

THE DAILY GOSPEL

Wednesday, September 1, 2004
22nd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 3:1-9

Gospel: Lk 4:38-44

Leaving the synagogue, Jesus went to the house of Simon. His mother-in-law was suffering from high fever and they asked him to do something for her. Bending over her, he rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and waited on them.

At sunset, people suffering from many kinds of sickness were brought to Jesus. Laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Demons were driven out, howling as they departed from their victims, You are the Son of God! He rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, for they knew he was the Messiah.

Jesus left at daybreak and looked for a solitary place. People went out in search of him and, finding him, they tried to dissuade him from leaving. But he said, I have to go to other towns to announce the good news of the kingdom of God. That is what I was sent to do. So Jesus continued to preach in the synagogues of the Jewish country.

Commentary

It is as if his healing power was pent up from his experience in Nazareth, and now in Capernaum it rushes out in full flood. There, familiarity robbed him of his power. But here it is no barrier: first he heals Peter's mother-in-law, and then crowds of sick and demon-tormented people.

Dreadful thought: like the people of Nazareth we have the power to prevent miracles. The chances are that we all have prevented many miracles, just by filling the air with criticism, or cynicism, or discouragement. We can even do it with a belittling look; in short, with a habit of mind that reduces everything. Some people have a presence that is quite negative. In their atmosphere we die a little: we keep our stories and anecdotes to ourselves, we talk safe. This is how human community is corroded. It is also how faith is corroded. We talk about denying the faith, as if words were the worst we could do. We can do much worse than that! Words at least are explicit. But by a look, by our very presence, our atmosphere, we can corrode the faith subtly and silently and deeply. And we may not even be aware that we have done it.

Claretian Publications Inc., 8 Mayumi St., U.P. Village

U.P. P.O. Box 4, Diliman, 1101 Quezon City;

Tel.: 921-3984; Fax: 921-7429

E-mail: cci@claret.org

Websites: <http://www.bible.claret.org> (Claretian Publications)

& <http://missionaries.claret.org> (Claretians in the Philippines)

Thursday, September 2, 2004
22nd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 3:18-23

Gospel: Lk 5:1-11

One day, as Jesus stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, with a crowd gathered around him listening to the word of God, he caught sight of two boats left at the water's edge by the fishermen now washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to pull out a little from the shore. There he sat and continued to teach the crowd.

When he had finished speaking he said to Simon, Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch. Simon replied, Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing. But if you say so, I will lower the nets. This they did and caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. They signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They came and filled both boats almost to the point of sinking.

Upon seeing this, Simon Peter fell at Jesus' knees, saying, Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man! For he and his companions were amazed at the catch they had made and so were Simon's partners, James and John, Zebedee's sons.

Jesus said to Simon, Do not be afraid. You will catch people from now on. So they brought their boats to land and followed him, leaving everything.

Commentary

PETER was a professional fisherman, so if he caught nothing it was probably because there was nothing much to catch. Twice it's recorded that he went fishing and caught nothing: in today's reading and in Jn 21:3. But what catches they were!

In today's reading, if Peter had made a large catch by his own skill, the further large catch on Jesus' instructions would not have been at all surprising. It would not have turned his life around. He would just have remarked, *What great fishing there is today!* But because he came empty-handed, the Lord was able to catch him! The fish in that miraculous catch was Peter himself!

In Jn 21, Jesus has been executed. Peter and the others didn't know what to do with themselves. Peter said, *I'm going fishing.* The others said, *We'll come with you.* And then the most pathetic words in the New Testament, *That night they caught nothing.* But look! There on the shore stood Jesus! Had they caught a lot of fish that night, they might not have seen him at all. He was their catch that night!

So when have I failed? When have I succeeded? The wonder of it is that I can never say for sure. (How unbearable life would be if I could!)

Friday, September 3, 2004
22nd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 4:1-5

Gospel: Lk 5:33-39

Some people asked Jesus, *The disciples of John fast often and say long prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees. Why is it that your disciples eat and drink?* Then Jesus said to them, *You can't make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them. But later the bridegroom will be taken from them and they will fast in those days.*

Jesus also told them this parable, *No one tears a piece from a new coat to put it on an old one; otherwise the new will be torn and the piece taken from the new will not match the old. No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed as well. But new wine must be put into fresh skins. Yet no one who has tasted old wine is eager to get new wine, but says: The old is good.*

Commentary

NEW wine must be put into fresh skins. In the Lord's time wine was not kept in bottles but in skins. When the new wine was placed in a skin, it continued to ferment, giving off carbon dioxide. An old skin had not the elasticity of a new one, and so it would burst and the wine was lost. This says to us: *don't let your mind become like an old wine-skin. Our faith makes unconditional demands on us throughout our lives. It requires us to make immense leaps of sympathy and forgiveness; it asks us to live for God, not for earthly power and wealth; it asks us to put aside self-will and to live for others; it asks us to put to death our worldly pride and vanity, and to imitate the self-emptying (kenosis), the poverty of Christ; it asks us to lay down our very lives for our brothers and sisters; most challenging of all, it asks us to love our enemies. This was a new way to live, it was the new wine, requiring a new mind, new structures. The world, even at that time, was weary of the old ways of tyranny. It has even more reason to be tired of them now. That the Gospel still appears new and revolutionary is evidence that we haven't moved very far. The Gospel will always be News to us.*

Saturday, September 4, 2004
22nd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 4:9-15

Gospel: Lk 6:1-5

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the corn fields and his disciples began to pick heads of grain crushing them in their hands for food. Some of the Pharisees asked them, *Why do you do what is forbidden on the Sabbath?* Then Jesus spoke, *Have you never read what David did when he and his men were hungry? He entered the house of God, took and ate the bread of the offering and even gave some to his men, though only priests are allowed to eat that bread. And Jesus added, The Son of Man is Lord and rules over the Sabbath.*

Commentary

THIS particular fight with the Pharisees was not about taking a neighbor's property, but about working on the Sabbath. To pluck ears of corn with the hand (not with a sickle) as you walked through a neighbor's field was permitted in the Jewish scriptures (Dt 23:26). But the Pharisees saw the action as a five-fold breach of the Sabbath: the plucking was reaping, rubbing the grains

between the hands was threshing , blowing the chaff away was winnowing , holding the grains in one s hand was bearing a burden and preparing a meal ! Complicated!

The Pharisees were watching him and the influence he was having on people. How do you take it when some people are observing you and waiting for you to make a mistake? That kind of scrutiny causes you to make mistakes; so the critical attitude finds only what it is looking for. If you often suffer from this kind of attack, it is interesting to see how Jesus handled it. He gave them no ground; he didn't apologize or concede any point even though his own argument was not very strong! (David's action did not occur on a Sabbath.) It is impossible to engage in argument with fanatical legalists without becoming a legalist yourself. It is better not to enter into details, but simply to take the ground from under their whole system which is what the Lord did. The Son of Man, he said, is Lord of the Sabbath.

Sunday, September 5, 2004
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Wis 9:13-18

Indeed, what man can know the intentions of God? Who can discern the plan of the Lord?

For human reasoning is timid, our notions misleading; a perishable body is a burden for the soul and our tent of clay weighs down the active mind.

We are barely able to know about the things of earth and it is a struggle to understand what is close to us; who then may hope to understand heavenly things?

Who has ever known your will unless you first gave him Wisdom and sent down your holy spirit to him? In this way you directed the human race on the right path; they learned what pleases you and were saved by Wisdom.

2nd Reading: Phlm 9-10, 12-17

Yet I prefer to request you in love. The one talking is Paul, the old man, now prisoner for Christ. And my request is on behalf of Onesimus, whose father I have become while I was in prison.

In returning him to you, I am sending you my own heart. I would have liked to keep him at my side, to serve me on your behalf while I am in prison for the Gospel, but I did not want to do anything without your agreement, nor impose a good deed upon you without your free consent.

Perhaps Onesimus has been parted from you for a while so that you may have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave. For he is a very dear brother to me, and he will be even dearer to you. And so, because of our friendship, receive him as if he were I myself.

Gospel: Lk 14:25-33

One day, when large crowds were walking along with Jesus, he turned and said to them, If you come to me, without being ready to give up your love for your father and mother, your spouse and children, your brothers and sisters, and indeed yourself, you cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not follow me carrying his own cross cannot be my disciple.

Do you build a house without first sitting down to count the cost to see whether you have enough to complete it? Otherwise, if you have laid the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone will make fun of you: This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.

And when a king wages war against another king, does he go to fight without first sitting down to consider whether his ten thousand can stand against the twenty thousand of his opponent? And if not, while the other is still a long way off he sends messengers for peace talks. In the same way, none of you may become my disciple if he doesn't give up everything he has.

Commentary

READY to give up your love for your father and mother. We need to look at this difficult verse. Many English translations still say hate your father and mother. This is even more challenging. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for setting aside the law of God, which said Honor your father and mother, for the sake of their own customs (Mk 7:10-13). He could hardly be telling us now to hate them, or to give up our love for them.

The problem is a too literal translation from another language. A French school principal once wrote to tell the parents of her English student that their daughter had been hanged. What she meant to say was that the girl had been suspended from the school! Languages put things differently! Aramaic idiom dispensed with qualifiers: if you don't love, you hate; if you're not first, you're last. In modern languages we are able to say something and then qualify it out of existence. The shock of a literal translation from Aramaic is probably good for us! What that particular verse is saying is that discipleship is to come before all other relationships. It even comes before one's relationship to oneself, Those who lose their life for my sake will find it (Mt 10:39). Discipleship doesn't mean fawning on a teacher, but being moved with the help of that teacher to a position

where everything isn't corrupted by the ego. The roots of the ego go very deep, and of course they are knotted in a thousand ways with our parents' egos, and our spouses. These knots are not love (even though love is sometimes symbolized by a knot). It is discipleship that cuts those knots so that we can love one another in life-giving ways.

Monday, September 6, 2004
23rd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 5:1-8

Gospel: Lk 6:6-11

On another Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and began teaching. There was a man with a paralyzed right hand and the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees watched him: Would Jesus heal the man on the Sabbath? If he did, they could accuse him.

But Jesus knew their thoughts and said to the man, Get up and stand in the middle. Then he spoke to them, I want to ask you: what is allowed by the Law on the Sabbath, to do good or to do harm, to save life or destroy it? And Jesus looked around at them all.

Then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand. He stretched it out and his hand was restored, becoming as whole as the other. But they were furious and began to discuss with one another how they could deal with Jesus.

Commentary

WE have just enough religion to make us hate, said Jonathan Swift, but not enough to make us love one another. If religion penetrates the head only, it will serve to divide people from one another, because left to itself that's what the head does best: it makes distinctions and oppositions. To become a bond of unity religion has to enter the heart; but as they say, the journey from head to heart is the longest in the world. There must have been some Pharisees who had a heart, but apart from Nicodemus and Gamaliel we don't meet them in the New Testament. (And those two men were singularly ineffective.) The New Testament picture of the Pharisees is consistent with what is known of them from other sources. They watched Jesus closely to find fault with him, especially in the matter of healing on the Sabbath; they tried to trap him with their questions; they were scandalized by his association with tax-collectors and sinners; they attributed his exorcisms to the devil; and they plotted to take his life. All of this activity is the very opposite of religious, and yet it was the work of a highly committed religious group.

Religion brings out the best and the worst in people. This is very clear to us nowadays. Many religious people are not worshipping God but themselves: there is no ego quite so poisonous as the religious one. It bends the language of religion to its own ends, and is quite indifferent to God. In the 17th century, Pascal could write, Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction. The test, as always, is not what we say but what we do.

Tuesday, September 7, 2004
23rd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 6:1-11

Gospel: Lk 6:12-19

Jesus went out into the hills to pray, spending the whole night in prayer with God. When day came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them whom he called apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James son of Alphaeus and Simon called the Zealot; Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who would be the traitor.

Coming down the hill with them, Jesus stood on a level place. Many of his disciples were there and a large crowd of people who had come from all parts of Judea and Jerusalem and from the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. They gathered to hear him and be healed of their diseases; likewise people troubled by evil spirits were healed. The entire crowd tried to touch him because of the power that went out from him and healed them all.

Commentary

HERE is a taste of C.H. Spurgeon, the great English 19th-century Baptist preacher whose collected works run to fifty volumes, and who had to have larger and larger buildings put up to accommodate his vast congregations—the last one capable of holding 6,000 people.

Those dark and silent hills were a fit oratory for the Son of God. Heaven and earth in midnight stillness heard the groans and sighs of the mysterious Being in whom both worlds were blended. The continuance of His pleadings is remarkable; the long watches were not too long; the cold wind did not chill His devotions; the grim darkness did not darken His faith, or loneliness check His

importunity. We cannot watch with Him one hour, but He watched for us whole nights. The occasion for this prayer is notable; it was after His enemies had been enraged prayer was His refuge and solace; it was before He sent forth the twelve apostles prayer was the gate of His enterprise, the herald of His new work. Should we not learn from Jesus to resort to special prayer when we are under peculiar trial, or contemplate fresh endeavors for the Master's glory? Lord Jesus, teach us to pray.

Wednesday, September 8, 2004
Birth of Mary

1st Reading: Mic 5:1-4 or Rom 8:28-30

Gospel: Mt 1:18-23

This is how Jesus Christ was born. Mary his mother had been given to Joseph in marriage but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

Then Joseph, her husband, made plans to divorce her in all secrecy. He was an upright man, and in no way did he want to discredit her.

While he was pondering over this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She has conceived by the Holy Spirit, and now she will bear a son. You shall call him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

All this happened in order to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will conceive and bear a son, and he will be called Emmanuel which means: God-with-us.

Commentary

OF course there is nothing in the gospels about the birth of Mary. But it's interesting that the text used for this feast is an account of the birth of Jesus.

In a sense, when a child is born a mother is born. When a child is born, its mother begins to be a mother. Even if she was already mother to other children this new child makes her a new mother; a new chapter in her mothering begins. In the birth of the Son of God, Mary begins to be the Mother of God.

Icons of the Theotokos (Greek for God-bearer) are common now in the West. Historically the term had great importance because the Nestorians, who effectively said that Christ was two persons—a divine and a human—were opposed to its use, claiming that it neglected the humanity of Christ. The Council of Ephesus (431) asserted against the Nestorians that Mary was truly the Theotokos, the God-bearer, or Mother of God: this was a clear way of stating the unity of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon (451) continued the use of this term, and it has become orthodox Christian teaching. Note that it is more a statement about Christ than about Mary—or rather, equally so. When a Child is born, a Mother is born.

Thursday, September 9, 2004
23rd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 8:1-7, 11-13

Gospel: Lk 6:27-38

Jesus said to his disciples, But I say to you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you and pray for those who treat you badly. To the one who strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek; from the one who takes your coat, do not keep back your shirt. Give to the one who asks and if anyone has taken something from you, do not demand it back.

Do to others as you would have others do to you. If you love only those who love you, what kind of graciousness is yours? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do favors to those who are good to you, what kind of graciousness is yours? Even sinners do the same. If you lend only when you expect to receive, what kind of graciousness is yours? For sinners also lend to sinners, expecting to receive something in return.

But love your enemies and do good to them, and lend when there is nothing to expect in return. Then will your reward be great and you will be sons and daughters of the Most High. For he is kind towards the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Don't be a judge of others and you will not be judged; do not condemn and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you, and you will receive in your sack good measure, pressed down, full and running over. For the measure you give will be the measure you receive back.

Commentary

LOVING your enemy is the clearest evidence that you are no longer making yourself the measure of love nor indeed the measure of anything. This state has been described to us by many people. By some miracle the axis of your life has moved elsewhere. The self-centered self, which seemed fixed forever and which controlled everything you did and even what you saw, is no longer the main center of reference. Suddenly the world is immense! (How could it be immense if you saw only what related to your self-centered self?) And the very idea of competition dies. Tauler wrote, The theologians and the saints have said that in heaven there is such great love that when one soul recognizes that another soul has more love for God than it has itself, it rejoices as much as if this greater love were its own. The more we are like this on earth, the greater will be our eternal joy in God.

It is true that I can do deeds of love against the grain, as it were. I can force myself to do good for others. This is very good and heroic, but the problem is that resistance may be growing within me at some deep level: force creates counter-force. If I have outbursts of anger and impatience, this is a sign that my virtue is forced. I still don't have the skill. There has been no release. The word for virtue in Greek (arete) means skill.

In this sublime page of the Gospel we see how far beyond the Pharisees' mind Jesus is drawing us.

Friday, September 10, 2004
23rd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-27

Gospel: Lk 6:39-42

Jesus offered this example, Can a blind person lead another blind person? Surely both will fall into a ditch. A disciple is not above the master; but when fully trained, he will be like the master. So why do you pay attention to the speck in your brother's eye while you have a log in your eye and are not conscious of it? How can you say to your neighbor: Friend, let me take this speck out of your eye, when you can't remove the log in your own? You hypocrite! First remove the log from your own eye and then you will see clearly enough to remove the speck from your neighbor's eye.

Commentary

TODAY'S reading is in direct continuity with yesterday's. We are still looking at that extraordinary teaching by Jesus. Judge not! is the same as Love your enemies. In both cases it is the self-centered basis that is being removed. I read where a scholar translated this Judge not as Try to be more lenient in your judgments! This misses the point exactly. If you judge, even leniently, you are still on your throne of judgment probably admiring yourself for your leniency! St. Paul wrote, Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Rom 14:10). That was calculated to dampen our enthusiasm for judging one another.

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was distinguished for his beauty. His mother was told that he would have a long life, provided he never looked upon his own features. However, he rejected the love of the nymph Echo and fell in love with his own reflection in the waters of a spring and pined away. In psychoanalysis the term narcissism means excessive self-esteem or self-involvement. Many things we call by nicer names could well be forms of narcissism (or at least they have to pass the test): judging others and finding them wanting, deploring the variety of opinions in circulation, trying to convert people to our view.

Saturday, September 11, 2004
23rd Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 10:14-22

Gospel: Lk 6:43-49

Jesus said to the crowd, No healthy tree bears bad fruit, no poor tree bears good fruit. And each tree is known by the fruit it bears: you don't gather figs from thorns, or grapes from brambles. Similarly the good person draws good things from the good stored in the heart, and an evil person draws evil things from the evil stored in the heart. For the mouth speaks from the fullness of the heart.

Why do you call me: Lord! Lord! and not do what I say? I will show you what the one who comes to me and listens to my words and acts accordingly, is like. That one is like the builder

who dug deep and laid the foundations of his house on rock. The river overflowed and the stream dashed against the house, but could not carry it off because the house had been well built.

But the one who listens and does not act, is like a man who built his house on the ground without a foundation. The flood burst against it, and the house fell at once: and what a terrible disaster that was!

Commentary

TREES don't tell lies; only human beings tell lies. There is a scientist who has been working for many years at teaching a chimpanzee to use language. One day he knew he had made a breakthrough: the chimp told a lie! (He tried to blame someone else for breaking a mug.) That lie showed that the chimp now had a sense of being a separate self; he had stepped aside from the truth; he had an ego, like us. The ego is the fundamental lie. We are the only creatures on this earth who tell lies: we and one chimp! We settle our very identity on a lie. That is why it is so hard even for the world's greatest teachers to dispel it: it's not just a puff of nothing; it's the self-assertion of intelligent beings.

Jesus faced this fundamental lie in his adversaries, You are from your father the devil. He does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me (Jn 8:44-45). I have to imagine these words addressed directly to myself.

But the truth emerges eventually. The work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, wrote St. Paul (1Cor 3:13). One day we will be completely truthful. Perhaps that is the attraction that trees have and nature generally: those are being that are already true to the core. Sit under a tree for an hour, and it will become harder to tell a lie afterwards!

Sunday, September 12, 2004 **23rd Week in Ordinary Time**

1st Reading: Ex 32:7-11, 13-14

Yahweh said to Moses, Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have quickly turned from the way I commanded them and have made for themselves a molten calf; they have bowed down before it and sacrificed to it and said: These are your gods, Israel, who brought you out of Egypt.

And Yahweh said to Moses, I see that these people are a stiff-necked people. Now just leave me that my anger may blaze against them. I will destroy them, but of you I will make a great nation.

But Moses calmed the anger of Yahweh, his God, and said, Why, O Yahweh, should your anger burst against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with such great power and with a mighty hand? Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the promise you yourself swore: I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land I spoke about I will give to them as an everlasting inheritance.

Yahweh then changed his mind and would not yet harm his people.

2nd Reading: 1 Tim 1:12-17

I give thanks to Christ Jesus, our Lord, who is my strength, who has considered me trustworthy and appointed me to his service, although I had been a blasphemer, a persecutor and a rabid enemy. However he took mercy on me because I did not know what I was doing when I opposed the faith; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, together with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

This saying is true and worthy of belief: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the first. Because of that I was forgiven; Christ Jesus wanted to display his utmost patience in me so that I might be an example for all who are to believe and obtain eternal life. To the King of ages, the only God who lives beyond every perishable and visible creation to him be honor and glory forever. Amen!

Gospel: Lk 15:1-32

Tax collectors and sinners were seeking the company of Jesus, all of them eager to hear what he had to say. But the Pharisees and the scribes frowned at this, muttering. This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. So Jesus told them this parable:

Who among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, will not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and seek out the lost one till he finds it? And finding it, will he not joyfully carry it home on his shoulders? Then he will call his friends and neighbors together and say: Celebrate with me for I have found my lost sheep. I tell you, just so, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine upright who do not need to repent.

What woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one, will not light a lamp and sweep the house in a thorough search till she finds the lost coin? And finding it, she will call her friends and neighbors and say: Celebrate with me for I have found the silver coin I lost! I tell you, in the same way there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner.

Jesus continued, There was a man with two sons. The younger said to his father: Give me my share of the estate. So the father divided his property between them.

Some days later, the younger son gathered all his belongings and started off for a distant land where he squandered his wealth in loose living. Having spent everything, he was hard pressed when a severe famine broke out in that land. So he hired himself out to a well-to-do citizen of that place and was sent to work on a pig farm. So famished was he that he longed to fill his stomach even with the food given to the pigs, but no one offered him anything.

Finally coming to his senses, he said: How many of my father's hired workers have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will get up and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me then as one of your hired servants. With that thought in mind he set off for his father's house.

He was still a long way off when his father caught sight of him. His father was so deeply moved with compassion that he ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. The son said: Father, I have sinned against Heaven and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son

But the father turned to his servants: Quick! Bring out the finest robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and kill it. We shall celebrate and have a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found. And the celebration began.

Meanwhile, the elder son had been working in the fields. As he returned and was near the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what it was all about. The servant answered: Your brother has come home safe and sound, and your father is so happy about it that he has ordered this celebration and killed the fattened calf.

The elder son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and pleaded with him. The indignant son said: Look, I have slaved for you all these years. Never have I disobeyed your orders. Yet you have never given me even a young goat to celebrate with my friends. Then when this son of yours returns after squandering your property with loose women, you kill the fattened calf for him.

The father said: My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But this brother of yours was dead, and has come back to life. He was lost and is found. And for that we had to rejoice and be glad.

Commentary

THIS man welcomes sinners and eats with them. This is the theme of the entire chapter 15 of Luke's gospel. The chapter has three parables of God's mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost (or prodigal) son. In fact Luke's could be called the gospel of the lost. Luke alone tells the story of the prodigal son; he alone tells the story of the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus and washed them with her tears, drying them with her hair (7:36-50); he alone has the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector (18:9-14); he alone tells the story about Zacchaeus and the Lord's coming to eat with him (19:1-10); he alone tells about the repentant thief on the cross (23:39-43) mercy even at the last gasp.

But these parables would be better named the found sheep, the found coin and the found son; the point of the parables is that God's mercy comes after us and finds us. Each of them mentions joy, rejoice with me! says the shepherd who found the lost sheep; rejoice with me! says the woman who found the coin; it was right we should celebrate and rejoice, said the father of the lost son.

That is a theme to stay with: God's joy in us. Luke's gospel makes me think of no one such as Julian of Norwich. It is God's will, she wrote, that we have heartfelt joy with him in our salvation. He wants us to find great comfort and strength in it, and to be completely and happily taken up with it, by his grace. For we are his happiness, and he finds endless enjoyment in us, and we shall in him, by his grace.

Monday, September 13, 2004
24th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 11:17-26, 33

Gospel: Lk 7:1-10

When Jesus had finished teaching to the people, he went to Capernaum.

There was a captain whose servant was very sick and near to death, a man very dear to him. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent some elders of the Jews to persuade him to come and save his servant's life. The elders came to Jesus and begged him earnestly, saying, "He deserves this of you, for he loves our people and even built a synagogue for us."

Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the captain sent friends to give this message, "Sir, do not trouble yourself for I am not worthy to welcome you under my roof. You see I didn't approach you myself. Just give the order and my servant will be healed. For I myself, a junior officer, give orders to my soldiers and I say to this one: Go, and he goes; and to the other: Come, and he comes; and to my servant: Do this, and he does it."

On hearing these words, Jesus was filled with admiration. He turned and said to the people with him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith. The people sent by the captain went back to his house; there they found that the servant was well."

Commentary

THE captains of this translation are the centurions of other translations. As the name implies, they were the officers in command of 100 foot-soldiers. In a Roman legion there would be 60 centurions in charge of 6,000 men. In the time of Jesus there were two such legions in Palestine. These 120 men left an entirely favorable impression, according to the gospels strange for an occupying army! The one in today's reading left more than a good impression; he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.

This centurion was also particularly sensitive to Jewish custom. He knew that Jews would not allow Gentiles to enter their houses, nor would they enter the house of a Gentile, so he sent messengers to Jesus. When Jesus came near the house, the centurion said, "Sir, I am not worthy to receive you in my house...." (The centurion Cornelius in Acts 10 also written by Luke had the same sensitivity, When Peter reached the house Cornelius went out to meet him.) And still he thought like an army man: in terms of orders being carried out. I say Go! and he goes! And he thought that Jesus could just issue an order to the sickness and it would just go, like an army private!

Which goes to show that an army man doesn't have to give his soul to the army; he can be a human being at the same time. Sartre's famous illustration of bad faith was an army man who had become an army man body and soul: someone who had found his complete identity in being a soldier. Those New Testament centurions, pagans though they were, have much to teach us about work and humanity.

Tuesday, September 14, 2004 The Exaltation of the Cross

1st Reading: Num 21:4-9

2nd Reading: Phil 2:6-11

Gospel: Jn 3:13-17

Jesus said to Nicodemus, "No one has ever gone up to heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man."

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world; instead, through him the world is to be saved.

Commentary

NICODEMUS cannot have been a very great teacher and Jesus hinted it because Jews at that time spoke of converts to Judaism as people who were born again. He didn't seem quite to understand this expression.

The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James, first issued in 1902, is an enduring classic. There he illustrates the contrast between the once-born and the twice-born (or born again) Christian. The soul of the once-born (or healthy-minded, as he calls them) is of a sky-blue tint their affinities are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions [they] can think no ill of man or God. They have a certain complacency and perhaps romantic sense of excitement. In contrast to these, the twice-born or morbid-minded are more likely to feel that from the bottom of every fountain of pleasure, as the old poet said, something bitter rises up. All natural happiness is infected; there is a deep sense of sin and failure. To people of this stamp, the attitude of the once-born seems unspeakably blind and shallow, while to the once-born the attitude of these seems unmanly and diseased.

These are still battling it out, under new names: creation-centered spirituality versus sin/redemption spirituality. Original blessing or original sin? Nature or the Cross? But we mustn't forget that it was the same Jesus who said, Behold the lilies of the field and who died on the Cross. The challenge, as always, is to refuse to become partisan, but rather to enter into the drama and refuse to be limited by labels.

Wednesday, September 15, 2004
Our Lady of Sorrows

1st Reading: Heb 5:7-9

Gospel: Jn 19:25-27

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister Mary, who was the wife of Cleophas, and Mary of Magdala. When Jesus saw the Mother, and the disciple whom he loved, he said to the Mother, Woman, this is your son. Then he said to the disciple, There is your mother. And from that moment the disciple took her to his own home.

Commentary

It was women who featured most prominently at this first real altar of sacrifice, Calvary. So, the three women who stood by Jesus (in a most literal sense) were his mother, a relative, and his friend Mary Magdalene. They showed greater fidelity and courage than the men, nearly all of whom had run away.

I came across this remarkable prayer from the Methodist Service Book, I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing. That prayer may appear to some as an expression of purely passive spirituality; or some may describe it as feminine. But just think: how could you defeat a person who could truly pray that prayer? It would be impossible. Far from being an expression of weakness, it is an expression of the uttermost strength. Any spirituality that lacked this kind of strength would be shallow and partial. The Cross may look like weakness, but it is the power of God. And God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1Cor 1:25).

Thursday, September 16, 2004
24th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 15:1-11

Gospel: Lk 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to share his meal, so he went to the Pharisee's home and as usual reclined on the sofa to eat. And it happened that a woman of this town, who was known as a sinner, heard that he was in the Pharisee's house. She brought a precious jar of perfume and stood behind him at his feet, weeping. She wet his feet with tears, she dried them with her hair and kissed his feet and poured the perfume on them.

The Pharisee who had invited Jesus was watching and thought, If this man were a prophet, he would know what sort of person is touching him; isn't this woman a sinner?

Then Jesus spoke to the Pharisee and said, Simon, I have something to ask you. He answered, Speak, master. And Jesus said, Two people were in debt to the same creditor. One owed him five hundred silver coins, and the other fifty. As they were unable to pay him back, he graciously canceled the debts of both. Now, which of them will love him more?

Simon answered, The one, I suppose, who was forgiven more. And Jesus said, You are right. And turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman? You gave me no water for my feet when I entered your house, but she has washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You didn't welcome me with a kiss, but she has not stopped kissing my feet since she came in. You provided no oil for my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. This is why, I tell you, her sins, her many sins, are forgiven, because of her great love. But the one who is forgiven little, has little love.

Then Jesus said to the woman, Your sins are forgiven. The others sitting with him at the table began to wonder, Now this man claims to forgive sins! But Jesus again spoke to the woman, Your faith has saved you; go in peace.

Commentary

It was probably to get a better look at him that Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to a meal. He omitted all the normal courtesies for receiving a guest. When you invited a Rabbi to your house, it was normal to place your hand on his shoulder and give him the kiss of peace, to bathe his feet (it is a very dusty country), and to burn a grain of incense or put a drop of attar of roses on his head.

Simon the Pharisee had done none of these things on receiving Jesus into his house, and this must have been a pointed discourtesy.

There is great irony in the fact that, without knowing it, a woman of the streets paid him the very courtesies that his host had so rudely omitted. Meanwhile Simon thought to himself, If this man were a prophet. Simon's thought was so conventional that it wasn't thought at all. A prophet might be expected to surprise people and jolt them out of their fixed minds. But for Simon, a prophet would be someone who pried into people's hearts in order to judge and condemn them just as the Pharisees did! A prophet would be someone who kept the line of division clear: sinner/saint. He wasn't ready and he couldn't imagine a Messiah who would welcome sinners and eat with them.

Friday, September 17, 2004
24th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 15:12-20

Gospel: Lk 8:1-3

Jesus walked through towns and countryside, preaching and giving the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve followed him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and diseases: Mary called Magdalene, who had been freed of seven demons; Joanna, wife of Chuza, Herod's steward; Suzanna and others who provided for them out of their own funds.

Commentary

EVERY morning of life Jewish men gave thanks to God for not having been born Gentiles, nor slaves, nor women. The power of the revolution unleashed by Jesus is seen at one remove in St. Paul, who (though he never knew Jesus in the flesh) could write, There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). It takes nothing less than an inner revolution to bring a person to deny, phrase by phrase, the prayer he or she learned as a child. Try to imagine doing that to the Our Father or the Hail Mary! I find it impossible to imagine.

A rabbi would not be seen speaking to a woman in public; a strict one would not even be seen speaking to his own wife. But Jesus was followed around the country by a mixed band of men and women. Compounding it, he even spoke with Gentile women: the Samaritan woman and the Syro-Phoenician woman.

Luke's gospel particularly teems with women: it is in Luke that we read of Elizabeth, and Anna, and the widow of Naim, and the woman who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee; it is Luke who gives us the scene of Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha. And see the litany of names in today's reading. Scholars say that Luke was probably from Macedonia, where women were more emancipated than elsewhere.

Saturday, September 18, 2004
24th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: 1 Cor 15:35-37, 42-49

Gospel: Lk 8:4-15

As a great crowd gathered and people came to him from every town, Jesus began teaching them through stories, or parables. The sower went out to sow the seed. And as he sowed, some of the grain fell along the way, was trodden on and the birds of the sky ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and no sooner had it come up than it withered, because it had no water. Some fell among thorns; the thorns grew up with the seed and choked it. But some fell on good soil and grew, producing fruit a hundred times as much. And Jesus cried out, Listen then, if you have ears to hear!

The disciples asked him, What does this story mean? And Jesus answered, You have been granted to know the mystery of the kingdom of God. But to others it is given in the form of stories, or parables, so that *seeing they may not perceive and hearing they may not understand.*

Now, this is the point of the parable:

The seed is the word of God. Those along the wayside are people who hear it, but immediately the devil comes and takes the word from their minds, for he doesn't want them to believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are people who receive the word with joy, but they have no root; they believe for a while and give way in time of trial. Among the thorns are people who hear the word but as they go their way, are choked by worries, riches, and the pleasures of life; they bring no fruit to maturity. The good soil, instead, are people who receive the word and keep it in a gentle and generous mind, and persevering patiently, they bear fruit.

Commentary

THE soil is the heart, the place where the seed of God's word is to be received and hidden, and from where it will appear in its own time in a revolution of freshness and new life. But the difficulty is that the soil is never perfect.

1. *Some seed fell along the path . The path is where everyone walks: it's public. It's not a place of interest in itself; it leads elsewhere. When you are on a path you are between places, you are nowhere. The path has no interiority. If I'm always on the way to somewhere else (and which of us isn't nowadays?) I'm nowhere, and the word of God cannot find a place in me.*

2. *Some seed fell on rocky ground . The heart can be like a rock or a stone: solid, impenetrable, self-enclosed, separate, unloving and unloved . Throughout the ages it has been a common metaphor for the heart. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh (Ezk11:19).*

3. *Some seed fell among thorns . It has a chance to grow there, but everything else is growing there too. My power is divided into a thousand parts, and only one is available for the word of God. It's like flicking through the pages of a magazine: nothing remains in the heart, even though everything was promised.*

4. *Some seed fell on good soil . It's good soil when none of the above applies. Then the heart is deep and soft and silent. Then I may hear the word of God.*

Sunday, September 19, 2004
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Am 8:4-7

Hear this, you who trample on the needy to do away with the weak of the land. You who say, When will the new moon or the sabbath feast be over that we may open the store and sell our grain? Let us lower the measure and raise the price; let us cheat and tamper with the scales, and even sell the refuse with the whole grain. We will buy up the poor for money and the needy for a pair of sandals.

Yahweh, the pride of Jacob, has sworn by himself, I shall never forget their deeds.

2nd Reading: 1 Tim 2:1-8

First of all I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for rulers of states and all in authority, that we may enjoy a quiet and peaceful life in godliness and respect. This is good and pleases God. For he wants all to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. As there is one God, there is one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave his life for the redemption of all. This is the testimony, given in its proper time, and of this, God has made me apostle and herald. I am not lying, I am telling the truth: He made me teacher of the nations regarding faith and truth.

I want the men in every place to lift pure hands in prayer to heaven without anger and dissension.

Gospel: Lk 16:1-13

Jesus told his disciples, There was a rich man whose steward was reported to him for fraudulent service. He summoned the steward and asked him: What is this I hear about you? I want you to render an account of your service for it is about to be terminated.

The steward thought to himself: What am I to do now? My master will surely dismiss me. I am not strong enough to do hard work, and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I will do: I must make sure that when I am dismissed, there will be some people to welcome me into their house.

So he called his master's debtors one by one. He asked the first who came: How much do you owe my master? The reply was: A hundred jars of oil. The steward said: Here is your bill. Sit down quickly and write there fifty. To the second he put the same question: How much do you owe? The answer was: A thousand measures of wheat. Then he said: Take your bill and write eight hundred.

The master commended the dishonest steward for his astuteness. For the people of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light. And so I tell you: use filthy money to make friends for yourselves, so that when it fails, these people may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Whoever can be trusted in little things can also be trusted in great ones; whoever is dishonest in slight matters will also be dishonest in greater ones. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling filthy money, who could entrust you with true wealth? And if you have not been trustworthy with things which are not really yours, who will give you the wealth which is your own?

No servant can serve two masters. Either he does not like the one and is fond of the other, or he regards one highly and the other with contempt. You cannot give yourself both to God and to Money.

Commentary

THIS parable has been a problem from the beginning. A scholar says that the second part is early Christian moralizing, an attempt the first of many to make sense of this rather unedifying story. Every character in the story, even the owner who was a victim of dishonesty, was dishonest.

One commentator tries to make sense of it as follows. Such stewards had great liberty in the way they did their work. Sometimes, to pay themselves, they would lend out the owner's property and charge high rates of interest on it. What this steward cancelled may have been these interest rates. In other words he himself was the loser. But this explanation makes the unjust steward a just man which contradicts the story itself.

Perhaps, as in the case of the unwise bridesmaids (see August 27), we should restrict our attention to the single point that every parable makes. But what is that point in this case? Be astute: that's one. But then there follow all the others in today's reading! Which one did Jesus intend?

Someone said (in relation to philosophical texts) that the meaning of a text is the history of its meaning. In other words, it means all the things that people have ever thought it to mean. This seems a very unruly principle, like a hedge grown wild. But it's not as bad as it sounds: 1. our Christian instinct will be a fairly reliable guide in excluding any unchristian interpretations; and 2. it means that we really respect and listen to every interpretation it has ever received. (And that means respecting the people who went before us.)

Monday, September 20, 2004
25th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Pro 3:27-34

Gospel: Lk 8:16-18

Jesus said to his disciples, No one, after lighting a lamp covers it with a bowl or puts it under the bed; rather he puts it on a lampstand so that people coming in may see the light. In the same way, there is nothing hidden that shall not be uncovered; nothing kept secret that shall not be known clearly. Now, take care how well you listen, for whoever produces will be given more, but from those who do not produce, even what they seem to have will be taken away from them.

Commentary

MATTHEW'S gospel too has this image of a light on a lamp stand; but there's a subtle difference. It gives light to all who are in the house (Mt 5:15); while here in Luke's gospel, it gives light to those who enter the house. Matthew was Jewish and writing for Christians of Jewish origin, but Luke was a Gentile writing for Gentile Christians. Gentiles are coming to the house of faith from the outside.

Read in connection with this, Ephesians 5:8-9. Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

Tuesday, September 21, 2004
Matthew, Apostle & Evangelist

1st Reading: Eph 4:1-7, 11-13

Gospel: Mt 9:9-13

As Jesus moved on, 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

St. Augustine thinks Matthew wasn't called at the same time as the others because he had some financial matters to finish off. But a 6th-century writer took it that Matthew left his affairs in disorder, a thing that greatly impressed him. It must be particularly difficult for someone who deals

with figures to leave them unbalanced. Do we have to balance our books before we set out on the Gospel path?

Matthew wrote his gospel to convince Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of their prophecies. Sixteen times in his gospel he uses the phrase so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled. He sees Jesus through the lens of the Old Testament: in him are fulfilled all the hopes of the Jewish people. In view of this conviction, his tax-gathering papers must have seemed very unimportant. Financial matters are so precise and so tangible and near . His must have been a powerful conversion, because he had been in the service of Mammon, God's greatest rival. You cannot serve God and Mammon, Jesus said (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13).

Business people tend to be hard-headed, and perhaps his conversion took a little longer. St. John Chrysostom (5th century) suggested that Matthew was not called at the same time as Peter and John and the others because he was then still in a hardened state. He was more used to handling hard cash than human aspiration.

Wednesday, September 22, 2004
25th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Pro 30:5-9

Gospel: Lk 9:1-6

Jesus called his twelve disciples and gave them power and authority to drive out all evil spirits and to heal diseases. And he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He instructed them, Don't take anything for the journey, neither walking stick, nor bag, nor bread, nor silver coins; and don't even take a spare tunic. Whatever house you enter, remain there until you leave that place. And wherever they don't welcome you, leave the town and shake the dust from your feet: it will be as a testimony against them.

So they set out and went through the villages, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

Commentary

Why would I spend every day worrying about the next day and trying to provide for it? Because I don't believe in Providence. The word providence (Latin pro- + videre) means to see to something. God is a Father who sees to things, not a cold pagan God (like Aristotle's, who doesn't even know that anything else exists). The Father of Jesus is a warm God.

But can you trust this warm God? People who believe in God and in God's Providence don't have it any easier than others; in fact they often have it harder. A business person (Matthew, for example, in his tax-gathering days) would say there were no short-term benefits. What about the long-term benefits? Preachers have played this card with the shamelessness of businessmen. Their hearers were prepared for it, because they all remembered by heart the catechism answer to why we are on this earth, To know, love and serve God, and by this means to be happy with Him forever in heaven. God then was a means to my happiness. It's not surprising that many found Mammon could do it better.

The language of business corrupts religion. It makes self-interest a first principle. Jesus tells us to take nothing for the journey. He tells us to love God with the whole heart: that means we are to take our eyes off the returns, and to stop calculating chances and being our own providence and giving up our lives to anxiety.

Thursday, September 23, 2004
25th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Ecl 1:2-11

Gospel: Lk 9:7-9

King Herod heard of all that Jesus was doing and did not know what to think, for people said, This is John, raised from the dead. Others believed that Elijah or one of the ancient prophets had come back to life. As for Herod, he said, I had John beheaded; who is this man about whom I hear such wonders? And he was anxious to see him.

Commentary

In Matthew's account Herod said, This is John the Baptist himself; he has risen from the dead . This was in keeping with Matthew's tendency to see the present in terms of the past. But here in Luke's gospel Herod says, John? I beheaded him. So who is this I hear such reports about? He makes no confusion of past and present. True, others did, but not Herod and not Luke. Luke was not Jewish and he seldom quotes the Old Testament. He is not interested in

presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy; and he traces the genealogy of Jesus back to Adam, the founder of the human race, rather than to Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race.

Herod, Luke says, was anxious to see Jesus. Later in the gospel he hadn't lost this interest.

Herod was delighted to see Jesus; he had heard about him and had been wanting for a long time to set eyes on him (23:8). The tone of Luke's gospel is a great openness to the future.

We can be so absorbed in our past that the present seems less real, and the future only a threat. When we look at one another we should see living people, not ghosts. Ghosts are creatures who have nothing but a past.

Friday, September 24, 2004
25th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Ecl 3:1-11

Gospel: Lk 9:18-22

One day when Jesus was praying alone, not far from his disciples, he asked them, What do people say about me? And they answered, Some say that you are John the Baptist; others say that you are Elijah, and still others that you are one of the former prophets risen from the dead. Again Jesus asked them, Who then do you say I am? Peter answered, The Messiah of God. Then Jesus spoke to them, giving them strict orders not to tell this to anyone.

And he added, The Son of Man must suffer many things. He will be rejected by the elders and chief priests and teachers of the Law, and put to death. Then after three days he will be raised to life.

Commentary

At one end of the scale, people in numbers can be a community; at the other end they can be a mob. In both cases there's a certain unity of purpose, even if in the latter case it's a destructive one. But the whole space between these extremes is the space of the crowd. There's no telling what they think.

What do people say about me? Jesus asked. People say everything! It was scarcely necessary to ask. They gave the usual list of false identities—the same as in yesterday's reading. They had met him, they had been miraculously fed by him (as recounted in the verses just before today's reading); yet they had no idea who he was. Nor did that worry them. No doubt they appreciated the food. But one day, not far in the future, they would turn into a vicious mob shouting, Crucify him!

He seemed to have a presentiment of this. The Son of Man must suffer many things. Jesus would never be popular. He lost to Barabbas. I always feel uncomfortable when I hear people reciting Church statistics—percentages and numbers. What's a statistic? Does it exist in the singular? When you figure in statistics are you one of a community, or of a crowd, or a mob? Any calculation that fails to distinguish between these can't be very useful for anything.

Saturday, September 25, 2004
25th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Ecl 11:9 12:8

Gospel: Lk 9:43-45

While all were amazed at everything Jesus did, he said to his disciples, Listen and remember what I tell you now: The Son of Man will be delivered into human hands. But the disciples didn't understand this saying; something prevented them from grasping what he meant, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

Commentary

SOMETHING prevented them from grasping what he meant. It's always something when we don't understand it, or want to understand it, or even want to look at it. Fear makes us look away which is the early stage of running away. If we could just look, we might not be so afraid. They were afraid to ask him. Why? Was he not their friend? Why were they afraid of him? No, they were not afraid of him; they were afraid that what he was saying was true, and they didn't want to hear it.

There's no need to be afraid of the truth, we were often told as children. There's every reason! In fact there's no reason to be afraid of anything else. To lie is to look away from the truth, because I'm afraid of it. Lies are evasions for the sake of comfort. Lies are afraid of nothing so much as the truth, because it has power to destroy them. The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light (Jn 3:19). Are you afraid of the dark? No, I'm afraid of the light!

Sunday, September 26, 2004
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Am 6:1, 4-7

Woe to those proud people who live, over-confident on the hill of Samaria!

Woe to you, men of renown, from the first among the nations, to whom the people of Israel come!

You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and sprawl on your couches; you eat lamb from the flock and veal from calves fattened in the stall.

You strum on your harps, and like David, try out new musical instruments.

You drink wine by the bowlful and anoint yourselves with the finest oils, but you do not grieve over the ruins of Joseph.

Therefore you will be the first to go into exile; and the feast of sprawlers will be over.

2nd Reading: 1 Tim 6:11-16

But you, man of God, shun all this. Strive to be holy and godly. Live in faith and love, with endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith and win everlasting life to which you were called when you made the good profession of faith in the presence of so many witnesses.

Now, in the presence of God who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus who gave the good testimony before Pontius Pilate, I command you to keep the commandment. Keep yourself pure and blameless until the glorious coming of Christ Jesus, our Lord, which God will bring about at the proper time, he, the magnificent sovereign, King of kings and Lord of lords. To him, alone immortal, who lives in unapproachable light and whom no one has ever seen or can see, to him be honor and power for ever and ever. Amen!

Gospel: Lk 16:19-31

Jesus said to the Pharisees, Once there was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted every day. At his gate lay Lazarus, a poor man covered with sores, who longed to eat just the scraps falling from the rich man's table. Even dogs used to come and lick his sores. It happened that the poor man died and angels carried him to take his place with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. From hell where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham afar off, and with him Lazarus at rest.

He called out: Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus with the tip of his finger dipped in water to cool my tongue, for I suffer so much in this fire.

Abraham replied: My son, remember that in your lifetime you were well-off while the lot of Lazarus was misfortune. Now he is in comfort and you are in agony. But that is not all. Between your place and ours a great chasm has been fixed, so that no one can cross over from here to you or from your side to us.

The rich man implored once more: Then I beg you, Father Abraham, to send Lazarus to my father's house where my five brothers live. Let him warn them so that they may not end up in this place of torment. Abraham replied: They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them. But the rich man said: No, Father Abraham. But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.

Abraham said: If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the grave.

Commentary

RICH and poor: we'd like to be both. It would be nice to be rich: we would be very secure, everything provided for (and against), we would be invulnerable in our large estate, and very comfortable. But on the other hand we would have a lot of worries about things like insurance, about our staff and whether they were honest, about the stock-market, about inflation and recession, and all the cares and headaches of our business. Sometimes we would think: how nice if we were poor! We would have no worries about the stock-market or the recession; we would only have to worry about small immediate things like lunch; we would be freeeee!

If we were rich we would be secure; if we were poor we would be free. How nice if we could be both: secure, and free at the same time.

But we can mount only one horse. And each is different from what is seemed. Wealth doesn't give security and poverty doesn't give freedom. The wealthy man is not so secure as he thinks he is: somewhere deep in him is an unsatisfied hunger and thirst. He can never have enough. Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is unquenchable? And the poor man is not free: only to a full stomach does poverty seem like freedom.

Today's parable makes it clear that we can't have it both ways, and that the consequences of our choice reach into eternity. The parable is a warning to the rich to wake up from their beautiful dream.

Monday, September 27, 2004
26th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Job 1:6-22

Gospel: Lk 9:46-50

One day the disciples were arguing about which of them was the most important. But Jesus knew their thoughts, so he took a little child and stood him by his side. Then he said to them, Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me. And listen: the one who is found to be the least among you all, is the one who is the greatest.

Then John spoke up, Master, we saw someone who drove out demons by calling upon your name, and we tried to forbid him because he doesn't follow you with us. But Jesus said, Don't forbid him. He who is not against you is for you.

Commentary

SOMEONE said that a neurosis is a secret you don't know you're keeping. There must exist somewhere deep in us the mother of all neuroses (otherwise where would the little ones come from?). This would be the one to get to know. It has been given a name: it is the ego.

It's not me, it's the idea I have of me. That makes two of me. The first me (let's call me that) is dependent for life on an astronomical number of other creatures. There are more living beings (with their own DNA, different from mine) living in my body than there are people in the world! I am their planet, I am their mountains and rivers. They depend on me and I depend on them; if I sprayed them all to death (were that possible) I would die instantly.

This is not good news for the ego (that's the other me). This me thinks he's basically alone in the world, and that anything he gets (apart from what he got for nothing from his mother a long time ago) is due to his own efforts. He's a lonely competitor for just about everything, and he has his story to tell (which forgets to mention the many billions of creatures inside and outside his skin). So it's very important for him to be reassured that he's doing well. Or rather (since he doesn't really know who or what he is), that he's doing better than someone else.

The disciples of Jesus, like all of us, had the same problem. They were arguing about which of them was the most important. Jesus took a child and said, You must become like children. Children were not romanticized in those days: a child was a nobody. You must become nobody, then there will be room in you for you and for all the others.

Tuesday, September 28, 2004
26th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Job 3:1-3, 11-17, 20-23

Gospel: Lk 9:51-56

As the time drew near when Jesus would be taken up to heaven, he made up his mind to go to Jerusalem. He had sent ahead of him some messengers who entered a Samaritan village to prepare a lodging for him. But the people would not receive him because he was on his way to Jerusalem. Seeing this, James and John, his disciples said, Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to reduce them to ashes? Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went on to another village.

Commentary

THERE was once a great saint who wandered around the country, always giving thanks to God, Thank you, Lord, you always give us everything we need! Some people were attracted to his lifestyle and took to wandering with him. They would beg their food and shelter wherever they went. One day they were given nothing to eat, and they were turned from every door when they asked for lodging. But the saint continued, Thank you, Lord, you always give us everything we need! Next day they fared no better; and again the next day: nothing. Still the old man continued,

Thank you, Lord, thank you. This was too much for one of the disciples, and he said, Haven't you noticed that for the past three days the Lord has given us nothing? Well then, said the old man, it must be that we needed three days of hunger and poverty. Thank you, Lord, you always give us everything we need.

Wednesday, September 29, 2004
Michael, Gabriel and Raphael

1st Reading: Dn 7:9-10, 13-14 or Rev 12:7-12

Gospel: Jn 1:47-51

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming, he said of him, Here comes an Israelite, a true one; there is nothing false in him. Nathanael asked him, How do you know me? And Jesus said to him, Before Philip called you, you were under the fig tree and I saw you.

Nathanael answered, Master, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel! But Jesus replied, You believe because I said: I saw you under the fig tree. But you will see greater things than that.

Truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

Commentary

THE word angel means messenger (Greek, angelos). In the Old Testament the Hebrew word mal ak was applied to both human and divine messengers. The more remote God seemed, the greater became the need for intermediaries. Certain mighty figures, later known as archangels, appear in the Book of Daniel, and the process of naming angels began. A confusing variety of functions and names is found, probably because angels were important in popular devotion. All these names have meanings, of course. Michael means one who is like God, Gabriel means God is strong, Raphael means God heals, Daniel means God judges, Elizabeth means God is fullness, and so on. The archangel Michael was thought to have a special responsibility as the guardian angel of Israel (Dan 12:1).

Early Christianity inherited Jewish beliefs about angels, but the interest is much diminished. The angel of the Annunciation has a permanent place in Christian spirituality, but the New Testament tends if anything to put angels in their place. So in Hebrews 1, angels are inferior to the Son; in 1Cor 13:1 the eloquence of angels takes second place to love; and in 1P 1:12 the angels are seen as envying the Christian.

Thursday, September 30, 2004
26th Week in Ordinary Time

1st Reading: Job 19:21-27**Gospel: Lk 10:1-12**

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.

Commentary

I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Jesus had a right to say this because he himself was like a lamb among wolves (see January 3). The Christian Gospel proclaims that the deepest wisdom is hidden in suffering. This is not to love suffering for itself, but to understand that power is made perfect in weakness (2Cor 12:9).

It is very paradoxical. Any deep teaching is full of paradox. The English word suffer originally meant to allow. To suffer is to allow the pain of life of reach me. It is natural to try to avoid pain, but when it comes my way I should let it reach me. Otherwise I will develop a hard outer layer of insensitivity. When we see people who have done this we are inclined to say: suffering has made them hard and bitter. But it hasn't. It is their rejection of suffering that has done so. Life doesn't make people hard; it's the denial of life that makes them hard.

Hard outer shells go with inner mushiness. You often find that people with hard exteriors are the very ones whose inner lives are full of self-indulgence and self-pity. This has none of the openness or possibilities of growth that genuine suffering has. One of the things we learn as we grow older is the difference between neurotic self-inflicted suffering and genuine suffering. By their fruits you shall know them. Even by the skin of their fruits you shall know them.

