to spectacles of absolute power of life and death in the Coliseum games could only despise it.

Compassion is seen as a high value now, even when it is being disregarded in practice. Most people would like to be regarded as compassionate even politicians and bureaucrats. It's a tribute, even if sometimes half-hearted, to the man of Nazareth who sat down to eat with the despised of the land, and who laid down his life to prove that compassion was more than soft talk.

Saturday, July 3, 2004

St. Thomas, Apostle

1st Reading: Eph 2:19-22

Gospel: Jn 20:24-29

Thomas, the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, We have seen the *Lord*. But he replied, Until I have seen in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.

Eight days later, the disciples were inside again and Thomas was with them. Despite the locked doors Jesus came and stood in their midst and said, Peace be with you. Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here and see my hands; stretch out your hand and put it into my side. Resist no longer and be a believer.

Thomas then said, You are my *Lord* and my God. Jesus replied, You believe because you see me, don't you? Happy are those who have not seen and believe.

Commentary

THE others said to Thomas, We have seen . Thomas said, Until I have seen . What's the difference? None. The others believed because they had seen; why shouldn't Thomas insist on the same?

Thomas has been unfairly nicknamed Doubting Thomas. Of course the gospel writer has us in mind. Like Thomas, we relate on the scene much later. We have to be reassured; we are the real Doubting Thomases.

Like Thomas we are invited too to put your finger here and see my hands; stretch out your hand and put it into my side. Most of us know the wounds of Christ firsthand. I talked with a woman yesterday who lives, you could say, in the side of Christ. Many have lived there, throughout the ages. We are now dying with him on his cross, in his pains and Passion, wrote Julian of Norwich in the 14th century, and when we deliberately remain on that same cross, holding on to the very end, with his help and grace, then suddenly we shall see his expression change and we shall be with him in heaven. Without a moment's break we shall pass from one state the other and we shall all be brought into joy.

Sunday, July 4, 2004
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Is 66:10-14

Rejoice for Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her. Be glad with her, rejoice with her, all you who were in grief over her, that you may suck of the milk from her comforting breasts, that you may drink deeply from the abundance of her glory.

For this is what Yahweh says: I will send her peace, overflowing like a river; and the nations wealth, rushing like a torrent towards her.

And you will be nursed and carried in her arms and fondled upon her lap.

As a son comforted by his mother, so will I comfort you. At the sight of this, your heart will rejoice; like grass, your bones will flourish. For it shall be known that Yahweh's hand is with his servant, but his fury is upon his enemy.

2nd Reading: Gal 6:14-18

For me, I do not wish to take pride in anything except in the cross of Christ Jesus our Lord. Through him the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

Let us no longer speak of the circumcised and of non-Jews, but of a new creation. Let those who live according to this rule receive peace and mercy: they are the Israel of God! Let no one trouble me any longer: for my part, I bear in my body the marks of Jesus.

May the grace of Christ Jesus our Lord be with your spirit brothers and sisters. Amen.

Gospel: Lk 10:1-12, 17-20

The Lord appointed seventy-two other disciples and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place, where he himself was to go. And he said to them, The harvest is rich, but the workers are few. So you must ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers to his harvest. Courage! I am sending you like lambs among wolves. Set off without purse or bag or sandals; and do not stop at the homes of those you know.

Whatever house you enter, first bless them saying: Peace to this house. If a friend of peace lives there, the peace shall rest upon that person. But if not, the blessing will return to you. Stay in that house eating and drinking at their table, for the worker deserves to be paid. Do not move from house to house.

When they welcome you in any town, eat what they offer you. Heal the sick who are there and say to them: The kingdom of God has drawn near to you.

But in any town where you are not welcome, go to the marketplace and proclaim: Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off and leave with you. But know and be sure that the kingdom of God had come to you. I tell you that on the Judgment Day it will be better for Sodom than for this town.

The seventy-two disciples returned full of joy. They said, Lord, even the demons obeyed us when we called on your name. Then Jesus replied, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. You see, I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the Enemy, so that nothing will harm you. Nevertheless, don't rejoice because the evil spirits submit to you; rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven.

Commentary

SCHOLARS have exercised all their ingenuity on the number 72! (and on 70, which is the number given in other versions). Could these be references to Genesis 10? or to Exodus 18? etc. But someone has suggested that it may be the sum total of followers that Jesus had at that time! Whatever about numbers, the significance of the passage seems clear: all followers of Jesus are sent out to proclaim the Good News. In the previous chapter Luke had described the sending out of the Twelve. The instructions that Jesus gave to the 12 and to the 72 are practically the same.

You could say that in our time the parable of the lost sheep is reversed: there is one lone sheep in the sheepfold and the ninety-nine are lost! Moreover, the shepherds spend all their time looking after the one sheep!

Every follower of Christ is called to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Even reluctant followers! To the man who was making excuses for not following, Jesus said, Go and proclaim the Kingdom of God (Lk 9:60).

Do you need a diploma in catechetics? No! Not one of the 70 had a diploma of any kind nor any of the Twelve. Jesus himself had no diplomas or degrees. But what you have to have is love. If you love genuinely, you are a missionary: you are going out of yourself. If you go out to even one stranger you are, in a way, going out to the whole world. And if you go out to an enemy, you are standing on the highest peak of the Christian life.

Monday, July 5, 2004
14th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Hos 2:16,17-18, 21-22

Gospel: Mt 9:18-26

While Jesus was speaking to them, an official of the synagogue came up to him, bowed before him and said, My daughter has just died, but come and place your hands on her, and she will live. Jesus stood up and followed him with his disciples.

Then a woman who had suffered from a severe bleeding for twelve years came up from behind and touched the edge of his cloak. For she thought, If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed. Jesus turned, saw her and said, Courage, my daughter, your faith has saved you. And from that moment the woman was cured.

When Jesus arrived at the official's house and saw the flute players and the excited crowd, he said, Get out of here! The girl is not dead. She is only sleeping! And they laughed at him. But once the crowd had been turned out, Jesus went in and took the girl by the hand, and she stood up. The news of this spread through the whole area.

Commentary

COURAGE, my daughter, your faith has saved you. It is interesting to see what happens when you emphasize a different word (see February 26). When you look you see that these words (Your faith has saved you, or a close equivalent) are quite frequent in the gospels: Mt 9:22, 29; 15:28; Mk 5:34; 10:52; Lk 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42 . Many people imagine that the life of faith is some kind of alienation, but here Jesus puts people's lives back in their own hands.

Meister Eckhart wrote, It is just as true to say that man became God as that God became man. And so whatever you have you have not got on loan from God, for God is your own. Tauler added, He is ours, he is all our own . And someone else added, And so, whatever you get you get from yourself.

The self in question, of course, is not the ego, but your true life that is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3). Faith then is not a kind of mental slavery, but a coming into your power.

Tuesday, July 6, 2004
14th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Hos 8:4-7, 11-13

Gospel: Mt 9:32-38

Some people brought to Jesus a man who was dumb because he was possessed by a demon. When the demon was driven out, the dumb man began to speak. The crowds were astonished and

said, Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. (But the Pharisees said, He drives away demons with the help of the prince of demons.)

Jesus went around all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and he cured every sickness and disease. When he saw the crowds he was moved with pity, for they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is abundant but the workers are only few. Ask the master of the harvest to send workers to gather his harvest.

Commentary

HE drives away demons with the help of the prince of demons. This is what you might call the explanation from below. A great deal of modern psychology also offers explanations from below. We live in a culture of suspicion, in which higher motives are usually interpreted as hypocrisy. It's a seductive way of looking; it explains away goodness, and so it gives me permission to wallow where I am; it even makes wallowing look commendably honest.

There is also the explanation from above. That too has its dangers of course. There is the case of the history student who gave God as the explanation of everything that happened in the past.

It all makes you think: what are we doing when we look for explanations? What part of our mind or being are we trying to satisfy? And what do we do with explanations when we get them? In truth: nothing! We pass on to something else.

In Matthew's version of today's passage, Jesus ignored the jibe about Beelzebul. That's undoubtedly the best thing to do with explanations, especially explanations from below. Trying to counter them only robs us of our power. I love the way the narrative just continues, Jesus went around all the towns and villages .

Wednesday, July 7, 2004
14th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Hos 10:1-3, 7-8, 12

Gospel: Mt 10:1-7

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority over the unclean spirits to drive them out and to heal every disease and sickness.

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first Simon, called Peter, and his brother Andrew; James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew, the tax collector; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon, the Canaanite, and Judas Iscariot, the man who would betray him.

Jesus sent these twelve on mission with the instruction: Do not visit pagan territory and do not enter a Samaritan town. Go instead to the lost sheep of the people of Israel.

Go and proclaim this message: The kingdom of heaven is near.

Commentary

LOOK at that list of twelve and try to imagine how they looked. They were simple men, local in their speech and manners; to us today they would probably appear ragged and scruffy in the extreme. Yet these are the men whose memory has been venerated by the saints and mystics of all ages.

Recently I thumbed through an expensive large-format book on the treasures of the Vatican. It also showed a picture of a group of cardinals; and on the following page a close-up of one cardinal's gold pectoral cross and chain against its background of watered silk. We are used to witnessing such treasures, but the legend took me aback. Here it is, Faith feeds upon symbols and images. The gold cardinal's cross is the symbol of the Princes of the Church, men chosen to constitute the Senate of Catholicity and the potential electorate of Popes. I felt immensely sad. The Cross is a

symbol of poverty and humility, not of worldly royalty. Poverty can go anywhere, but solid gold is a stranger to most places. Tomorrow's reading has something to say about carrying gold.

The Gospel calls us to poverty of spirit and poverty of life. Remember what Peter said to the cripple, I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk (Acts 3:6).

Thursday, July 8, 2004
14th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Hos 11:1, 3-4, 8-9

Gospel: Mt 10:7-15

Jesus said to his disciples, Go and proclaim this message: The kingdom of heaven is near. Heal the sick, bring the dead back to life, cleanse the lepers, and drive out demons. You received this as a gift, so give it as a gift. Do not carry any gold, silver or copper in your purses. Do not carry a traveler's bag, or an extra shirt, or sandals, or walking-stick: workers deserve their living.

When you come to a town or a village, look for a worthy person and stay there until you leave.

As you enter the house, wish it peace. If the people in the house deserve it, your peace will be on them; if they do not deserve it, your blessing will come back to you.

And if you are not welcomed and your words are not listened to, leave that house or that town and shake the dust off your feet. I assure you, it will go easier for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than it will for the people of that town.

Commentary

You received this as a gift, so give it as a gift. Or, as we sing, Freely, freely you have received. / Freely, freely give. Giving and receiving are the opposite of buying and selling (see May 22). In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer there is a prayer for ourselves in time of wealth. In all time of our tribulation; in all time of our wealth; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment, Good Lord, deliver us. This shows a wise understanding that we are in greater danger from wealth than from poverty. When we can buy our way we depend on no one, but when we are poor we depend on everyone, we are at everyone's mercy. And so we are well placed for learning something about the mercy of God.

This first sending-out of disciples (today's reading) was local and experimental. The great sending-out would be later, to the whole world (Mt 28:19). Jesus sent them out to announce the new mercy of God. He sent them out poor, for they were to show this new side of God in their lives, not just talk about it in sermons. Proclaiming the Good News means being the Good News. Someone said, What you are speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying.

Friday, July 9, 2004
14th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Hos 14:2-10

Gospel: Mt 10:16-23

Jesus said to his disciples, Look, I send you out like sheep among wolves. You must be clever as snakes and innocent as doves. Be on your guard with respect to people, for they will hand you over to their courts and they will flog you in their synagogues. You will be brought to trial before rulers and kings because of me, and so you may witness to them and the pagans.

But when you are arrested, do not worry about what you are to say and how you are to say it; when the hour comes, you will be given what you are to say. For it is not you who will speak; but it will be the Spirit of your Father in you.

Brother will hand over brother to death, and a father his child; children will turn against parents and have them put to death. Everyone will hate you because of me, but whoever stands firm to the end will be saved.

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. For sure, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

Commentary

THERE are lots of animals in this reading: sheep, wolves, snakes and doves. Where did snakes get their reputation for cleverness? In the Book of Genesis. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made (3:1). The serpent beguiled me, and I ate, said Eve (3:13). Never since that time have they shown any signs of an ability to plan a strategy; they just react in the moment like every other animal. And they are all the better for it.

We associate intelligence with the ability to plan. We are impressed by planning, even when the objective is silly. Many things in life require planning, but it can become a compulsive habit. If I feel I have to plan everything, it means that I don't trust myself to react correctly in some future situation. But what makes me think I can do it better now, before the situation has even arisen? How should I know what to say to some people when I haven't even seen them yet? Compulsive planning ensures that I will always live in the past, that I will never fully meet a new situation. Intelligence isn't old hat; it's always new. We have to trust the intelligence that is in us; to distrust it is to undermine it.

When the hour comes, you will be given what you are to say. Not before. All the things that are very alive—intelligence, faith—don't keep till tomorrow; they are for now. You cannot prepare for the suddenness of a wolf's attack except by being alert. That word alertness is probably much closer to the essence of intelligence and of faith too than planning. Jesus kept saying, Stay awake!

Saturday, July 10, 2004 **14th Week in Ordinary Time**

1st Reading: Is 6:1-8

Gospel: Mt 10:24-33

Jesus said to his apostles, A student is not above his teacher, or a slave above his master. A student should be glad to become like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If the head of the family has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of the family! So, do not be afraid of them.

There is nothing covered that will not be uncovered, and nothing hidden that will not be made known. What I am telling you in the dark, you must speak in the light. What you hear in private, proclaim from the housetops.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but have no power to kill the soul. Rather be afraid of him who can destroy both body and soul in hell. For only a few cents you can buy two sparrows, yet not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. As for you, every hair of your head has been counted. So do not be afraid: you are worth much more than many sparrows.

Whoever acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. Whoever rejects me before others I will reject before my Father in heaven.

Commentary

FOR an ordinary commentary on this text, see June 23. Here I will give you sentences and phrases of Meister Eckhart's sermon on it. It is probably his most obscure sermon. He is shedding light into very obscure places. There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed.

When God works in the soul, He loves His work. Where the soul is in which God performs His work, that work is so great that it is nothing but love, and the love is nothing but God. God loves

Himself and His nature, His being and His Godhead . In the love in which God loves Himself, He loves all things .

I take a bowl of water and put a mirror in it and set it under the disc of the sun. Then the sun sends forth its light-rays both from the disc and from the sun's depth, and yet suffers no diminution. The reflection of the mirror in the sun is a sun, and yet it is what it is. So it is with God. God is in the soul with His nature, with His being and with His Godhead, and yet He is not the soul. The reflection of the soul in God is God, and yet she is what she is .

Whoever has understood this sermon, good luck to them! If no one had been here I should have had to preach it to this collecting-box!

Sunday, July 11, 2004
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Dt 30:10-14

For you shall turn to Yahweh, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and observe his commandments and norms, in a word, everything written in this book of the Law.

These commandments that I give you today are neither too high nor too far for you. They are not in heaven that you should say: Who will go up to heaven to get these commandments that we may hear them and put them into practice. Neither are they at the other side of the sea for you to say: Who will cross to the other side and bring them to us, that we may hear them and put them into practice.

On the contrary, my word is very near you; it is already in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can put it into practice.

2nd Reading: Col 1:15-20

He is the image of the unseen God,
and for all creation he is the firstborn,
for in him all things were created,
in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible:
thrones, rulers, authorities, powers
All was made through him and for him.
He is before all
and all things hold together in him.
And he is the head of the body, that is the Church,
for he is the first, the first raised from the dead
that he may be the first in everything,
for God was pleased to let fullness dwell in him.
Through him God willed to reconcile all things to himself,
and through him, through his blood shed on the cross,
God establishes peace,
on earth as in heaven.

Gospel: Lk 10:25-37

A teacher of the Law came and began putting Jesus to the test. And he said, Master, what shall I do to receive eternal life? Jesus replied, What is written in the Scripture? How do you understand it? The man answered, It is written: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* Jesus replied, What a good answer! Do this and you shall live. The man wanted to keep up appearances, so he replied, Who is my neighbor?

Jesus then said, There was a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him and went off leaving him half-dead.

It happened that a priest was going along that road and saw the man, but passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite saw the man and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, too, was going that way, and when he came upon the man, he was moved with compassion. He went over to him and treated his wounds with oil and wine and wrapped them with bandages. Then he put him on his own mount and brought him to an inn where he took care of him.

The next day he had to set off, but he gave two silver coins to the innkeeper and told him: Take care of him and whatever you spend on him, I will repay when I come back.

Jesus then asked, Which of these three, do you think, made himself neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The teacher of the Law answered, The one who had mercy on him. And Jesus said, Go then and do the same.

Commentary

Do this and you will live, said Jesus to the teacher, referring to the answer the teacher had just given him. At the end of the reading he says again, Go and do the same. Those scribes or teachers of the Law loved to quote texts, as this one does in today's reading. Life isn't a theory, or a quotation or piece of Scripture, Jesus seems to say to him.

In western Christianity theology became a university subject, while in the East it continues to come in large measure from monasteries. This marks its character profoundly. While in the East, spirituality remained at the very heart of theology, in the West it became a Cinderella subject. But what is theology without spirituality? It is just theory or philosophy, and it tends to be unrelated to the lives of most people. At an ecumenical meeting recently a western professor of theology remarked in passing that theology was based on philosophy; to which an oriental replied that he had always believed it to be based on the Scriptures!

Holiness of life can never be pushed to the side in theology. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love, wrote St. John (1Jn 4:8). Before the Faith was called Christianity it was called the Way (Acts 19:9). It is a way of life before it is a way of thinking. The real test is in the field of action.

Monday, July 12, 2004 15th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Is 1:10-17

Gospel: Mt 10:34 11:1

Jesus said to his disciples, Do not think that I have come to establish peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father and daughter against her mother; a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Each one will have as enemies those of one's own family.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me. One who wants to benefit from his life will lose it; one who loses his life for my sake will find it.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes him who sent me. The one who welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive the reward of a prophet; the one who welcomes a just man because he is a just man will receive the reward of a just man. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, because he is a disciple of mine, I assure you, he will not go unrewarded.

When Jesus had finished giving his twelve disciples these instructions, he went on from there to teach and to proclaim his message in their towns.

Commentary

KIERKEGAARD (1813-1855) distinguished three stages in the spiritual development of a human being: the aesthetic, the moral, and the spiritual. In the first stage a person is governed by the senses, and by impulse and emotion; it is the sphere of imagination and desire. You want nothing to limit your field of choice, and so your life takes no definite form. Your religion is about beauty and intense sensations. This runs aground rather quickly if you are a serious person, and you have to leap to the second stage: the stage where you begin to take moral standards and responsibilities seriously. But after struggling here you realize it is impossible to be a moral person if you are attempting only to be a moral person. Your religion at this stage would be a very self-righteous one: judging and resenting others, with the danger of only pretending where you cannot succeed. You become more keenly aware of your alienation from God. The third stage is when you take a leap of faith in God. God has to come to you from beyond all your efforts. Only this will open your heart and reveal to you what faith really is.

Kierkegaard's analysis is still relevant to our times. We can detain ourselves for years at the aesthetic level, reading beautiful books and yet taking few or no steps to lead a spiritual life. Many people become locked in stage two, and their religion remains hard and grim and judgmental. But God will take us beyond it: one great day we will get the grace to take up our cross and follow him, to lose our life for his sake .

Tuesday, July 13, 2004
15th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Is 7:1-9

Gospel: Mt 11:20-24

Jesus began to denounce the cities in which he had performed most of his miracles, because the people there did not change their ways, Alas for you Chorazin and Bethsaida! If the miracles worked in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, the people there would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I assure you, for Tyre and Sidon it will be more bearable on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to heaven? You will be thrown down to the place of the dead! For if the miracles which were performed in you had taken place in Sodom, it would still be there today! But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.

Commentary

JESUS worked great miracles in Chorazin and Bethsaida, he said. Yet there is no account of them. Even the two lake-towns themselves have disappeared. Chorazin (now Keraze) is a pile of ruins, Bethsaida is nothing but a location. Yet the Son of God walked their streets, healed their sick tormented people, spoke to them about a new hope and a new world. Gospels could have been written, filled with his words and his deeds.... Instead, there is total silence.

Capernaum is mentioned sixteen times in the gospels; Jesus made it his base when he left his hometown. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea (Mt 4:13). Yet in this reading he said the most terrible things about it. It was more hard-hearted, he said, than Sodom.

And his hometown of Nazareth? It was there that they tried to throw him over the cliff (Lk 4:29).

And the capital city, Jerusalem? It was there that they put him to death.

It doesn't read like a success story. It is the mystery of divine grace and the human will. This is the greatest drama in the world, and there are no clichés or platitudes in it. It is a heart-rending story, and who could even begin to guess the ending?

Wednesday, July 14, 2004
15th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Is 10:5-7, 13-16

Gospel: Mt 11:25-27

On one occasion Jesus said, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I praise you, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to simple people. Yes, Father, this is what pleased you.

Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Commentary

TODAY'S reading follows directly after yesterday's. It is when he had spoken of the dismal failures of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum that he suddenly burst out, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I praise you, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to simple people. For simple people, most other translations have children, or infants. So it appears that the reason people didn't listen to the teaching of Jesus was not that they were stupid, but that they were too clever! They were stuck probably at Kierkegaard's second stage. This clever hard-heartedness is a theme throughout the gospels (and in every age). Later, St. Paul would write, For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1Cor 1:22-24). The theme is: a different kind of wisdom. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise (1Cor 1:25, 27).

We must not be against human wisdom: this would do no service to God. Intelligence is one of God's most shining gifts. But it has to be a kind of wisdom that remains open to extension beyond itself: to a deeper wisdom that must look at first like foolishness. Sometimes a child can cut through all our evasions and projections and ask a question that goes straight to the heart. To such as these, said Jesus, the Kingdom of God has been revealed.

Thursday, July 15, 2004
15th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Is 26:7-9, 12, 16-19

Gospel: Mt 11:28-30

Jesus spoke thus, Come to me, all you who work hard and who carry heavy burdens and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart; and you will find rest. For my yoke is good and my burden is light.

Commentary

HERE is part of a sermon that Johann Tauler (1300-1361) preached on this text.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Wisdom, has said: My yoke is sweet and My burden is light. All earthly-minded people deny this. Weighed down as they are by the burden of fallen nature, they say that God's yoke is bitter and His burden heavy. Yet the contrary must be true, because Eternal Wisdom has said so. A yoke is something which one wearily trails or drags along, and a burden is something which weighs heavily or presses one down.

If people could discover and realize and contemplate how God has founded the innermost depth of the soul, how God dwells there hidden and concealed, they would indeed be blessed. And even though people have turned their eyes away from all this and wandered far away, still they are constantly drawn and attracted back to it. As long as they wander away from it they can never find rest, for there is nothing else that can satisfy them. Though they may not know it, this pulls and

draws them all the time, for this is what they were made for. All things find rest in their own proper state; the stone lies on the ground, fire rises into the air, and the human soul is drawn to God.

Friday, July 16, 2004
15th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Is 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8

Gospel: Mt 12:1-8

It happened that Jesus walked through the wheat fields on a Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and began to pick some heads of wheat and crush them to eat the grain. When the Pharisees noticed this, they said to Jesus, Look at your disciples; they are doing what is prohibited on the Sabbath!

Jesus answered, Have you not read what David did when he and his men were hungry? He went into the house of God, and they ate the bread offered to God, although neither he nor his men had the right to eat it, but only the priests. And have you not read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the Temple break the Sabbath rest, yet they are not guilty?

I tell you, there is greater than the Temple here. If you really knew the meaning of the words: *It is mercy I want, not sacrifice*, you would not have condemned the innocent.

Besides the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

Commentary

THERE was a time in the Church, not long ago, when rubrics and regulations about minutiae were given an inordinate importance. I heard of a priest on the missions long ago (a man of my own Order) who was cycling back to the priory one evening when a woman stopped him and asked if he would hear her confession. He didn't like to say, *Come to the church*, because it was more than a mile distant. Yet the regulations said there had to be a grill or screen when a woman made her confession. Being an inventive man he turned his bicycle upside down and heard her confession through the spokes of the wheel! Some years later the same man was returning near midnight and realized that he hadn't finished praying his breviary. There was no interior light in the car, so he got out and crouched down to pray Compline by the headlights. A passer-by stopped and said, *That must be a great book you're reading!*

Rules are brought into ridicule when there is no room left for common sense. In reaction people swing to the opposite extreme. The law tried to be spirit; it tried to go into every nook and cranny of our lives and guide us from within. We need spirit, or rather the Spirit, to guide us wisely. I often come back to these words from the Sequence to the Holy Spirit at Pentecost:

*Bend the rigid, (Flecte quod est rigidum,
Warm the frigid, Fove quod est frigidum,
Straighten out the quirks! Rege quod est devium.)*

Saturday, July 17, 2004
15th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Mic 2:1-5

Gospel: Mt 12:14-21

The Pharisees went out and made plans to get rid of him. As Jesus was aware of the plot, he went away from that place. Many people followed him and he cured all who were sick. Then he gave them strict orders not to make him known.

In this way Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled:

Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, and with whom I am pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him and he will announce my judgment to the nations.

He will not argue or shout, nor will his voice be heard in the streets. The bruised reed he will not crush, nor snuff out the smoldering wick. He will persist until justice is made victorious and in him all the nations will put their hope.

Commentary

WE need not think that legalism gives up easily. It continually tries to make a comeback. What is the difference between the Pharisees measuring out tithes of mint, dill, and cummin (Mt 23:23), and Catholics up the 1960s weighing food by the ounce on fast days? The difference is that we had no excuse. We had been hearing the Gospel all our lives, and we knew that it was the Pharisees kind of religion that sent Jesus to his death.

The Pharisees made plans to get rid of Jesus. He is nothing but trouble for legalists. He is the one who sends the Spirit, and the Spirit blows where it will. Then we read the terrible words, He went away from that place. He often engaged the Pharisees in debate, but now he just leaves quietly. He will not argue or shout, nor will his voice be heard in the streets. When he has spoken the truth there is nothing else he can do. Even he cannot force them to live with open hearts. Someone can shout at you, but understanding is a silent subtle movement, like a bud opening in the mind. At a certain point there is nothing to do but wait. He gives us time to ripen.

Sunday, July 18, 2004
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Gen 18:1-10

Yahweh appeared to Abraham near the oak of Mamre. Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent, in the heat of the day, when he looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them. He bowed to the ground and said, My Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought. Wash your feet and then rest under the trees. I shall fetch some bread so that you can be refreshed and continue on your way, since you have come to your servant. They then said, Do as you say. Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said to her, Quick, take three measures of flour, knead it and make cakes.

Abraham then ran to the herd, took a fine, tender calf, gave it to the servant who hurried to prepare it. He took butter and milk and together with the calf he had prepared laid it all before them. And while he remained standing, they ate. They then asked, Where is Sarah, your wife? Abraham answered, She is in the tent. And the visitor said, At this same time next year I will return and Sarah by then will have a son.

2nd Reading: Col 1:24-28

At present I rejoice when I suffer for you; I complete in my own flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, which is the Church. For I am serving the Church since God entrusted to me the ministry to make the word of God fully known. I mean that mysterious plan that for centuries and generations remained secret, and which God has now revealed to his holy ones.

God willed to make known to them the riches and even the Glory that his mysterious plan reserved for the pagan nations: Christ is in you and you may hope God's Glory.

This Christ we preach. We warn and teach everyone true wisdom, aiming to make everyone perfect in Christ.

Gospel: Lk 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he entered a village and a woman called Martha welcomed him to her house. She had a sister named Mary who sat down at the Lord's feet to listen to his words. Martha, meanwhile, was busy with all the serving and finally she said, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the serving?

But the Lord answered, Martha, Martha, you worry and are troubled about many things, whereas only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.

Commentary

MARTHA and Mary: work and contemplation. If you had only a slight acquaintance with Meister Eckhart you might expect him to favor Mary over Martha. But surprisingly he regards Martha as having it more together than Mary.

Mary was filled with longing: longing she knew not why and wanting she knew not what. We suspect that she, dear Mary, sat there [at the Lord's feet] a little more for her own happiness than for spiritual profit. That is why Martha said, Bid her rise, Lord, fearing that by dallying in this joy she might progress no further .

Martha stood maturely and well grounded in virtue . Now Martha says, Lord, tell her to help me. This was said not in anger, but it was rather affection that constrained her. We can call it affection or teasing. How so? Observe. She saw how Mary was possessed with a longing for her soul's satisfaction . [But] temporal work is as noble as any communing with God, for it joins us to Him as closely as the highest that can happen to us except the vision of God in His naked nature .

Monday, July 18, 2004 16th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Mic 6:1-4, 6-8

Gospel: Mt 12:38-42

Some teachers of the Law and some Pharisees spoke up, Teacher, we want to see a sign from you. Jesus answered them, An evil and unfaithful people want a sign, but no sign will be given them except the sign of the prophet Jonah. In the same way that Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the monster fish, so will the Son of Man spend three days and three nights in the depths of the earth.

At the judgment, the people of Niniveh will rise with this generation and condemn it, because they reformed their lives at the preaching of Jonah, and here there is greater than Jonah. At the judgment, the Queen of the South will stand up and condemn you. She came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and here there is greater than Solomon.

Commentary

THE country in which Jesus lived was no backwater; it was the crossroads of the world. And the time in which he lived was a time of fervid enthusiasms and political meltdown. The people were looking for signs and wonders. There was a belief that the new age (the messianic times) would be ushered in with marvelous signs like those of the Exodus. People's imaginations were on fire (as indeed are ours today!) for new things. This easily degenerates into a desire for entertainment. Rabbi Eliezer was said to have made rivers flow backwards, displaced trees, had voices come from heaven....

Naturally, people expected something similar from Jesus. No sign will be given to this wicked generation, he told them, but the sign of Jonah! Matthew seems to have interpreted this very fancifully, comparing the three days and three nights that Jesus was to spend in the tomb (factually inaccurate) with the three days and nights that Jonah spent in the whale's belly. (Lk 11:29-32 does not make this comparison.)

Jonah himself was the sign to the Ninevites. Jesus is saying, You are seeking a sign I am God's sign!

Tuesday, July 20, 2004

16th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Mic 7:14-15, 18-20

Gospel: Mt 12:46-50

While Jesus was still talking to the people, his mother and his brothers wanted to speak to him and they waited outside. So someone said to him, Your mother and your brothers are just outside; they want to speak with you.

Jesus answered, Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Then he pointed to his disciples and said, Look! Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is for me brother, sister, or mother.

Commentary

I saw the God rejoices that he is our Father, God rejoices that he is our Mother, and God rejoices that he is our true Spouse and that our soul is his beloved wife. And Christ rejoices that he is our Brother, and Jesus rejoices that he is our Savior. These are five high joys, as I understand, in which he wishes that we rejoice, praising him, thanking him, loving him, endlessly blessing him. This fair lovely word mother is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone nor to anyone except of him [Jesus] and to him who is true Mother of life and of all. Thus wrote Julian of Norwich, the 14th-century English anchoress.

We hear frequently now how fruitful it is to call God Mother as well as Father. But Spouse? This may surprise us a little today (or we may think it refers only to nuns), but it would not have surprised Christians in the past. Bridal spirituality is part of the history of the Christian faith. Some of the greatest names are associated with it: St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. John of the Cross.

However, what are we to make of Julian's calling Jesus our Mother? No feminist today has gone this far! But Julian always has good reasons for what she says. She is not saying that Jesus is like your mother, but the reverse: your mother is like Jesus. A mother's is the most intimate, willing and dependable of all services, because it is the truest of all. None has been able to fulfill it properly but Christ. He bears us to joy and eternal life! Blessings on him!

Wednesday, July 21, 2004

16th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Jer 1:1, 4-10

Gospel: Mt 13:1-9

Jesus left the house and sat down by the lakeside. As many people gathered around him, he got in a boat. There he sat while the whole crowd stood on the shore, and he spoke to them in parables about many things.

Jesus said, The sower went out to sow and, as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground where there was little soil, and the seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was not deep. But as soon the sun rose the plants were scorched and withered because they had no roots. Again other seeds fell among thistles; and the thistles grew and choked the plants. Still other seeds fell on good soil and produced a crop; some produced a hundredfold, others sixty and others thirty. If you have ears, then hear!

Commentary

THE word of God is fruitful in itself, but we have the ability to make it fruitless. Here is the timeless question of the interplay of grace and freewill (see July 13). Theologians had many a bitter battle over it in past centuries. Once it becomes an abstract question it has no context any more, and the debate can go on forever. It was never settled in fact. But of course when you bring it back to the personal sphere it is a very pointed question, and it is settled every moment of one's life. It becomes the question, How is my heart today? Let's expand the images in today's reading.

Is my heart just a public path with no interiority at all, nowhere to abide ? (to use a favorite word in John's gospel). Am I full of restless activity, so that I never really see anyone or face anything? Am I constantly transmitting, so that I can never hear what others are trying to tell me?

Or is that heart of mine a hard stony place? Am I afraid of anyone who comes near me, in case they make demands I can't meet? Am I gritting my teeth and covering up some very painful thing in my life? Am I choked by the dissipation of modern life? Can I sit without turning on the TV or picking up something to read? Is my life a series of disconnected events, with no vision, no direction, no passion? That list covers everyone, I think! Our job now is to find good soil in the heart, where the seeds of the Gospel can sprout.

Thursdsday, July 22, 2004

Mary Magdalene

1st Reading: Song 3:1-4

Gospel: Jn 20:1-2, 11-18

Now, on the first day after the Sabbath, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark and she saw that the stone blocking the tomb had been moved away. She ran to Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved. And she said to them, They have taken the *Lord* out of the tomb and we don't know where they have laid him.

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she bent down to look inside; she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head, and the other at the feet. They said, Woman, why are you weeping? She answered, Because they have taken my *Lord* and I don't know where they have put him.

As she said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not recognize him. Jesus said to her, Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for? She thought it was the gardener and answered him, *Lord*, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him.

Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him, Rabboni which means, *Master*. Jesus said to her, Do not cling to me; you see I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them: I am ascending to my Father, who is your Father, to my God, who is your God.

So Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the *Lord*, and this is what he said to me.

Commentary

A woman's evidence carried no weight in first-century cultures; only men could be proper witnesses. Yet all four gospels testify in different ways that Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Christ. Go to my brothers, Jesus told her. She was the first bearer of the distinctive Christian message: that Jesus is risen from the dead. For this reason tradition has called her the apostle to the apostles. She was the first Christian preacher!

In John's gospel, Peter and John (representing authority and love) work out their protocol about precedence at the mouth of the tomb (love got there first, but stood back for authority). But then they just go home (verse 10). Mary Magdalene stays on the spot, and then she sees Jesus alive.

In the Authorized Version, Jesus says to her, Touch me not! This phrase gained currency in English, to express a cold unapproachable manner. It gave the impression that Jesus was recoiling from her touch. But in the original the tense is a continuous one (literally do not keep on touching me), translated correctly, as in the present version (the Christian Community Bible) as Do not cling to me. She had been searching for him (They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't

know where they have laid him.), and now that she found him she wasn't going to let him go! But he said, Go to my brothers and tell them. She learned to move from contemplation to action.

Friday, July 22, 2004
16th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Jer 3:14-17

Gospel: Mt 13:18-23

Jesus said to his disciples, Now listen to the parable of the sower.

When a person hears the message of the Kingdom but without taking it to himself, the devil comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed that fell along the footpath.

The seed that fell on rocky ground stands for the one who hears the word and accepts it at once with joy. But this fickle and has no roots. No sooner is he harassed or persecuted because of the word, than he gives up.

The seed that fell among the thistles is the one who hears the word, but then the worries of this life and the love of money choke the word, and it does not bear fruit.

As for the seed that fell on good soil it is the one who hears the word and understands it; this bears fruit and produces a hundred, or sixty, or thirty times more.

Commentary

THIS passage is generally regarded by scholars not as words of Jesus but as an interpretation by the earliest Christian community. It was not Jesus way to explain parables. In fact explaining a story is like explaining a joke: it only flattens it. The parables don't need explanation unless it be to fill in some historical facts that have become obscured by the passage of time. But we can meditate on them, as those early Christians did, and all Christians through the ages.

The meditation of those early Christians reflects their experience, of course. Their interpretation shows that they had experience of those four kinds of listening to the word: the three fruitless ones and the one fruitful. So has the Church in every age, and so have we today.

Every one of us is a crowd! Especially today when we are mobbed by so many voices coming at us through the airwaves. (My name is Mob, said the demoniac, for we are many. Mk 5:9) In our individual selves perhaps we can distinguish all four kinds of hearers. Or days when we are one of them in particular .

Saturday, July 24, 2004
16th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Jer 7:1-11

Gospel: Mt 13:24-30

Jesus told his disciples another parable, The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everyone was asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and left.

When the plants sprouted and produced grain, the weeds also appeared. Then the servants of the owner came to him and said: Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?

He answered them: This is the work of an enemy. They asked him: Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds? He told them: No, when you pull up the weeds, you might uproot the wheat with them. Let them just grow together until harvest; and at harvest time I will say to the workers: Pull up the weeds first, tie them in bundles and burn them; then gather the wheat into my barn.

Commentary

MARK'S gospel has the wonderful parable of the grain that grows by day, by night, the farmer doesn't know how (Mk 4:26-29). Matthew omits that parable and puts the present one in its place; and this one is unique to Matthew. It's a good thing that we have both.

The infant Church soon experienced weeds among the wheat. Paul mentions as one of his greatest difficulties danger from false brothers (2 Cor 11:26).

The weed in the parable was darnel, a plant that has a resemblance to wheat. Evil takes care to look like good. If everything evil looked evil, our life would have wonderful clarity, but alas! it isn't so. Our world today pays incredibly detailed attention to image: it's the age of the image, almost to the point of discarding substance. The parable summons us to careful discernment.

Sunday, July 25, 2004 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Gen 18:20-32

Yahweh said, How great is the cry for justice against Sodom and Gomorrah! And how grievous is their sin! I am going down to see if they have done all that they are charged with in the outcry that has reached me. If it is not so, I will know.

The men with him turned away and went towards Sodom, but Yahweh remained standing before Abraham. Abraham went forward and said, Will you really let the just perish with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty good people in the town. Are you really going to let them perish? Would you not spare the place for the sake of these fifty righteous people? It would not be at all like you to do such a thing and you can't let the good perish with the wicked, nor treat the good and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the judge of all the earth be just? Yahweh said, If I find fifty good people in Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.

Abraham spoke up again, I know that I am very bold to speak like this to my Lord, I who am only dust and ashes! But perhaps the number of the good is five less than fifty. Will you destroy the town because of five? Yahweh replied, I will not destroy the town if I find forty-five good people there. Again Abraham said to him, Perhaps there will be only forty. He answered, For the sake of forty I will not do it. Abraham went on, saying, May my Lord not be angry, but let me speak. Maybe only thirty good people will be found in the town. Yahweh answered, I will not destroy it if I find thirty there. Abraham said, Now that I have been so bold as to speak to my Lord, what if only twenty can be found? He said, For the sake of twenty I will not destroy the place.

But Abraham insisted, May my Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found? And Yahweh answered, For the sake of ten good people, I will not destroy Sodom.

2nd Reading: Col 2:12-14

I refer to baptism. On receiving it you were buried with Christ; and you also rose with him for having believed in the power of God who raised him from the dead.

You were dead. You were in sin and uncircumcised at the same time. But God gave you life with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of our debts, those regulations which accused us. He did away with all that and nailed it to the cross.

Gospel: Lk 11:1-13

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples. And Jesus said to them, When you pray, say this:

Father, hallowed be your name,
may your kingdom come,

give us each day the kind of bread we need,
and forgive us our sins, for we also forgive all who do us wrong,
and do not bring us to the test.

Jesus said to them, Suppose one of you has a friend and goes to his house in the middle of the night and says: Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine who is traveling has just arrived and I have nothing to offer him. Maybe your friend will answer from inside: Don't bother me now; the door is locked and my children and I are in bed, so I can't get up and give you anything. But I tell you, even though he will not get up and attend to you because you are a friend, yet he will get up because you are a bother to him, and he will give you all you need.

And so I say to you, Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For the one who asks receives, and the one who searches finds, and to him who knocks the door will be opened.

If your child asks for a fish, will you give a snake instead? And if your child asks for an egg, will you give a scorpion? Even you evil people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more then will the Father in heaven give holy spirit to those who ask him!

Commentary

THE Jews had the strongest sense of God's immensity: God was the Most High, the Holy One. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Is 55:8,9). They did occasionally call God Father, but Jesus did so consistently and with an exceptional warmth. Throughout the gospels we hear him, I thank you, Father. Yes, Father, for so it seemed good to you, Father, into your hands. Here we hear the authentic voice of Jesus so much so that the early Christians liked to say the word in the original Aramaic, Jesus' own language. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father! (Gal 4:6).

Christianity appeared first as a mystery religion. Christians did not speak about the inner mysteries to outsiders. Certain things were revealed to the initiate only on the vigil of their baptism. The Our Father was one of those mysteries. Tertullian (born about 160 AD) prepared them for that moment when they would address God for the first time as Father. You blessed ones, for whom the grace of God is waiting, when you come up from that sacred washing of the new birth, and when for the first time you spread out your hands with your brothers and sisters in your mother's house [the Church], ask of your Father for special graces. Ask, Jesus says, and you shall receive. So now, you have sought, and have found. You have knocked, and it has been opened to you.

Monday, July 26, 2004
Sts. Joachim and Ann

1st Reading: Sir 44:1, 10-15

Gospel: Mt 13:16-17

Jesus said to his disciples, But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears, because they hear.

For I tell you that many prophets and upright people would have longed to see the things you see, but they did not, and to hear the things you hear, but they did not hear it.

Commentary

CHRISTIANITY is a mystery religion (see yesterday); it can only be understood from the inside. To the outsider, for example, the Eucharist is just a crowd of people eating little morsels of bread; but to the insider it is the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

Western culture equips us poorly for understanding anything from the inside. We have specialized in analysis, the view from the outside. We have become what Jonathan Swift called the tribe of Answerers, Considerers, Observers, Reflectors, Detectors, Remarkers. And of course

Objectors. We are Objectors in a further sense of the word: we turn everything into an object. The word object comes from the Latin ob and jacere: to throw against. We stand over against everything in the world, even ourselves. We feel that there are experts somewhere who know us better than we know ourselves. We are only objects of study. We are somehow displaced from our own lives. Two psychoanalysts met on the street and one of them said, You re well, how am I?

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. In other words, don t let anyone do your hearing or your seeing for you. They can do their own, and offer to share it with you, but don t let them presume that they can do yours.

Tuesday, July 27, 2004
17th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Jer 14:17-22

Gospel: Mt 13:36-43

Jesus sent the crowds away and went into the house. And his disciples came to him saying, Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field. He answered them, The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world; the good seed are the people of the Kingdom; the weeds are those who follow the evil one. The enemy who sows them is the devil; the harvest is the end of time and the workers are the angels.

Just as the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so will it be at the end of time. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom all that is scandalous and all who do evil. And these will be thrown in the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the just will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. If you have ears, then hear.

Commentary

AHA! They are looking for explanations! They want to get their minds around this parable, so that they can put it out there from them: that s what explanations do.

Still, it must be all right to look for explanations so long as we don t put too much store by them, or imagine that the one we find is the only possible one.

It is about seeds. Seeds are the beginning of things, not the end. Good and evil will be separated out only at the end of time. That means, in practical terms, never! In the ultimate, yes, in eternity; but not in time at no time! We have heard politicians talk about stamping out evil. I heard someone comment, Jesus didn t do it, the Buddha didn t do it, but this politician is going to do it! Only in the final sifting will it be done, and we don t know anything about that. Let s not be too surprised at evil deeds: we are part of the picture ourselves. Besides, many things that we call good today we will call evil tomorrow. We don t have the full picture. Only God has. To claim to have the full picture is to claim to be God.

This thought doesn t make evil any less evil, or less painful to its victims. But if we don t spend all our time wondering why there is so much evil in the world, we may have a little left over for wondering why there is so much good.

Wednesday, July 28, 2004
17th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Jer 5:10, 16-21

Gospel: Mt 13:44-46

Jesus said to the crowds, The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. The one who finds it buries it again; and so happy is he, that he goes and sells everything he has, in order to buy that field.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like a trader who is looking for fine pearls. Once he has found a pearl of exceptional quality, he goes away, sells everything he has and buys it.

Commentary

O wad some god the giftie gie us / To see oursels as others see us, wrote Bobbie Burns. (If you are not familiar with the Scots dialect: wad = would; giftie = gift; gie = give). But I wonder. It could be a useful insight now and then; but perhaps we already see ourselves too much as others see us. We see ourselves reflected in the eyes of others as in a mirror. A mirror reflects only the surface, so we see only the surface of ourselves and not the reality. If I am wealthy I can see it in the way other people look at me, so I feel important in myself. Soon I begin to look nowhere else for my sense of self-worth. I am inside out: the outside has become my inside, and the inside is where? Nowhere. Really, I m not even inside out: I m just two-dimensional, like a sheet of paper all surface.

We have to become frustrated with surfaces sooner or later. We have to fail in some significant way. Richard Rohr said (speaking particularly about men): we spend the first half of life building our tower (our career, our savings, etc.), and this is right. But in the second half of our life we have to fall off our tower! Unless you fall off your tower unless you have a broken heart he said, you will be of no use to anyone. It is failure that will open up the heart; and in that deep inner place we will find the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price.

Thursday, July 29, 2004

St. Martha

1st Reading: 1 Jn 4:7-16

Gospel: Jn 11:19-27

Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to offer consolation at their brother's death.

When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him while Mary remained sitting in the house. And she said to Jesus, If you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Jesus said, Your brother will rise again.

Martha replied, I know that he will rise in the resurrection, at the last day. But Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection; whoever believes in me, though he die, shall live. Whoever is alive by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?

Martha then answered, Yes, Lord, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.

Commentary

A little beyond the end of today's reading there is the shortest verse in the Bible. It is Jn 11:35, and it says simply, Jesus wept. It shows sensitivity in the people who first divided the Scriptures into chapters and verses. They could easily have put these words with the following verse; it would even have been logical: the following verse is, So the Jews said, See how he loved him! When someone weeps you just have to give them time to weep. Weeping may be saying a lot, but it is not language, and it doesn't require an answer or an explanation. There are two occasions in the gospel when Jesus told people not to weep (Lk 7:13; 8:52). On both occasions there was an error of fact: the persons being mourned were not dead. But in today's story there is no doubt about Lazarus being dead. So Jesus wept; he did not take death lightly. He is sometimes made to seem a sort of magician who leaped up on the third day. If we make little of death we make little of the resurrection.

Nor can we to make little of Martha. She is not playing second fiddle to Mary (especially not in this passage). With Peter's, hers is the most explicit confession of Jesus as Messiah which is the

whole purpose for which the gospel was written (Jn 20:30,31). A scholar says that this points to the prominent women like Martha played in the early Church.

Friday, July 30, 2004
17th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Jer 26:1-9

Gospel: Mt 13:54-58

Jesus went to his hometown and taught the people in their synagogue. They were amazed and said, Where did he get this wisdom and these special powers? Isn't he the carpenter's son? Isn't Mary his mother and aren't James, Joseph, Simon and Judas his brothers? Aren't all his sisters living here? How did he get all this? And so they took offense at him.

Jesus said to them, The only place where prophets are not welcome is their hometown and in their own family. And he did not perform many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

Commentary

In the church of the Monastery of Jeronimos in Lisbon, built in 1498 and dedicated to Our Lady of the Kings, there is a statue of King Manuel, surrounded by symbolic figures of all the virtues. One of those virtues, to our surprise, is wealth! It must have taken a lot of misreading of the New Testament to put that statue there! Jesus had nowhere to lay his head. You cannot serve God and wealth, he said.

As far as I know, nobody was ever offended by the Buddha. He was like a distant peak: you understood him or you didn't, but you could not be offended by him. He was a prince, but he renounced a kingdom and became a poor man. Someone pointed out that all the great Hindu incarnations were also of royal blood. But Jesus was just a workman (see February 4); he was a villager. That's too close for comfort: he shows us up. He came from nowhere, just like us. Unlike the Buddha he did not have to renounce vast wealth.

Because we worship wealth we are impressed by the renunciation of wealth. That is still a kind of worship of wealth. Jesus was neither wealthy, nor had he renounced great wealth. He was rejected in his own town; they would not accept him. He had renounced only a village workshop, so how does he dare to teach us? He's a nobody; we know all about him; why should anyone bother with a carpenter?

Wealth is a key to the mind.

Saturday, July 31, 2004
17th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Jer 26:11-16, 24

Gospel: Mt 14:1-12

On one occasion the news about Jesus reached King Herod. And he said to his servants, This man is John the Baptist. John has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.

Herod had, in fact, ordered that John be arrested, bound in chains and put in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had said to him, It is not right for you to have her as wife. Herod wanted to kill him but he did not dare, because he feared the people who regarded John as a prophet.

On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced in the midst of the guests; she so delighted Herod that he promised under oath to give her anything she asked. The girl, following the advice of her mother, said, Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a dish.

The king was very displeased, but because he had made this promise under oath in the presence of the guests, he ordered it to be given her. So he had John beheaded in prison and his head brought on a dish and given to the girl. The girl then took it to her mother.

Then John's disciples came to take his body and bury it. And they went to bring the news to Jesus.

Commentary

How would you like a little history for a change? Today's reading lends itself to it. It's the story of a very violent family.

When Herod the Great (the one responsible for the slaughter of the innocents) came to die, he divided his kingdom among his four sons; they were known therefore as tetrarch, which means ruler of a quarter. When one of them died, the Emperor gave the dead man's quarter to Agrippa, with the title king. This maddened Herodias with jealousy, because her husband (the Herod Antipas of this reading) was known only as a tetrarch. (Matthew corrects Mark's gospel at this point: see Mk 6:14, where he refers to this Herod as a king.) She was not able to conceal how miserable she was, by reason of the envy she had towards him, wrote Josephus, the Jewish historian. She persuaded her unwilling husband to go to Rome to beg the Emperor for the title of king. Agrippa (the tetrarch who was called king) sent word ahead to the Emperor that Herod and Herodias were organizing a rebellion. The Emperor took Herod's tetrarchy from him, confiscated all his wealth, and sent him and Herodias into exile.

It was a lot of trouble for the title king, which is only a word like any other. In their banishment they were probably still haunted by the ghost of John the Baptist. (Herod had thought that Jesus was John come back to life.) Words and spirits: all just wind, just nothing.