

Bits 'n Pieces

Lenten Reflections

by Rev. Martin R. Bartel, O.S.B.

Ash Wednesday

Even now, says the LORD, return to me with your whole heart (Joel 2:12).

As we begin Lent, the gospel for Ash Wednesday reminds us of the three pillars of this holy season: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. These three tools guide us in fashioning a spiritually fruitful Lent.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the elder Native American who was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too," he added.

The grandchildren thought about it for a minute and then one asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

In the context of the story, Lent is the time to feed the good wolf and starve the bad one. (Perhaps a bad analogy on a day when the Church directs us to fast and abstain!)

We feed the wolf of prayerfulness by making time for solitude and peace, reading the Word and meditating upon it, joining others for public worship and savoring the presence of God guiding and directing our lives. We starve the wolf of busy-ness by eliminating the non-essential in our life.

These forty days are an occasion to starve the wolf of desire and consumption by denying ourselves some physical nourishment so as to remind us that God alone satisfies the deepest desires of the human heart. Spiritual food and exercise hasten our growth and development as a genuine reflection of God. Leaving the world of comfort allows us to enter the realm of the spirit. We feed the wolf of fasting by feasting on the Divine and the buffet of good works.

The time before Easter is the time to feed the wolf of almsgiving by sharing our resources of time, talent and treasure with those in any need. We starve the wolf of self-centeredness and stinginess by expanding our circle of concern and generously caring for others.

Which wolf will you feed this Lent and which one will you starve?

Normally, these reflections will not be this lengthy, but with Ash Wednesday setting the tone for our entire Lent, the following email which I received yesterday might be a good them for each day until Easter:

- TODAY I WILL NOT STRIKE BACK**

If someone is rude, if someone is impatient, if someone is unkind, I will not respond in a like manner.

2. **TODAY I WILL ASK GOD TO BLESS MY 'ENEMY'**

If I come across someone who treats me harshly or unfairly, I will quietly ask God to bless that individual. I understand "enemy" could be a family member, neighbor, co-worker or stranger.

3. **I WILL BE CAREFUL ABOUT WHAT I SAY**

I will carefully choose and guard my words being certain that I do not spread gossip.

4. **TODAY I WILL GO THE EXTRA MILE**

I will find ways to help share the burden of another person.

5. **TODAY I WILL FORGIVE**

I will forgive any hurts or injuries that come my way.

6. **TODAY I WILL DO SOMETHING NICE FOR SOMEONE, BUT I WILL DO IT IN SECRET**

I will reach out anonymously and bless the life of another.

7. **TODAY I WILL TREAT OTHERS THE WAY I WISH TO BE TREATED**

I will practice the golden rule. "Do Unto others as I would have them do unto me"- with EVERYONE I encounter.

8. **TODAY I WILL RAISE THE SPIRITS OF SOMEONE WHO IS DISCOURAGED**

My smile, my words, my expression of support, can make the difference to someone who is wrestling with life.

9. **TODAY I WILL NURTURE MY BODY**

I will eat less... I will eat only healthy foods. I will thank God for my body.

10. **I WILL GROW SPIRITUALLY**

I will spend a little more time in prayer today. I will begin reading something spiritual or inspirational; I will find a quiet place (at some point during this day) and listen to God's voice.

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"Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor 6:2)

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, heeding his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you, a long life (Deut. 30:19b-20a).

Some time ago, a friend who was going through some very tough times, sent the following brief story entitled, "Our Cross."

"Lord, I can't go on," he said. "I have too heavy a cross to bear."

The Lord replied, "My son, if you can't bear its weight, just place your cross inside this room. Then, open that other door and pick out any cross you wish."

The man was filled with relief. "Thank you, Lord," he sighed, and he did as he was told.

Upon entering the other door, he saw many crosses, some so large the tops were not visible. Then, he spotted a tiny cross leaning against a far wall. "I'd like that one, Lord," he whispered.

The Lord replied, "My son, that is the cross you just brought in."

In the gospel, Jesus says that in following him, we are to take up our cross daily. This prompts a consideration of what our cross is and how it compares with the crosses of those around us. Whatever our cross, it serves some purpose in our personal life, a purpose which may never be known until God Himself speaks the mystery to us when we meet Him face to face.

The variety of our crosses is infinite: a difficult spouse, an addictive personality, economic woes, a fussy baby, or a serious illness. For students, it may be passing an important exam or as seemingly traumatic as first love gone awry. Our cross may be an oft repeated story from a loved one with few new experiences to share: that deaf relative who refuses to consider a hearing aid; or dreaded dementia, our own or that of a relative. Perhaps it's absorbing the unkindness of another, rather than responding in kind or accepting the rudeness of the driver behind us.

Whatever our cross, the Lord bids us to shoulder it daily and carry on. We gain encouragement and support from knowing that we are not alone. Our Savior carried his cross, too, and we seek to follow his footsteps one day at a time.

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it (Luke 22:24).

Friday after Ash Wednesday

This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own (Isaiah 58:6-7).

Many years ago, a friend shared the following with me, which I thought would be good homily material. (She was right!) At the time, it was for me a new and fresh perspective on fasting and feasting. I like to review it annually during Lent, and try, with varying degrees of success each year, to put it into practice.

Fast From-Feast On

- Fast from judging others; Feast on the Christ dwelling in them.
- Fast from emphasis on differences; Feast on the unity of life.
- Fast from apparent darkness; Feast on the reality of light.
- Fast from thoughts of illness; Feast on the healing power of God.
- Fast from words that pollute; Feast on phrases that purify.
- Fast from discontent; Feast on gratitude.
- Fast from anger; Feast on patience.
- Fast from pessimism; Feast on optimism.
- Fast from worry; Feast on divine order.
- Fast from complaining; Feast on appreciation.
- Fast from negatives; Feast on affirmatives.
- Fast from unrelenting pressures; Feast on unceasing prayer.
- Fast from hostility; Feast on non-resistance.
- Fast from bitterness; Feast on forgiveness.
- Fast from self-concern; Feast on compassion for others.
- Fast from personal anxiety; Feast on eternal truth.
- Fast from discouragements; Feast on hope.
- Fast from facts that depress; Feast on verities that uplift.
- Fast from lethargy; Feast on enthusiasm.
- Fast from thoughts that weaken; Feast on promises that inspire.
- Fast from shadows of sorrow; Feast on the sunlight of serenity.
- Fast from idle gossip; Feast on purposeful silence.
- Fast from problems that overwhelm; Feast on prayer that [strengthens].

—William Arthur Ward (American author, teacher and pastor, 1921-1994.)

The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast (Matthew 9:15b).

Monday of the First Week of Lent

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left (Matt 25-31-33).

Being a southpaw (left-handed), I have always harbored a certain resentment that the sheep would be on Jesus' right and the goats on his right. However, in my reading, I came across the following selection. It is a unique perspective on the final judgment, and put me (and my laterality, handedness) at ease.

Of all Jesus' stories [about the judgment at the end of time], I do prefer the one about the sheep and the goats. In this story, it is Jesus who is doing the separating. The whole human race, the virtuous and the sinful, will be packed into a big hot auditorium. Jesus will be there and perhaps Satan and his cohorts, too, which would explain the heat. It will seem like any other religious ceremony on a hot summer day. We shall be milling around trying to get a seat by the door in order to get a breath of air and be able to sneak out early (old habits die slowly). Jesus will be standing up in front of the auditorium on the stage. After a while, he will call the meeting to order with the following words:

We are going to leave this place and begin the trip into eternity. This is the way I want the trip organized. I want all of you who know you are really decent and deserving of heaven, all you who see yourselves as my faithful sheep, to take places at my right hand (and he holds up his right arm). And I want all the rest of you, you goats who do not deserve my love, to take places at my left hand (and he holds up his left arm). When we go down the road to eternity, I will tell you where to go.

Then Jesus will be quiet for a moment, facing the congregation with this right hand and his left hand raised high above his head. Then he will say, "Take your places: sheep on my right and goats on my left!"

Then the pandemonium will begin. All those who are convinced that they are just fine will scrap for the best places on the Lord's right. The very biggest will push their way into the first row so that they can get the best places in heaven (R-1 zoning and restrictions against low-income housing). These folks will believe that they not only deserve to get to heaven but that they deserve the very best castles, those with a view of the other place, perhaps. Heaven for them would be a loss if they could not look down on all these folks they looked down on in life.

Those who end up on the left will include those who were too weak to fight for the best seats even if they were inclined to. Kids will be there because they will not understand the business about "right and left." They will be interested only in having a place to play and there will be more room on the left. Some others will consciously choose left, people like Augustine and Benedict, Peter and Theresa, who will be convinced they don't deserve any gifts from the Lord.

Finally things will settle down. Jesus will look at the people on his right and the people on his left and say, "Those on my right will follow me to heaven; those on my left must go to hell. And now, let's go!"

And then he will TURN AROUND [emphasis added] and march off. (From *The Inn of the Samaritan, The Sheep and the Goats*, by Donald X. Burt, O.S.A.)

Are we on his right or his left in the auditorium? Are we on his right or his left entering the kingdom of heaven?

Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy (Lev. 19:2).

Tuesday of the First Week of Lent

If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions (Mt 6:14-15).

As Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, we as his followers are reminded how important forgiveness is to his message. The following message makes the same point:

Two friends were walking through the desert. During some point in the journey they had an argument and one friend slapped the other one in the face. The one who got slapped was hurt much more in his heart than on the skin of his face, but without saying anything he wrote in the sand: "TODAY MY FRIEND SLAPPED ME IN THE FACE."

They kept walking until they found an oasis where they decided to take a swim. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire and started drowning, but his friend rushed to his aid and saved him. Afterward the saved friend carved into a stone: "TODAY MY FRIEND SAVED MY LIFE."

The friend who had slapped and saved his friend asked him, "After I hurt you you wrote in the sand, but now you carve into a stone. Why?"

He replied, "When someone hurts us we should write it down in sand where the winds and waves of forgiveness can erase it away. But when someone does something good for us and blesses us with kindness and peace, we must engrave it in stone where no wind nor wave can ever erase it." (Source unknown)

It is forgiveness that allows us to write our hurts in the sand and gratefulness that demands that we carve our blessings in stone. What a great idea for Lent. Both forgiveness and gratefulness have their origin in God.

So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it (Is 55:11).

Wednesday of the First Week of Lent

Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. . . . At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here (Luke 11:30, 32).

Both readings today remind us of the overall theme of Lent: repent! It is never too late to heed that command, put sinful ways behind, and embrace the way of Jesus. We are now one week into the season of Lent. Like Jonah, we have procrastinated, but let us hastily take advantage of these grace-filled days.

Fr. Jack McArdle tells of a legend in Russian Orthodox Church about the Day of Judgment at the end of the world. The people are joyfully flocking through the pearly gates of heaven. As the crowds stream in, everyone is in a festive mood, singing and dancing -- everyone except Jesus. As the last group of saints and repentant sinners pass, Jesus is seen standing outside the gate, with his hand shading his eyes from the sun, as he stares off into the distance obviously looking for someone. One of the saints asks him what he is doing, and he replies, "I'm waiting for Judas hoping he may have had a change of heart before he died and may still join us."

It is never too late to repent; we should not keep the Lord waiting.

"There are no hopeless situations; there are only those who have grown hopeless about them." Clare Booth Luce

When God saw by their actions how [the Ninevites] turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out (Jonah 3:10).

Thursday of the First Week of Lent

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened (Matt. 7:7-8).

A good friend got me hooked on country music many years ago. I think one of the reasons it appeals to me is that so many songs have religious overtones. One example is Garth Brooks' "Unanswered Prayers."

*My wife and I ran into my old high school flame
And as I introduced them the past came back to me
And I couldn't help but think of the way things used
to be*

Just the other night a hometown football game

*She was the one that I'd wanted for all times
And each night I'd spend prayin' that God would
make her mine
And if he'd only grant me this wish I wished back
then
I'd never ask for anything again*

*Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean*

he don't care

*Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered
prayers*

*She wasn't quite the angel that I remembered in my
dreams*

And I could tell that time had changed me

In her eyes too it seemed

We tried to talk about the old days

There wasn't much we could recall

I guess the Lord knows what he's doin' after all

And as she walked away and I looked at my wife

And then and there I thanked the good Lord

For the gifts in my life

We've probably all heard the expression that God always answers prayers, but sometime his answer is "no." I think a better way of looking at the question of seemingly unanswered prayer is that God sometimes answers in a way we do not expect, or desire, or endorse. I read of a woman who recorded her prayer intentions. She was surprised at the way some of her prayers were answered. For example, one was answered by a change of attitude toward a situation, rather than an actual change in the situation.

In other words, many of our prayers are answered in a way totally different from what we had in mind when we formed the prayer intention. Our prayers are indeed answered, but in a way so different from what we expected that we frequently fail to recognize the answer.

We have Jesus' word that if we ask, then we will receive. We need to be receptive to the answer, which he knows is best. Our prayers are often answered not in the way we thought they should be answered, but in the way a loving Father sees fit.

Queen Esther, seized with mortal anguish, likewise had recourse to the Lord. . . . Then she prayed to the Lord, the God of Israel, saying: "My Lord, our King, you alone are God. Help me, who am alone and have no help but you, for I am taking my life in my hand (Esther C:12, 14-15).

Friday of the First Week of Lent

You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, 'Raqa,' ['nitwit'] will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna (Matt. 5:21-22).

Fr. Mark Link, S.J., tells a wonderful story of a cool head prevailing over a hot one:

It was one of those hot days when everyone is on edge. Then came the inevitable explosion. Just as the traffic light turned green, the motor of a woman's car died. When she could not restart it, the driver behind her began honking. Again and again she tried to no avail. Now, the driver behind her was livid and began honking irrationally. Finally, the woman got out of her car, walked back to the motorist and said, "I'll be glad to honk your horn for you, if you'll start my car for me."

On the cross, Jesus absorbed all the anger and hatred and violence that humanity could muster. Rather than deflecting it, or responding in kind, he took it all upon himself, internalized it, and vanquished it once and for all. With that in mind, couldn't we follow in his footsteps and absorb another's anger rather than responding in a similar fashion? In doing so, we effectively bury such harshness and rise to new life.

But if the wicked man turns away from all the sins he committed, if he keeps all my statutes and does what is right and just, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of the crimes he committed shall be remembered against him; he shall live because of the virtue he has practiced (Ez. 18:22-23).

Monday of the Second Week of Lent

Be merciful, just as (also) your Father is merciful. Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you (Luke 6:36-38).

There is a story about an elderly carpenter who was ready to retire. He told his employer-contractor of his plans to leave the house building business and live a more leisurely life with his wife enjoying his extended family.

He would miss the paycheck, but he needed to retire. They could get by. The contractor was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a personal favor. The carpenter said yes, but in time it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end his career.

When the carpenter finished his work and the builder came to inspect the house, the contractor handed the front-door key to the carpenter. "This is your house," he said, "my gift to you."

What a shock! What a shame! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently. Now he had to live in the home he had built none too well.

So it is with us. Sometimes we build our lives with less than the best actions and effort. Then with a shock, we look at the situation that we have created and find that we are now living in the house we have built. If we had realized that, we would have done it differently.

It is helpful to think of God building a house for us in heaven using the materials that we provide. He's constructing our house with our actions toward others. When we act with mercy, compassion, understanding, forgiveness and generosity, He builds our house with those materials. When we are merciless, judgmental, condemning, grudging and stingy, He's fashion a not-too-happy house.

Someone once told me of a plaque on the wall that says, "Life is a do-it-yourself project." Our life tomorrow and forever, is the result of your attitudes and the choices that we make today.

Yours, O Lord, our God, are compassion and forgiveness! Yet we rebelled against you and paid no heed to your command, O LORD, our God, to live by the law you gave us through your servants the prophets (Dn 9:9-10).

Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent

The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matt 23:11-12).

Father Anthony de Mello, S.J., the late writer and retreat master, in his book, *Song of the Bird*, told the memorable story of the tiger and disabled fox:

A fox who lived in the deep forest of long ago had lost its front legs. No one knew how: perhaps escaping from a trap. A man who lived on the edge of the forest, seeing the fox from time to time, wondered how in the world it managed to get its food. One day when the fox was not far from him, he had to hide himself quickly because a tiger was approaching. The tiger had fresh game in its claws. Lying down on the ground, it ate its fill, leaving the rest for the fox.

Again the next day the great Provider of this world sent provisions to the fox by this same tiger. The man began to think: "If this fox is taken care of in this mysterious way, its food sent by some unseen Higher Power, why don't I just rest in a corner and have my daily meal provided for me?"

Because he had a lot of faith, he let the days pass, waiting for food. Nothing happened. He just went on losing weight and strength until he was nearly a skeleton. Close to losing consciousness, he heard a Voice which said: "O you, who have mistaken the way, see now the Truth! You should have followed the example of that tiger instead of imitating the disabled fox." (From *The Tale of the Reed Pipe* by Massud Farzan.)

While we all may prefer to be the fox, and be the object of another's attention and care, Jesus directs us to be tigers, extending our care and attention to others.

Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow. Come now, let us set things right, says the LORD: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; Though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool (Is 1:16-18).

Allow me to add some comments about Mathew 23:9, *Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven*, which is part of today's gospel. This verse is often used to criticize the traditional Catholic practice of calling priests by the term of respect, "Father." In this context, Jesus is emphasizing the primary role of our Heavenly Father. It is obvious that Jesus is not forbidding children to use the term in regard to their biological father. Furthermore, consider Mark 7:9-13, where Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and scribes for not honoring their "fathers." Moreover, calling the apostles and their successors "father" was common within the early Christian communities (1 Cor. 4:15, 1 Jn. 2:12, Acts 7:2, 22:1). What Jesus condemns in this passage is not the literal use of the term, but rather ascribing ultimate power and authority to anyone other than God the Father.

Wednesday of the Second Week of Lent

Jesus summoned them and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:25-28).

A young career woman told the following story:

During my second month of college, our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one: "What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?"

Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50s, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank.

Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. "Absolutely," said the professor. "In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say, 'hello.'"

I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name was Dorothy.

The gospel for today, like the similar one from yesterday, clearly indicates that Jesus measures greatness differently than secular society does. While many measure standing by power, authority, influence, connections, status and wealth, Jesus is not impressed with such things. He measures greatness as he spent his time and gave his life -- in service to others.

So, no offense to college students or college graduates, but Jesus clearly has a soft spot in his heart for the woman who cleans the school and for those who do likewise in whatever situation they find themselves.

"The measure of greatness is not the number of servants you have, but the number of people you serve." Anonymous

Heed me, O LORD, and listen to what my adversaries say. Must good be repaid with evil that they should dig a pit to take my life? (Jer. 18:19-20a).

Thursday of the Second Week of Lent

There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores (Luke 16:19-21).

Perhaps you recall your catechisms lessons from former times when "sins of omission" were presented. In that lesson, we learned that it is sinful to not do things that we know should be done. One little boy obviously did not understand this phrase. When the teacher asked the class, "what are sins of omission?" He quickly responded: "Those are the sins we should have committed, but didn't."

Today's gospel presents the quintessential sin of omission. The rich man is not condemned because of his wealth; rather his "sin" is his utter disregard for someone in desperate need, the poor man, Lazarus. He did not assuage the agony of Lazarus so he receives his divine judgment, which is quite harsh. After all, the rich man did not do anything wrong. He did not steal from Lazarus or physically assault him. Rather, he had a weighty responsibility toward Lazarus, and failed to fulfill it. This was a serious sin of omission. The severity of his punishment, torment in the netherworld, throws light on the gravity of his responsibility.

We dare not be deaf to the cries of the needy; we close our eyes to the plight of the victims to our own peril. We cannot be complacent when others are suffering; we must be faithful to what our religious tradition teaches: the well-being of others is indeed our business.

Let me close with **The Sin of Omission** by Margaret E. Sangster

*It isn't the thing you do, dear,
Its the thing you leave undone
That gives you a bit of a heartache
At setting of the sun.
The tender work forgotten,
The letter you did not write,
The flowers you did not send, dear,
Are your haunting ghosts at night.*

*The stone you might have lifted
Out of a brother's way;
The bit of heartsome counsel
You were hurried too much to say;
The loving touch of the hand, dear,
The gentle, winning tone
Which you had no time nor thought for
With troubles enough of your own.*

*Those little acts of kindness
So easily out of mind,
Those chances to be angels
Which we poor mortals find~
They come in night and silence,
Each sad, reproachful wraith,
When hope is faint and flagging,
And a chill has fallen on faith.*

*For life is all too short, dear,
And sorrow is all too great,
To suffer our slow compassion
That tarries until too late:
And it isn't the thing you do, dear,
It's the thing you leave undone
Which gives you a bit of heartache
At the setting of the sun.*

I, the LORD, alone probe the mind and test the heart, to reward everyone according to his ways, according to the merit of his deeds (Jer. 17:10).

Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:26-33)

Our Lenten journey is detoured somewhat today as the Church pauses, exactly nine months to the day before the Feast of the Nativity, to observe Gabriel's announcement to Mary.

There is a beautiful story about Gabriel's words to Our Lady, from ***The Golden Legend***, written by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, in 1275:

Of the salutation that the angel brought to the glorious Virgin, we read an example of a noble knight which for to amend his life gave and rendered himself into an abbey of Citeaux, and, for as much as he was no clerk, there was assigned to him a master for to teach him, and to be with the brethren clerks, but he could nothing learn in long time that he was there save these two words: Ave Maria, which words he had so sore imprinted in his heart that always he had them in his mouth wheresoever he was.

At last he died and was buried in the churchyard of the brethren. It happened after, that upon the burials grew a right fair fleur-de-lis, and in every flower was written in letters of gold: Ave Maria, of which miracle all the brethren were marvelled, and they did open the sepulcher, and found that the root of this fleur-de-lis came out of the mouth of the said knight, and anon they understood that our Lord would have him honored for the great devotion that he had to say these words. Ave Maria.

Like the noble knight, let the name of Mary be ever on our lips, but more importantly, let the example of Mary, especially her unwavering acquiescence to the will of God, be ever imitated in our life. Let us say repeatedly by our manner of living: "May it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38b)

Therefore the Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel, which means, "God is with us!" (Is. 7:14, 8:10b)

Monday of the Third Week of Lent

And he said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." (Luke 4: 24-27)

In this passage of the gospel, Jesus continues a previous conversation with the people of his hometown (Nazareth) synagogue. Those in attendance have been marveling at Jesus' words, but are perplexed because they recognized him as Joseph's son, one of their own townspeople, and well-known by them. Jesus notes that it sometimes takes an outsider, a foreigner, to appreciate God's saving action among his people.

There is a story, and it is definitely only a story, that I recall from long ago. I do not remember the source. According to the story, the devils were once successful in taking God captive. Now that they held him prisoner, they caucused about what to do with him so that they could be rid of him forever. One devil suggested they hide him, bound hand and foot, under the deepest rock on the ocean floor. Another, however, disagreed saying, "No, these humans are crafty and ingenious folk. Someday, they will learn about undersea travel and they will voyage to that place, find Him, and set him free." Another devil opined that they should imprison him behind the farthest star in the sky. Again, another devil disagreed saying, "No, these humans are crafty and ingenious folk. Someday, they discover space travel, and fly a mission to the farthest star in the sky where they will unbind God and set Him free and we will right back where we were. A third devil, perhaps the smartest one of all said, "I know. Let's hide Him in the common, ordinary, everyday things of life. Those humans will never think to look for Him there."

That appears to be at least part of the problem in today's gospel. Jesus was too common, too ordinary, too well-known to his own neighbors, that they could not accept him as the Messiah. What is common and ordinary and every day to us, is likewise often not appreciated. The "expert" from fifty miles away merits our attention and brings out the best in us, but those closest to us, family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, remain often unnoticed, unappreciated and unheeded. The challenge for us today is to recognize and heed "the prophet" among us. They truly are the presence of God in our midst with a message from God for us all.

The prophet [Elisha] sent [Naaman] the message: "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will heal, and you will be clean." But Naaman went away angry, saying, "I thought that he would surely come out and stand there to invoke the LORD his God, and would move his hand over the spot, and thus cure the leprosy. Are not the rivers of Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be cleansed?" With this, he turned about in anger and left. But his servants came up and reasoned with him. "My father," they said, "if the prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it? All the more now, since he said to you, 'Wash and be clean,' should you do as he said." So Naaman went down and plunged into the Jordan seven times at the word of the man of God. His flesh became again like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. (2 Kgs 5:10-14)

Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent

Then Peter approaching asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. (Matt. 18: 21-22)

This passage will always remind me of a story told by an Irish priest. It still gives me goosebumps when I think of it.

I know a woman who, throughout her life, has suffered immensely from her husband. He is a drunkard. At least twice a week, he will go out sporting and come home drunk, penniless and often violent. She has suffered five broken bones from him. Moreover, when he is drunk, he often goes after other women and sometimes brings back infections from them.

I say he does these things. That is not quite right. He used to do those things, but not any more. A few months ago, he suffered a severe stroke that left him completely paralyzed down one side of his body, unable to walk, unable to speak, unable to look after himself. Since his stroke, his wife has looked after him devotedly.

I asked her recently how it felt, after the life he had given her, now to have to look after him as an invalid. She said: "Well, Father, when I went to school, we didn't have very good teachers like we do now. So I didn't learn to read or write so good. When I was younger, I used to try to write down all the things he had done to me and count them up. But I found they never added up to seventy-seven."

And I knew at once that I was in the presence of someone who was making her way into the Kingdom a long way ahead of me.

The grace of such forgiveness is in rare supply. However, such forgiveness is absolutely indispensable to becoming an authentic disciple of Christ. Let's look at those grudges and resentments were grasping. Do they really add up to seventy-seven?

With contrite heart and humble spirit let us be received; ... Do not let us be put to shame, but deal with us in your kindness and great mercy (Dan. 3:39, 42)

Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent

Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:19)

You may know that author Mark Twain held religion in disdain. Just two quotes attributed to him clearly indicate his derision:

I am quite sure now that often, very often, in matters concerning religion and politics, a man's reasoning powers are not above the monkey's. - *Mark Twain in Eruption*

Man is kind enough when he is not excited by religion. - *A Horse's Tale*

So it was interesting to read that Church leaders were largely to blame for his becoming hostile to the Bible and the Christian faith. As he grew up, he knew elders and deacons who owned slaves and abused them. He heard men using foul language and saw them practice dishonesty during the week after speaking piously in church on Sunday. He listened to ministers use the Bible to justify slavery. Although he saw genuine love for the Lord Jesus in some people, including his mother and his wife, he was so disturbed by the bad teaching and poor example of church leaders, that he became bitter toward the things of God.

Jesus has harsh words today for those who break the commandments and teach others to do so. It is doubtful that many reading this reflection actually teach disobedience to the commandments. However, offering bad example is probably the most common way that we teach others to do the same. The gospel challenges us to consider what lessons we might unwittingly be teaching others. I am reminded of another quote, but I do not know the source: "Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some people will ever read!"

Therefore, I teach you the statutes and decrees as the LORD, my God, has commanded me, that you may observe them in the land you are entering to occupy. Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, 'This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.' (Deut. 4:5-6)

Thursday of the Third Week of Lent

He was driving out a demon (that was) mute, and when the demon had gone out, the mute person spoke and the crowds were amazed. Some of them said, "By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons." (Luke 11:14-15)

There is an old adage, "no good deed goes unpunished." The gospel for today is a prime example. Jesus cures, and he is accused of being satanic. He performs a good deed, and is adjudged evil.

Human beings are a strange lot. We are quick to judge and often judge unjustly. Jesus knew that firsthand, but he continued to do good. He was called a devil, but he persisted in acting divinely. What an example he gives us for those occasions when our well intentioned deeds are misjudged or misconstrued by others.

A poem attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta sums it up:

ANYWAY

People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.

Love them anyway!

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Do good anyway!

If you are successful, you will win false friends and enemies.

Succeed anyway!

The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway!

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway!

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway!

People really need help but may attack you if you help them.

Help them anyway!

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you've got anyway!

This rather is what I commanded them: Listen to my voice; then I will be your God and you shall be my people. Walk in all the ways that I command you, so that you may prosper. (Jer 7:23)

Friday of the Third Week of Lent

One of the scribes . . . asked him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31)

The gospel reminds us of the centrality of love, love of God and love of neighbor, in the teaching of Christ. An ancient church tradition, recorded by no less than Saint Jerome, records how Saint John the Apostle continued teaching the foundational message given by the Lord.

Saint Jerome relates that when age and weakness finally overtook John at Ephesus, he was no longer able to preach or make long discourses to the people. Nevertheless, John continued to participate in communal worship, carried to the assembly of the faithful by his disciples with great difficulty. When asked for some words of wisdom and inspiration, John addressed his flock consistently with only these words, "My dear children, love one another." When his followers, wearied with hearing constantly the same thing, asked him why he always repeated the same words, he replied, "Because it is the precept of the Lord, and if you comply with it, you do enough." Saint Jerome comments that the answer is worthy of the great Saint John, the favorite disciple of Christ, and which ought to be engraved in characters of gold, or rather to be written in the heart of every Christian.

If we're honest, we too perhaps, must admit that we grow weary of the great commandment to love God and neighbor. However, "***there is no greater commandment than these***" (v. 31b) so we must return to them again and again in our quest to become another Christ. Only when we have done so, have we done enough.

Let him who is wise understand these things; let him who is prudent know them. Straight are the paths of the LORD, in them the just walk, but sinners stumble in them. (Hos 14:10)

Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Now there was a royal official whose son was ill in Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, who was near death. Jesus said to him, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe." The royal official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus said to him, "You may go; your son will live." The man believed what Jesus said to him and left. While he was on his way back, his slaves met him and told him that his boy would live. He asked them when he began to recover. They told him, "The fever left him yesterday, about one in the afternoon." The father realized that just at that time Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live," and he and his whole household came to believe. (John 4:46b-53)

Many years ago Rudyard Kipling addressed the graduating class at McGill University in Montreal. He spoke on this theme: if a person's scale of values is based solely on material wealth, that person will be in difficulty all of his or her life. "Do not pay too much attention to money, or position, or glory," he advised the graduates. "Some day," he continued, "you will meet a person who cares for none of these things. Then you will know how poor you are."

The royal official in today's gospel, I imagine, had no concerns about fame, power or wealth. His status in society and his standing in court assured him of the best things that life had to offer. That was, until however, these things meant nothing in providing for the health of his child. It was then that he realized he needed more, much more. He needed Jesus Christ. The Lord responded to the man's faith and answered his deep, heartfelt need.

This episode reminds us how poor we are without faith in Christ. However, by faith in him, we possess all things worth having.

Lo, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; The things of the past shall not be remembered or come to mind. Instead, there shall always be rejoicing and happiness in what I create; For I create Jerusalem to be a joy and its people to be a delight; I will rejoice in Jerusalem and exult in my people. (Is. 65: 17-19a)

Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep (Gate) a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked. Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." He answered them, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" (John 5:2-11)

Although these reflections are not meant to be a Bible study, there is an interesting fact about verse four of this gospel selection. That particular verse is thought to be a later, non-Johannine addition: ***For [from time to time] an angel of the Lord used to come down into the pool; and the water was stirred up, so the first one to get in [after the stirring of the water] was healed of whatever disease afflicted him.*** The angel was a popular explanation of the turbulence and the healing powers attributed to it. This verse is missing from many translations of the Bible, including the one used for Catholic worship.

When I hear the phrase, "stirred up," I don't think of water, I think of trouble. "Stirring up trouble" is often attributed to a malcontent, a troublemaker, one who challenges the status quo. It may, in some cases, refer appropriately to Jesus.

Perhaps you've heard the saying, "afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted." It was originally coined about a century ago by a writer from Chicago named Finley Peter Dunne. He suggested that it was the job of the journalist to "afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted." In seminary, one of my professors referred to prophets as those who "afflicted the comfortable and comforted the afflicted."

Jesus certainly performs this role in today's gospel. He comforts, and even heals, the cripple of nearly 40 years, and he brazenly confronts the religious leaders who mistakenly thought the Sabbath was not an appropriate occasion for improving the life of another. In a similar way, Jesus challenges us during Lent to conform ourselves to him, while at the same time providing compassion to us in our great need for healing.

In what fashion is he "afflicting" you today? In what way is comforting you?

Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature that can multiply shall live, and there shall be abundant fish, for wherever this water comes the sea shall be made fresh. Along both banks of the river, fruit trees of every kind shall grow; their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail. Every month they shall bear fresh fruit, for they shall be watered by the flow from the sanctuary. Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine." (Ez. 47:9, 12)

Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

And [the Father] gave [the Son] power to exercise judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:27-29)

In Warren Wiersbe's *Meet Yourself in the Psalms*, he tells about a frontier town where a horse bolted and ran away with a wagon carrying a little boy. Seeing the child in danger, a young man risked his life to catch the horse and stop the wagon. The child who was saved grew up to become a lawless man, and one day he stood before a judge to be sentenced for a serious crime. The prisoner recognized the judge as the man who, years before had saved his life; he pleaded for mercy on the basis of that experience. The words from the bench silenced his plea: "Young man, then I was your savior; today I am your judge, and I must sentence you to be hanged."

During Lent, and particularly during Holy Week, we recall the saving events of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Today's gospel reminds us, however, that he is more than Savior, he is also Judge. As judge, Jesus has some harsh words for the Pharisees who refused to honor him as Son of the Father and Lord of even the Sabbath. We dare not repeat those mistakes, but rather seek to honor and obey Jesus in all things and in all ways. Jesus is clear: *those who have done good deeds [will proceed] to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds [will be banished] to the resurrection of condemnation. (v. 29)*

Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. (Is. 49:14-15)

Thursday of the Fourth Week of Lent

How can you believe, when you accept praise from one another and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God? (John 5:44)

In the former coronation of a new successor to St. Peter, at least from the beginning of the 16th century, the newly-elected pope was carried in state through St. Peter's Basilica on a grand chair, under a white canopy, with the papal ceremonial fans to either side. Three times, the procession was stopped and a bundle of flax lashed to a gilded staff was burnt before the newly-elected pontiff. The flax would burst in a brief and sudden flame, while the master of ceremonies proclaimed, "***Pater Sancte, sic transit gloria mundi.***" (Holy Father, thus passes the glory of the world.) This part of the ceremony functioned as a symbolic caution to set aside materialism and vanity. It reminded the new pope that he and all the tangible items around him will soon pass away. His loyalty must be to God's eternal kingdom.

That brief ceremony and today's gospel remind us to work for the praise of God and not the praise of others, to seek the things of heaven and not the things of earth. If our efforts have gotten off track, Lent is the ideal time to get ourselves re-centered and refocused.

With that, the LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once to your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, for they have become depraved. They have soon turned aside from the way I pointed out to them, making for themselves a molten calf and worshiping it, sacrificing to it and crying out, 'This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!' I see how stiff-necked this people is," continued the LORD to Moses. (Exodus 32-7-9)

Friday of the Fourth Week of Lent

So some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, "Is he not the one they are trying to kill? And look, he is speaking openly and they say nothing to him. Could the authorities have realized that he is the Messiah? But we know where he is from. When the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from." (John 7:25-27)

It appears that at least part of the reason the people of his day did not accept Jesus as Messiah was because he was too familiar to them; he was too well known, including his place of origin. To their mind, Jesus couldn't be from God because the people knew with great certainty that he came from Nazareth. The tradition of the time was that the Messiah would appear suddenly and mysteriously.

One of Aesop's Fables tells of a Fox and a Lion. When first the Fox saw the Lion he was terribly frightened, and ran away and hid himself in the woods. The next time, however, that he came near the King of Beasts, the Fox stopped at a safe distance and watched the Lion pass by. Then, the third time they came near one another, the Fox went right up to the Lion and passed the time of day with him, asking him how his family was, and when the Fox should have the pleasure of seeing the Lion again. Later, turning his tail, the Fox parted from the Lion without much ceremony. The moral is: familiarity breeds contempt.

Perhaps Jesus has become too familiar to us, too well known, and too thoroughly understood. When we think we know all about him and his ways, he loses his mysteriousness and his ability to surprise us with new insights and guidance. When we think we have Jesus all figured out, we can be sure that we surely do not as he is constantly revealing himself and his ways to us.

This gospel challenges us to approach the Lord today with an open mind, with a renewed receptivity to what he may be saying, and a different attitude toward what he may be asking of us.

"Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him." These were their thoughts, but they erred; for their wickedness blinded them, and they knew not the hidden counsels of God; neither did they count on a recompense of holiness nor discern the innocent souls' reward. (Wis. 2:20-22)

Monday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:3-7)

In my mind, this particular gospel will always conjure up an old (bad) joke:

Jesus saw a crowd chasing down a woman to stone her and approached them. "What's going on here, anyway?" he asked.

One of the crowd responded, "This woman was found committing adultery and the law says we should stone her!"

"Wait," yelled Jesus, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

Suddenly, a stone was thrown out from the sky, and knocked the woman on the side of her head.

"Aw, c'mon, Dad ... " Jesus cried, "I'm trying to make a point here!"

It is interesting to consider speculation about exactly what Jesus was writing on the ground in the context of today's gospel. One author conjectured that he was doodling, such was his boredom and lack of interest in the judgment of the woman that was going on around him. Another author opined that Jesus was writing the sins of the scribes and Pharisees who were so anxious to publicize the woman's sin. Whatever it was, we will never know because the scripture writer did not deem it worthy to be included in this account. However, between the writing and the challenge to cast the first stone, Jesus' response was enough to scatter the crowd that had gathered.

Whatever the particulars are, it is obvious Jesus does not want to get involved in dwelling on the woman's sinfulness and will not suffer gladly those who do. He is all about forgiveness and an admonition to do better.

Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more." (v. 11)

He has given us an example; we should not be so concerned with the sins of others as with our own. Furthermore, we should focus our attention on avoiding sin rather than calling attention to the sins of others. Even with only two weeks left, that is an ideal Lenten practice for us all.

The whole assembly cried aloud, blessing God who saves those that hope in him. (Dan 13:60)

Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

So Jesus said (to them), "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing on my own, but I say only what the Father taught me. The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him." (John 8:28-29)

Perhaps you've heard the song, ***You'll Never Walk Alone***. It is a show tune from the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel*. In the musical's second act, Nettie Fowler, the cousin of the female protagonist Julie Jordan, sings this song to comfort and encourage Julie when her husband, Billy Bigelow, the male lead, kills himself to avoid capture during a failed robbery. The lyrics are:

*When you walk through a storm
Keep your chin up high
And don't be afraid of the dark.
At the end of the storm
Is a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark.*

*Walk on through the wind,
Walk on through the rain,
Tho' your dreams be tossed and blown.
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone,
You'll never walk alone.*

In today's gospel, in the passage quoted above, Jesus makes reference to his impending crucifixion (***when you lift up the Son of Man***) as not his own will, but the will of the one who sent him, the Father. Even in this coming tragedy, Jesus asserts that the Father is with him; the Father will never abandon him.

What a wonderful lesson for us. It is in our difficult times that we think God has abandoned us. The example of Jesus instructs otherwise. In our storms, when we are tossed and turned, we can remain hopeful. Truly, when we walk with the Lord, we never walk alone.

So Moses prayed for the people, and the LORD said to Moses, "Make a saraph and mount it on a pole, and if anyone who has been bitten looks at it, he will recover." (Num. 21:7b-8)

Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Jesus then said to those Jews who believed in him, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)

Many years ago, I recall reading a story told by Father Edward Hays in his "Forest Letter." It concerned a man in earnest and diligent search for the Truth. He looked in all the normal places, churches, schools, monasteries and libraries, but had nearly given up with no success. He found himself one day on a mountain, near the entrance to a cave. The most distasteful figure he had ever seen appeared in front of him. The person's hair was oily and matted, with darkened skin wrinkled and leathery, blotched and pitted, eyes sunk deep in their sockets with dark circles all around, a long pointed nose, greenish teeth, long bony fingers with blackened nails. The man quickly tried to depart, but the figure beckoned saying, "Come inside, and I will teach you the Truth."

The man accepted the invitation and spent a year in the cave learning eternal verities. When it came time for the man to return to his former life, he asked if he could somehow repay the favor of his instruction in the Truth. This most unattractive creature responded, "Yes. When you return to your family and friends, and you tell them about me, tell them . . . tell them I was beautiful."

The story did not provide a moral as some of the fables do, but I suspect the the moral is that beauty, real beauty, has very little to do with outward appearances. Beauty has to do with the human heart and the human mind, much more than the human body. A human being who taught and lived and espoused the truth is beautiful indeed. More broadly, the truth is not always visible to the human eye, nor to human reason and understanding.

In the gospel for today, the Jews were not receptive to the truth from God as revealed in Jesus. They insisted on clinging to the superficial truth as they saw it. Consequently, they were on a collision course with the Son of God.

Let us attune our minds and our hearts on the truth that comes from God, eternal truth--the truth of faith, even when it opposes our senses.

King Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who sent his angel to deliver the servants that trusted in him; they disobeyed the royal command and yielded their bodies rather than serve or worship any god except their own God." (Dan 3:95)

Thursday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad. So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM." (John 8:56-58)

A certain theological joke has been making the rounds of the Internet:

Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and James Cone [all theological "heavy-hitters"] find themselves all at the same time at Caesarea Philippi. Who should come along but Jesus, and he asks the four famous theologians the same Christological question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Karl Barth stands up and says: "You are the ***totaliter aliter***, the vestigious ***trinitatum*** who speaks to us in the modality of Christo-monism."

Not prepared for Barth's brevity, Paul Tillich stumbles out: "You are he who heals our ambiguities and overcomes the split of angst and existential estrangement; you are he who speaks of the theonomous viewpoint of the ***analogia entis***, the analogy of our being and the ground of all possibilities."

Reinhold Niebuhr gives a cough for effect and says, in one breath: "You are the impossible possibility who brings to us, your children of light and children of darkness, the overwhelming oughtness in the midst of our fraught condition of estrangement and brokenness in the contiguity and existential anxieties of our ontological relationships."

Finally James Cone gets up, and raises his voice: "You are my Oppressed One, my soul's shalom, the One who was, who is, and who shall be, who has never left us alone in the struggle, the event of liberation in the lives of the oppressed struggling for freedom, and whose blackness is both literal and symbolic."

And Jesus writes in the sand, "Huh?"

It is very telling that when Jesus names himself to those who oppose him, he identifies himself as I AM. This is the same name that God uses for Himself when He speaks to Moses. Theologians and non-theologians alike have tried for centuries to identify God, to name God, but non can do it as well as Jesus: God is WHO IS. Period. Anything else used to describe God is both superfluous and redundant. Such is the enormity of God and the minimalism of humanity compared to God. How can we do other than to be humbled before Him?

God also said to Abraham: "On your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages." (Gen. 17:9)

Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent

The Jews again picked up rocks to stone him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of these are you trying to stone me?" (John 10:31-32)

Two monks were washing their bowls in the river when they noticed a scorpion that was drowning. One monk immediately scooped it up and set it upon the bank. In the process he was stung. He went back to washing his bowl and again the scorpion fell in. The monk saved the scorpion and was again stung. This happened several more times. The other monk finally asked him, "Brother, why do you continue to save the scorpion when you know it is going to sting?" "Just because the scorpion's nature is to sting," the monk replied, "I will not abandon my nature to save."

Once again, in today's gospel, Jesus is met with misunderstanding, derision and hatred. Nevertheless, he persists in his mission, in his God-given task of salvation, even to the agony of the cross. His example challenges us: how do we respond when our good works and laudable intentions are met with less than appreciation and gratitude. Just because it is someone else's decision to rebuke and criticize, that is no reason to abandon the divine commandment to love.

Yes, I hear the whisperings of many: "Terror on every side! Denounce! let us denounce him!" All those who were my friends are on the watch for any misstep of mine. "Perhaps he will be trapped; then we can prevail, and take our vengeance on him." But the LORD is with me, like a mighty champion: my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph. In their failure they will be put to utter shame, to lasting, unforgettable confusion. (Jer. 20:10-11)

Monday of Holy Week

Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Then Judas the Iscariot, one (of) his disciples, and the one who would betray him, said, "Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days' wages and given to the poor?" (John 12:3-5)

There is a wonderful story by the name of ***Babette's Feast***, by Isak Dineson. Two sisters operate a small Danish church founded by their now dead pastor-father. The congregation dwindled to eleven sour-faced, self-righteous, elderly people filled with pride and suspicious of each other. One night Babette arrives at the door of the sisters. She is a refugee from France bearing a letter of recommendation from an old friend of the sisters. The letter simply says, "Babette can cook."

Babette ends up staying 14 years with the sisters, cleaning and cooking for her room and board. Then comes the exciting news that a lottery ticket, which a friend in France has renewed for her every year, has won a big prize. Babette proceeds to prepare an elaborate feast for church members, all at her won expense. Babette treats them all to an incredible, gourmet dinner of turtle soup, caviar, quail, pastries, champagne and rare aged wine. At the feast, Babette reveals that she was once chef at a world-renowned cafe in Paris, and she has spent her entire winnings on the feast.

The gourmet dinner has a transforming effect. The amazing feast creates an environment in which old feuds are settled, friendship and love are rekindled, and genuine fellowship is experienced.

At the center of our gospel story is a similar gesture by another woman: Mary and her extravagant gift of anointing Jesus' feet. In her service to Jesus, interpreted by Jesus to be preparation for his impending burial, she foreshadows Jesus' washing of the apostles' feet at the Last Supper.

At the center of our own personal story ought to be similar elaborately generous acts of loving kindness like the ones we will remember later this week on Holy Thursday Good Friday.

Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit. (Isaiah 42:1a)

Tuesday of Holy Week

When he had said this, Jesus was deeply troubled and testified, "Amen, amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me." [John] leaned back against Jesus' chest and said to him, "Master, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I hand the morsel after I have dipped it." So he dipped the morsel and (took it and) handed it to Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot. After he took the morsel, Satan entered him. So Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." So he took the morsel and left at once. And it was night. (John 13:21, 25-26, 30)

And it was night. These last four words of verse 30 intrigue me. It is as if the evangelist wants to be very clear that darkness reigned at this crucial juncture in Jesus' life. It reminds us to be children of the light and not children of darkness, to live our lives in the daytime and not in night, in brightness and not in the shadows.

Barbara Hug has written a nice story entitled, *The Given Light*:

Once upon a time a man had heard, that in a foreign place, far away, there was a holy flame burning. So he got up and left his home to find the holy flame and bring some of its light back home to his house. He thought: 'When I have this light, then I will have happiness and life and all the people I love will have it too.'

He traveled far, far away and finally found the holy flame, with which he lit his light. On his way back he had only one worry: 'That his light could go out.'

On his way home he met someone who was freezing and didn't have any fire and who begged him to give him some of his fire. The man with the light hesitated for a moment. Wasn't his light too precious, too holy to be given away for something ordinary like that? Despite these doubts, he decided to give some of his light to the one who was freezing in the darkness.

The man continued his journey home and when he had almost reached his house a terrible thunderstorm started. He tried to protect his light from the rain and the storm, but at the end his light went out.

To return the long way back to the place where the holy flame was burning was impossible, he wouldn't have had enough strength to go back this far - but he was strong enough to return to the human being whom he had helped on his way home.

...and with his light he could light his own again.

James Matthew Barrie said, "Those who bring sunshine to the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves. I suspect Jesus might say, "Those who bring the light of Christ to others cannot keep it from themselves."

I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth, (Isaiah 49:6b)

Wednesday of Holy Week

Then one of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver, and from that time on he looked for an opportunity to hand him over. (Matthew 26:14-16)

Megan McKenna relates a poignant story that still gives me goosebumps whenever I re-read it. It seems particularly appropriate for this "Spy Wednesday," as Wednesday of Holy Week is sometimes called because the gospel reading for the day is that of Judas' betrayal. This story is from McKenna's book, ***Lent: The Daily Readings***.

When I was in Ireland a few years ago I was driving on a back country road and listening to the radio. There had been a short-story writing contest. To make the contest more of a challenge, the story was limited to around thirty words. They were reading some of the entries over the radio, and I was half listening, concentrating more on driving on the correct side of the road and not running into the stone walls that seemed all too close. Then this story was read.

Welcome home, son!
Hello, father.
It is so good to see you. It's been a long time.
Yes, father, a very long time. It was hard.
Hard as nails. Hard as wood.
I know, what was the hardest?
The kiss, Father, the kiss. *(long pause)*
Yes. Come in and let me hold you.

I nearly drove off the road. Within seconds I was crying and had to pull over. It hit me hard. I was overwhelmed by the realization that sin is evil and terrible, but some sin is more evil and more terrible: the sin of those who claim to be friends, disciples, companions. My sin, and the sin of the communities I was part of, the sin of the church were the most devastating of all, like that kiss.

During Holy Week, we often focus on the physical suffering of Jesus, but the emotional suffering may have been worse. If we've ever been betrayed by a friend, we have a glimpse of the mental anguish and pain endured by Jesus. And by our own small betrayals of him, our sins, we have added to his suffering.

I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. (Isaiah 50:6)

Holy Thursday – Mass of the Lord’s Supper

He rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. When he had washed their feet (and) put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." (John 13:4-5, 12-15)

Lawrence Lew, OP, has made an interesting comment regarding Jesus' washing of feet. He noted that while travelers customarily had the dust washed off their feet when they entered a home, Christ and his companions had already sat down for supper; the expected moment for foot-washing had passed. So, Christ's action at this point of the supper is indeed puzzling.

We're probably familiar with Jesus' washing of feet as a sign of Christ's humble, loving service, which we are then called to imitate. However, rather than to just look at what Christ did, Lew suggests that perhaps we should consider what Christ washed: feet.

Feet are often taken for granted, and some of us might even be ashamed of them. Certainly many parishioners who have been asked to have their feet washed at the Holy Thursday Mass have experienced embarrassment at revealing their foot. Perhaps Christ washes our feet as a sign that we should not be afraid to reveal to him even those things of which we are most ashamed, those secret sins and shameful deeds need to be surrendered to Christ. Then, he can wash us clean, removing our shame with his love. He restores the shameful parts of our lives to their proper beauty, and he kisses them, imparting the Holy Spirit to fill our lives.

Feet are also vitally important if we're to stand upright as ***homo sapiens***, and to walk. Jesus washes our feet so that we might stand tall, walk and be sent. The feet are the tools, so to speak, of the messenger, of the apostle. Since Christ sends us, his disciples, out as heralds of the Gospel, so, in preparation for this, he washes our feet.

Nourished by the Eucharist, also a key element in the Holy Thursday drama, we are sent! Walk proud and spread the Good News!

This is how you are to eat it: with your loins girt, sandals on your feet and your staff in hand, you shall eat like those who are in flight. It is the Passover of the LORD. (Exodus 12:11)

Good Friday

When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, "It is finished." And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit. (John 19:30)

A Father's Excruciating Decision - source unknown

There was a Pastor, who after the usual Sunday evening hymns, stood up, walked over to the pulpit and, before he gave his sermon for the evening, briefly introduced a guest minister who was in service that evening. In the introduction, the Pastor told the congregation that the guest minister was one of his dearest childhood friends and that he wanted him to have a few moments to greet the church and share whatever he felt would be appropriate for the service. With that, an elderly man stepped up to the pulpit and began to speak.

"A father, his son, and a friend of his were sailing off of the Pacific Coast," He began, "When a fast approaching storm blocked any attempt to get back to shore. The waves were so high, that even though the father was an experienced sailor, he could not keep the boat upright and the three were swept into the ocean as the boat capsized." The old man hesitated for a moment, making eye contact with two teenagers who were, for the first time since the service began, looking somewhat interested in his story.

The aged minister continued with his story, "Grabbing a rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life: to which boy he would throw the other end of the lifeline. He only had seconds to make the decision. The father knew that his son was a Christian and he also knew that his son's friend was not. The agony of his decision could not be matched by the torrent of waves.

"As the father yelled out, 'I love you son!' He threw out the lifeline to his son's friend. By the time the father had pulled the friend back to the capsized boat, his son had disappeared beneath the raging swells into the black of the night. His body was never recovered." By this time, the two teenagers were sitting up straight in the pew, anxiously waiting for the next words to come out of the old minister's mouth.

"The father," he continued, "knew his son would step into eternity with Jesus and could not bear the thought of his son's friend stepping into eternity without Jesus. Therefore, he sacrificed his son to save his son's friend..."

With that the old man turned and sat back down in his chair as silence filled the room. The Pastor again walked slowly to the pulpit and delivered a brief sermon. Within minutes after the service ended, the two teenagers were at the old man's side.

"That was a nice story," politely stated the boys. "But I don't think it was realistic for a father to give up his son's life in hopes that the other boy would become a Christian."

"Well, you've got a point there," the old man replied glancing down at the worn Bible. A big smile broadened his narrow face, he once again looked up at the boys and said, "It sure isn't realistic, is it? But I'm standing today to tell you that the story gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God to give up His only son for me. You see, I was the father and your Pastor was my son's friend."

Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth; Like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth. Oppressed and condemned, he was taken away, and who would have thought any more of his destiny? When he was cut off from the land of the living, and smitten for the sin of his people, a grave was assigned him among the wicked and a burial place with evildoers, Though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood. (Isaiah 53:7-9)

Holy Saturday

An Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday, is a sermon written by an unknown writer. It refers to the part of the Apostle's Creed that "He [Jesus] descended into Hell." According to church tradition, after dying on Good Friday, Jesus descended to the depths of the dead to preach His message to them, liberating all holy men and women from the past. This homily from antiquity recounts Jesus', the Second Adam, interaction with Adam.

"What is happening? Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still, because God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages. God has died in the flesh, and the underworld has trembled.

Truly he goes to seek out our first parent like a lost sheep; he wishes to visit those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. He goes to free the prisoner Adam and his fellow-prisoner Eve from their pains, he who is God, and Adam's son.

The Lord goes in to them holding his victorious weapon, his cross. When Adam, the first created man, sees him, he strikes his breast in terror and calls out to all: 'My Lord be with you all.' And Christ in reply says to Adam: 'And with your spirit.' And grasping his hand he raises him up, saying: 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.

'I am your God, who for your sake became your son, who for you and your descendants now speak and command with authority those in prison: Come forth, and those in darkness: Have light, and those who sleep: Rise.

'I command you: Awake, sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead; I am the life of the dead. Arise, O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence; for you in me and I in you, together we are one undivided person.

'For you, I your God became your son; for you, I the Master took on your form; that of slave; for you, I who am above the heavens came on earth and under the earth; for you, man, I became as a man without help, free among the dead; for you, who left a garden, I was handed over to Jews from a garden and crucified in a garden.

'Look at the spittle on my face, which I received because of you, in order to restore you to that first divine inbreathing at creation. See the blows on my cheeks, which I accepted in order to refashion your distorted form to my own image.

'See the scourging of my back, which I accepted in order to disperse the load of your sins which was laid upon your back. See my hands nailed to the tree for a good purpose, for you, who stretched out your hand to the tree for an evil one.

'I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side, for you, who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side healed the pain of your side; my sleep will release you from your sleep in Hades; my sword has checked the sword which was turned against you.

'But arise, let us go hence. The enemy brought you out of the land of paradise; I will reinstate you, no longer in paradise, but on the throne of heaven. I denied you the tree of life, which was a figure, but now I myself am united to you, I who am life. I posted the cherubim to guard you as they would slaves; now I make the cherubim worship you as they would God.

"The cherubim throne has been prepared, the bearers are ready and waiting, the bridal chamber is in order, the food is provided, the everlasting houses and rooms are in readiness; the treasures of good things have been opened; the kingdom of heaven has been prepared before the ages."

Easter Sunday

When the angel said to the women in reply, "Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.' Behold, I have told you." (Matt. 28:5-7)

I would not expect anyone to recognize the name of Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin. However, during his day, he was as powerful a man as there was on earth. As a Russian Communist leader, he took part in the Bolshevik Revolution 1917, was editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda and was a full member of the Politburo. His books and articles on economics and political science are still read today.

Bukharin traveled from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity hurling insults, argument, and proof against it. An hour later, he was finished. He looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of men's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded.

Deafening silence filled the auditorium for some time. Then one man dared approach the platform and mounted the lectern standing near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left then to the right. Finally, he shouted the ancient Easter greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "Christ is risen!" En masse, the crowd arose as one man. The response came crashing like the sound of thunder: "He is risen indeed!"

To this day, many people, various circumstances and numerous challenges test our belief in the Resurrection. When confronted thus, we, too, can say,

"Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed!"

