

December 31, 2007

# Weekday Homily Helps

Monday—7th Day in the Christmas Octave

**Theme:** Sing to the Lord a new song.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Jn 2:18-21 (204)

Rev. Timothy P. Schehr

Thus far in the letter John has been urging his readers to walk in the light of Christ. Now he urges them to allow nothing to distract them away from the truth they have in Jesus Christ. The precise concerns that gave rise to this letter are not easy to identify. But it is clear the trouble was generated by members within the community rather than by outsiders, as was the case with some of Paul's communities.

John introduces a sense of urgency into the letter with his assertion that it is the last hour, his term for the span of time between the Lord's resurrection and the Lord's coming at the end of time. In that span of time the Lord's children face a great challenge. The world around them, though passing away, can become an obstacle to their spiritual progress. Obsession with the things of the world can blind people to spiritual values. John does not want that to happen to his fellow believers. This is one reason for his writing this letter.

John's title for people who have allowed the world to steer them away from God is *antichrists*, "those who counter the anointed one (Christ)." By the time John writes, these antichrists have left the community. John is not surprised. He explains that if they had really belonged to the community, they would have stayed. But he seems to fear that members still within the community might fall victim to their influence. So John encourages them with the assertion that they have a special connection with Christ because, like the Anointed One, they have an anointing, too—the anointing of the Holy Spirit given them on the occasion of their entrance into the church. The Holy Spirit strengthens them with the truth. Among the aspects of this truth John would certainly identify their being children of God, their being destined for eternal life, and their loving one another as Christ loved them. John explains that he does not presume to inform them about the truth. He knows they already have it. He wants to reassure them they do have it so that no lie can work its way into their minds and weaken their attachment to the Lord.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Jn 1:1-18 (204)

Rev. Timothy P. Schehr

With its accent on God's Word, together with the light and life it brings, this Prologue to John's Gospel unmistakably echoes the creation account of Genesis. No doubt John wanted his readers to appreciate the depth of God's love for humanity that was always there from the beginning.

A great deal of good—also a theme of the creation account—permeates the initial paragraphs of the Prologue. Through the Word all created things come into existence. Through the Word light and life are made accessible to the men and women of the earth. Through the Word darkness is defeated never to overcome the light. And the light has no less a herald than John the Baptist, a man sent from God to invite everyone to believe because of his testimony.

But there are also hints of resistance in the Prologue. We are told the darkness has not overcome the light. But we may conclude from this that the darkness intended to overcome it. Then there is the announcement that the world did not know the light that came into the world. This is unexpected given the fact that just verses earlier we were told that without exception all things came to be through the Word of God that brings this life and light. How could it be that the Word would not be accepted by the very people so graciously brought into the world through its power? This startling announcement prepares the reader for a dynamic that permeates the entire Gospel. Jesus, the Word of God come into the world, will continually invite people to listen to his message but they will often resist it.

John also includes the good news that there were people who did accept the Word. God gave them the power to become children of God, born not through the conventional ways of the world but from above because of their faithful response to the Word. John will present us with example after example of this. And we will be moved to respond favorably to the Word ourselves.

The Word became flesh precisely to offer humanity this wonderful gift of becoming children of God and thereby gaining, as John declares later, eternal life. Those who address us in this portion of the Prologue declare that they saw "the glory as of the Father's only-begotten Son." Successive chapters seem to suggest that John uses the word *glory* to express all that the Father and Son do to lead men and women to salvation and to eternal life.

## Homily Suggestion

Joanmarie Smith, C.S.J.

The responsorial psalm for most of this week, Psalm 98, begins with command, "Sing to the Lord a new song." But we associate today, New Year's Eve, with an old song, "Auld Lang Syne." The melody is from an old Scots folk song and the words go back at least to the poem by Robert Burns in the eighteenth century and is probably based on an even earlier poem. *Auld Lang Syne* literally translates as "old long since." In more common language, it means, "the good old days." There is, therefore, a poignancy to the song, a recognition of the fleetingness of time. Sadder still is the suggestion that the best times are behind us.

The good news is literally The Good News today. The Gospel sounds a wholly different melody. Those who remember the liturgy before Vatican II may remember that these opening words of John's Gospel were read at every Mass just before the final blessing. Because it recounts the entire story of salvation, beginning before creation, reminds us that we are living in the good old days. The Word was made flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have been called to be children of God, we have seen his glory.

January 1, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Tuesday—Mary, Mother of God

**Theme:** Mother of God.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, Nm 6:22-27 (18)

Rev. Timothy P. Schehr

After nearly a year at the base of Mt. Sinai, the Israelites prepare to set out for the Promised Land. When they arrived at God's mountain after the exodus they were disorganized and filled with memories of Egypt. Now they are organized with a precise order of march and encampment—and they are committed to God through the covenant. Clearly they have every advantage to make a successful journey.

Already God has blessed them in many ways. God delivered them from oppression in Egypt, nourished them with bread from heaven, provided them with water from the rock, and protected them from their enemies. All of this demonstrates that God is the perfect covenant partner for Israel. One further demonstration of this is the text of the special blessing included in this reading.

God gives Aaron and his sons the privilege of pronouncing this blessing over the people as well as the privilege of speaking the divine name. Three times the divine name appears in the blessing; three times God's favor is bestowed on them. Each line of the blessing seems to intensify the benevolence God extends to the people. The blessing concludes with the word *shalom*, which denotes well-being, prosperity, health and security.

The image of God's face shining on the people may bring to mind all the benefits that sunlight brings to this earth—scattering darkness, providing warmth, bringing things to life. But the divine light offers immeasurable benefits besides, since it illuminates the mind and the heart as well.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Lk 2:16-21 (18)

Rev. Timothy P. Schehr

This passage begins with the shepherds hurrying to the city of David anxious to confirm the message received from the messenger of God. They were told a Savior was born to them and that proof of it would be their discovery of the child in a manger. As Luke records it, we see the discovery as if through the eyes of the shepherds. First they see Mary and Joseph, then they see the child in the manger just as the messenger of God had told them. In their amazement at this truth they recount to Mary and Joseph all the angel had told them about the child being the Savior and the Lord's Anointed (Lk 2:11).

Shepherds would not have recognized that the child was born to *them* if they had found the child surrounded by all

the riches of a royal household. But they would recognize a child born to them if that child were lying in so familiar a thing as a manger. Did they recall the words of Isaiah? In Isaiah's opening oracle God is astonished that ox and ass know to go to a manger to be nourished but the people of Israel do not know they need to go to God. But now shepherds gather around a manger holding the Savior of the world who will nourish the world to life.

It is also significant that the messenger of heaven first announces the news to shepherds since "Shepherd" is a title for God reaching all the way back to the age of the patriarchs (Gn 49:24). And of course Jesus will speak of himself as the Good Shepherd who leads his sheep to safe pastures.

Luke tells us Mary treasured these things in her heart and reflected on them. We have already heard her testimony about God's ways in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). She declared that God had done great things for her. She will see so many more great things accomplished by her Son.

The shepherds return to their fields giving glory and praise to God. This is the ideal response to the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. Unfortunately it will not always be the response from people within this Gospel.

When the ritual of circumcision is carried out for the child, making him a member of God's chosen people, they give him the name *Jesus* in compliance with the word of God expressed through the angel. Such obedience to God's word is the ideal.

## Homily Suggestion

Joanmarie Smith, C.S.J.

Perhaps it is apocryphal, but the story persists of potential converts who came to their instruction in Catholicism believing that all the different titles of Mary referred in fact to different women. So, Our Lady of Lourdes was a different person from Our Lady of Guadalupe. Perhaps the confusion is understandable. But once one appreciates what underlies all these titles the confusion clears. It is the reality we celebrate today and every time we say the Hail Mary. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us..."

Every doctrine about Our Blessed Mother really refers to a doctrine about Christ. In the fifth century, Bishop Nestorius taught that Mary was the Mother of Christ because he thought that there were two persons in Jesus, a human person and a divine person and that Mary was the mother of the human person. To him it seemed outrageous to call Mary the Mother of God. But an ecumenical council thought otherwise and insisted that the title Mother of God was appropriate because it preserved the recognition that Jesus had a human nature and a divine nature. A hundred years later another council declared that Jesus the Christ is one person who is truly human and truly God. Mary is the mother of that one person.

Another misunderstanding found among those unfamiliar with the faith is that we Catholics worship Mary, that we pray to her. But of course we recognize that Mary is human and we ask for her prayers, her intercession, the way we might ask Mrs. Jones down the block to pray for our intentions. But unlike Mrs. Jones, holy though she may be, when we ask Mary to pray for us, we are asking the very Mother of God to remember us.

January 2, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Wednesday—Basil and Gregory

**Theme:** Birds of a feather.

## Exegesis of the first reading, 1 Jn 2:22-28 (205)

*Rev. Timothy P. Schehr*

Who is the liar? With this question John takes up again his caution to the children of God: They must be wary of influences that would draw them away from their commitment to the Lord. They must recognize the lie in any position that would cast doubts on who Jesus is and what he accomplished for the world. Jesus brought to fulfillment the saving plan of his heavenly Father. As Jesus declared so clearly, "My Father is at work until now, and I am at work as well...whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise..." (Jn 5:17-19). Just as the Father has been working out the plan of salvation from the beginning, so, too, has Jesus.

That John must assert this in his letter suggests that the people he calls "antichrists" were not willing to recognize Jesus as the Son of God sent into this world to redeem it. It seems they could not accept the idea that God would enter into this human world so intimately as to become one with humanity even to the point of suffering and dying on the cross for our salvation.

John declares that this is the truth the children of God have heard "from the beginning," by which he means from the moment the gospel was first proclaimed to them. John speaks of their "remaining" in the Son and in the Father, echoing the words of Jesus to his apostles in the Fourth Gospel. John reminds them also of the promise Jesus made that eternal life awaited those who believed in him. John assures his readers that this promise from the Lord will be fulfilled if only their hearts remain loyal to him. John is confident they can do this because they received their own anointing from the Christ, the Anointed One, when they accepted the faith. They have the teachings of the Holy Spirit to protect them from the teachings of the antichrists.

John urges his readers to remain in the Lord and in the truth they have from his gift of the Holy Spirit. And when the Lord reveals himself at his coming at the end of time they will have no need to step back in fear for having welcomed a lie in place of the truth.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Jn 1:19-28 (205)

*Rev. Timothy P. Schehr*

The Prologue told us of John the Baptist's testimony to the light. Now we hear the details of that testimony. Officials in religion arrive at the site of John's baptizing, Bethany across the Jordan. Their assignment, from authorities in Jerusalem,

is to find out who he is. Their questions have the ring of an official inquiry. The author takes special notice of the fact that John did not deny who he was.

John's response is at first puzzling. Instead of telling them who he is, as we expect, he announces who he is not. He is not being cautious here, but fulfilling the mission given him by God. He was sent to give testimony to the light. John immediately directs their attention to the Christ. John's examiners should seek more information about the Christ. But they do not. They are not interested in John's message.

The priests and Levites wonder if John is Elijah or the prophet. But John does not accept such titles. He remains focused on his mission to direct their attention to the one who comes after him. They are just as focused on their own mission. They must give some answer to their superiors. Their loyalty to earthly authorities distracts them from the spiritual path John seeks to point out to them.

When they ask what John has to say about himself, John responds with a citation from Isaiah. He is the voice in the wilderness challenging people to prepare the way of the Lord. In the text of Isaiah it is the way that is in the wilderness rather than the voice. But John reconfigures the text to apply more directly to himself and once again to direct the attention of his inquisitors to the Lord.

Later some Pharisees arrive and wonder why John baptizes. Once again John's response shifts the conversation away from him and toward the one who comes after him. If those around him are truly listening they should start asking about the Lord. But they do not recognize Christ the Lord, they show no interest in him, even though the Word brings life and light to humanity.

This Gospel holds up the Baptist as the ideal witness to Jesus. He never allows his personal interests to interfere with his mission, something the apostles will struggle with for some time before they, too, become witnesses to the Lord.

## Homily Suggestion

*Joanmarie Smith, C.S.J.*

"We have all heard the expression, "Birds of a feather flock together." And if they are blessed, they become friends. You may also have heard of this expression, "Life made us sisters (brothers, cousins, etc.) but love made us friends." Today's saints and today's Gospel illustrate both these expressions. Practically everybody in Basil's family was recognized as a saint. (This was, of course, when sanctity was attributed to someone by public acclamation, before the rigorous process used today.) St. Basil and St. Gregory met at school and became friends united by their interest in theology and spirituality. Their friendship had some stormy periods, but they remained close enough for Gregory to give the eulogy at Basil's death.

We know that Jesus and John were cousins; we can conclude that love made them friends. In today's Gospel we hear that the most intimate mystery of Jesus was revealed to John. His mother, Elizabeth, must have shared the details of the visitation of Mary with her son. John knows Jesus is special. Jesus knew that John was special, too.

Today's Mass should renew the appreciation of our friends. As we continue the Eucharist, let us include in our thanksgiving those with whom we have shared special bonds of love.

January 3, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Thursday—Christmas Weekday

**Theme:** Let Jesus be Jesus.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Jn 2:29–3:6 (206)

*Rev. Timothy P. Schehr*

In the verses immediately preceding this reading, John urged his readers to remain loyal to the truth they accepted from the beginning when they became believers. That truth holds for them the promise of eternal life with God in heaven. When Jesus comes in glory at the end of time they will be able to confidently draw near rather than step back for having accepted a lie over the truth. Now John moves from knowledge to action. He begins by drawing the attention of his readers to the holiness of God.

Being holy like God was the calling of ancient Israel in the days of their covenant with God at Sinai. It remains the calling of the new Israel. But the members of John's community have the added advantage of having seen the holiness of God reflected in the love of Jesus, who empowered those who accepted him to become children of God (Jn 1:12). John reminds them of this love the Father has extended to them in giving them the privilege of being called children of God.

But being children of God in this world is not easy. The world, blinded by its pride and ambition, does not recognize God's children—any more than it recognized Jesus when he walked among us. Nevertheless, believers should find encouragement in being called children of God. And they have even greater privileges to anticipate in the eternal life promised to them. They can scarcely imagine what it will be like to see God as God is.

With such gifts available to them both now and in the world to come believers have every reason to keep themselves free from sin, reflecting in their own lives the holiness of God. Furthermore John's faithful community knows that the reason Jesus came into this world was to take away sins. Why then would they make the mistake of allowing the lawlessness of sin to rule their lives again once they have knowledge of the Lord? In John's view, anyone who chooses lawlessness simply cannot have seen Jesus or known him.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Jn 1:29-34 (206)

*Rev. Timothy P. Schehr*

In the account just previous to this one several groups approached John the Baptist. Their purpose was not, as it should have been, to listen to his testimony about the Lord. Instead they came to inquire about his identity and about his reason for baptizing. But now another comes toward John who is totally different from the others. God reveals to the

Baptist that this is the one he came to serve.

John immediately announces Jesus is the Lamb of God. The full significance of this unique title is revealed in the closing chapters of the Gospel when Jesus is crucified at the time of the slaughtering of the lambs on the eve of Passover. But the sacrifice of Jesus will atone not for the sins of one but for the sins of all.

Already John declared to some disbelievers that there was one coming after him whose sandal strap he was not worthy to untie. Now he explains that the Lamb of God ranks ahead of him because he existed before him. Readers will recall the text of the Prologue which declared that the Word was with God in the beginning and that it was through the Word that all was created.

Twice John admits that he did not know this one. His identity could not be grasped by mere human insight. But God gave John the sign by which he would know him. John would see the Spirit come down on him and remain on him. At the end of the reading John affirms that he has seen him and now testifies that he is the Son of God.

Of course, the Spirit of God came down on others, most notably Samson, Saul, and David. But given their choices in life it is quite clear the Spirit did not always remain on them. In Saul's case it is specifically noted that the Spirit of God departed from him (1 Sm 16:14). What distinguished Jesus from all the rest is that the Spirit comes down upon him and remains upon him. All his words and all his actions will fulfill the Father's plan of salvation. Furthermore, Jesus has the power to baptize others with the Holy Spirit as he will announce to his apostles at the Last Supper (Jn 16:13).

John likens the appearance of the Spirit to a dove from the sky. The image seems to evoke grace and benevolence. As Jesus declares throughout the gospel, he has come to give life to those who believe in him.

## Homily Suggestion

*Joanmarie Smith, C.S.J.*

As the presidential election heats up, we sometimes hear the expression, "Let the candidate be himself." There is the perception that the handlers or consultants are fearful that the candidate, left to his own devices, would put forth a plan or project that would surprise us. The implication is that the electorate does not like surprises. But that implication is not limited to our voting habits. We are all inclined to label or typecast others—including our family and friends. No matter how positive our labels are, they have the effect of limiting the possibility of our family or friends surprising us.

In today's Gospel, John allows himself to be surprised by Jesus. He knew Jesus was special; his mother, Elizabeth, had surely shared that with him. His first surprise was that Jesus presents himself for John's baptism with water, since he realized that Jesus was more special than he, John, was. Then he realizes that Jesus is far more than he ever had imagined. He admits that he did not recognize the profoundly unique nature of Jesus. Now if John the Baptist was surprised by Jesus, how much more do we have to be concerned that we let Jesus surprise us. In other words we have to let Jesus be Jesus in our lives.

January 4, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Friday—Elizabeth Seton

**Theme:** We are all natural evangelists.

## Exegesis of the first reading, 1 Jn 3:7-10 (207)

*Rev. Timothy P Schehr*

John here carries forward his theme of putting faith into action. He begins with a warning to his readers not to allow anyone to deceive them on this. His fear is that certain people he calls “antichrists” may influence the community with their own brand of religion. It seems they could not accept that the Son of God could have walked among us. They deny he was the Christ, the Anointed One sent to redeem the world. This line of thinking evidently has serious implications for their moral lives, too. And John does not want his readers to be swayed to follow such misguided teachers.

He announces that sinners belong to the devil who was himself a sinner from the beginning. John may be referring here to the Genesis account of the loss of Eden. The first man and woman choose to listen to the deceitful argument of the serpent rather obey the word of God. John seems to see this same scene playing out all over again in his own time. He reminds his faithful readers that Jesus came into the world to undo all the devil had done. Since the children of God were anointed with the truth when they entered the church why would they now have any reason to accept the lies generated by mere mortals?

John puts the matter even more boldly. He declares that anyone begotten of God cannot sin. This seems to go against John’s own assertion earlier in the letter that people who declare themselves free of sin are deceiving themselves and have no truth in them (1 Jn 1:8-10). But there need not be a contradiction in John’s words. John is stating here that sin holds no attraction at all for people who are truly God’s children. It is very much like the Lord’s own declaration that people can be identified by their actions, just as trees can be identified by their fruit. So John asserts that unholy actions and belonging to God are not compatible. Then he says the same thing of anyone who “fails to love his brother.”

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Jn 1:35-42 (207)

*Rev. Timothy P. Schehr*

Earlier in this same chapter John announced the Lamb of God. At that time there was no record of any response. But this time two disciples of the Baptist are standing with him. When John announces this second time that the Lamb of God is present, the disciples are listening and they no longer stand with John but walk with Jesus. Jesus turns around and asks them what they seek. In this Gospel a question like this

one, so simple on the surface, carries with it profound meaning. Typically in Jn, ordinary statements become invitations to move higher into the realm of the spirit. The two disciples answer the Lord’s question by stating that they want to know where he stays. They probably anticipate nothing more than an answer indicating some place in this world. But as they continue to walk with the Lord they will discover that his ultimate goal is to return to his Father in heaven.

They address him as Rabbi, which John immediately tells us means Teacher. Those who regard Jesus as teacher demonstrate they are already disposed to learn from him. John observes that the two disciples did stay with Jesus that day. What they learned from their Teacher made an impression on them. Their stay with him extends far beyond that one day and in fact they are soon going about inviting others to join them in their stay with Jesus. John notes the time the two disciples first decided to follow Jesus. He tells us it was “about four in the afternoon.” There will be other time references in this gospel; they all seem to alert us to moments in the Gospel that are significant for the journey of faith.

We discover that one of the two disciples with John the Baptist that day was named Andrew. Some indication of the kind of things Jesus was teaching about may be found in the fact that Andrew announces to his brother Simon that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s anointed in this world. Andrew’s enthusiasm is almost palpable in the account.

Jesus looks at Simon and immediately announces that he will someday carry the name *Peter*, meaning “rock.” At this point there is no response from Simon. His first words will not be spoken until Jn 6:68 when he announces that Jesus has the words of eternal life.

## Homily Suggestion

*Joanmarie Smith, C.S.J.*

We spontaneously share good news. Have you ever read a great book and said to a friend, “You’ve got to read this; you’ll love it.” Similarly with movies or TV shows we have enjoyed. We want our friends to have the experience we have had. In fact we can trace back today’s feast to a Catholic family who spontaneously shared the good news of their faith. Elizabeth Ann Seton was a wife, a mother, a widow, the founder of the Sisters of Charity and the first native born American to be canonized.

Elizabeth Seton came from a prominent and wealthy Episcopalian family and married into a similar one. Not long after her marriage, her husband lost his business and shortly after that he became ill and died. Elizabeth went to Italy and stayed with the Felicci family who shared their life style first and then, as Elizabeth became interested, their Catholic faith. Shortly after she returned from Italy she converted to the Catholicism, opened a school for the poor and began a religious community.

We have an even earlier instance of this natural inclination to share good news. In today’s Gospel we are told that the very first thing that Andrew does after overhearing John at Jesus’ baptism is to look for his brother to tell him, “We have found the Messiah.” There is no hard sell in these instances of evangelization and conversion; what is evident is the natural impulse to share good news. We don’t have to catechize our friends and neighbors, all we have to do is live our life faithfully.

January 5, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Saturday—John Neumann

**Theme:** Some saints don't seem like saints.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Jn 3:11-21 (208)

*Rev. Timothy P. Schehr*

John reminds his readers that love for one another was the very thing they heard "from the beginning" when they first accepted the faith and were anointed with the truth. Although he does not say so explicitly, John is presumably referring here to the gift of the Holy Spirit which Jesus promised those who believe in him. Just as Jesus was the Anointed One, believers, too, have an anointing that should shield them from the deceptions voiced by the antichrists.

Earlier sections of this letter seem to draw on Gn 2 and 3. Now John draws a lesson from the Cain and Abel account in Gn 4. Cain did not love his brother but killed him. The reason he did this, John implies, was that he would rather kill his brother than change his wicked heart and imitate Abel's just works. The same thing holds true for the situation between his beloved community and the world around them. John says they should not be surprised that the world chooses to hate them rather than imitate their good works. But they should not lose heart. And they should certainly not let go of the ideals they embraced when they were baptized. As John declares, they have passed from death to life. It is unthinkable for them to go back; they must keep going forward and put their faith into action. The Lord's example is just the opposite of Cain's. Jesus laid down his life for us. John calls upon his community to do the same for their brothers and sisters. He recognizes how great a challenge this is. But, as John assures them, "God is greater than our hearts." And if their consciences are clear they can be assured God is with them.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Jn 1:43-51 (208)

*Rev. Timothy P. Schehr*

Jesus goes to Galilee and finds Philip, whom he calls to follow him. John tells us that Philip was from the town of Andrew and Peter. It appears from this detail that Andrew and Peter must have told Jesus about their hometown friend, suggesting that he, too, should join their company. Philip shows great promise. Jesus chooses him to test by asking how they might feed the many people who were following them (Jn 6:5). When certain Greeks sought to meet Jesus, they approached Philip to arrange such a meeting (Jn 12:22). And at the last supper Philip speaks up for the rest and asks Jesus to show them his Father (Jn 14:8).

In this reading Philip takes the initiative in seeking out his

friend Nathanael to announce they have found the one who fulfills the law and the prophets. Nathanael gives his reply about the prospect of anything good coming from Nazareth. His low estimation of that town seems confirmed by the resistance Jesus encountered there when he returned to preach in their synagogue. Philip is not discouraged by Nathanael's lack of enthusiasm and invites him to see for himself.

Philip was probably well aware of his friend's penchant for candid remarks. Jesus is aware of it too. He may be teasing when he remarks that Nathanael is a true Israelite who speaks his mind. It takes Nathanael by surprise that this Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth knows him so well. He is surely even more taken aback when Jesus gives him the details of his meeting with Philip even down to what tree he was under at the time. Nathanael has heard enough. He makes the most elevated response we have heard yet from those following the Lord. He declares that Jesus is both Son of God and King of Israel. Does he truly appreciate all he is saying at this stage in his journey with the Lord? Or is he anxious to make amends for his earlier rash judgment?

John the Baptist had already declared Jesus to be the Son of God (Jn 1:34). But this is the first appearance of the title "King of Israel." The crowds will welcome Jesus into Jerusalem with this title (Jn 12:13). But Nathanael and the crowds probably expect that Jesus will be associated with the restoration of an earthly kingdom. Only in time will they discover the real nature of Jesus' kingdom.

Jesus challenges Nathanael to be prepared to learn still more about him. He declares that Nathanael, already impressed by what he has heard, will see even grander things. He will see the heavens opened and angels attending the Son of Man. No mention is made of Nathanael actually seeing such things in later chapters. Jesus may be referring to the many instances in which the apostles will see his divine glory manifested in the things he does to move people to believe in him and thereby gain eternal life.

## Homily Suggestion

*Joanmarie Smith, C.S.J.*

There is an old adage, "To live with the saints in heaven is glory, to live with them here is another story." John Neumann seems to illustrate the point.

When he was not ordained in his native land because there were too many priests, he left the seminary without leaving a forwarding address or even saying good-bye to his parents. He left the U.S. parish in which he was working in a similar manner to join the Redemptorists. When he was made Bishop of Philadelphia, a Vatican investigator recommended that he be replaced. On paper he does not seem like saint material.

Neither does Nathanael in today's Gospel sound like saint material. He responds to his friend Philip's good news about having found the Messiah with a sarcastic and prejudiced dismissal. Yet we know he was converted and became an apostle.

We never know who is really holy in God's eyes so it is best to leave other people's sanctity to the Creator.

January 7, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Monday after Epiphany

**Theme:** We have seen a great light.

## **Exegesis of the First Reading,** 1 Jn 3:22–4:6 (212)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

The author encourages his readers to have confidence that they will receive whatever they ask from God because they keep God's commandment. This commandment is described as twofold. First, it means believing in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and second, it requires loving one another. The result of keeping God's commandment is the mutual abiding of Christ with the believers. The reality of this mutual abiding is confirmed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Believers must exercise careful discernment before trusting a spirit. Obviously this has become a problem in the community to whom the author is writing. One criteria for determining the Spirit of God is whether or not the Spirit affirms the humanity of Christ. No authentic Spirit of God can deny the humanity of Christ. The statement proclaimed in the Prologue to the Gospel of John is an absolute non-negotiable: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Those who do not affirm this are called "the antichrist" which is another term for false prophet.

There has been a serious rift in the community and some have left. The author claims that those who have stayed have done so because they belong to God and the ones who have left belong to the world. In Johannine thought the world refers to unredeemed humanity. Knowing who belongs to God and who does not is important for this author because who one belongs to determines behavior. Therefore whoever has the Spirit of God will listen to those who also have the Spirit of God and will behave accordingly. Conversely, whoever is of the world will be attracted to the falsehoods and errors of the world and they will behave accordingly. What one believes and how one behaves is very important for this author. Deception has taken its toll on the community and will continue to do so without careful discernment.

## **Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mt 4:12-17, 23-25 (212)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

Jesus does not begin his ministry until John has been arrested and removed from the scene. Jesus' response to John's arrest is to withdraw to Galilee. This non-violent gesture will characterize Jesus and the advent of the kingdom of heaven. Part of Jesus' teaching is to show that there are alternative ways for dealing with violence and confrontation. Jesus leaves his hometown of Nazareth and moves to the territory of Galilee. He will establish his home in the town of

Capernaum, which will put him in an environment of Jewish and Gentile culture. Matthew wants to see this move as fulfilling Is 8:22–9:1. With Jesus the new age has dawned and he will dispel the spiritual darkness.

Matthew summarizes Jesus' message in the words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Mark uses the phrase "kingdom of God" but both express the same reality. Something new has emerged with Jesus and the only adequate response is to repent. However, this term does not mean to be sorry for past failures, show remorse and make amends. "Repent" is a call to a reorientation to life. It is as radical as if one is heading north and then turns around and heads south. There is also a sense of urgency in this term because the new reality of the kingdom of heaven has come near. The time is now.

Matthew provides a summary of what Jesus' ministry will consist of before he actually begins it. First, we are told that Jesus teaches in their synagogues. The designation "their synagogues" reflects the time of Matthew's community when the Christians had been excluded from the Jewish synagogues. This will cause bitter feelings between Christians and Jews of Matthew's time. Jesus' ministry includes teaching and preaching and healing the sick. Matthew shows that Jesus was very popular especially around Syria, the location of Matthew's own community. It is also important for Matthew to show that Jesus drew great crowds from both Gentiles (Galilee, the Decapolis) and Jews (Jerusalem and Judea).

## **Homily Suggestion**

*Kathleen M. Carroll*

Today we remember the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. Matthew ably encapsulates the historical moment (after the arrest of John the Baptist), the geographical and scriptural scope of the event and even the breadth of Jesus' teaching and healing. It is in the letter of John from our first reading, though, that we get the essence of what Christ means for us. God wants us to "believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us."

The great light revealed to us in the person and ministry of Jesus is both an example of how we are to live our lives as Christians and the means—the power, the inspiration, the strength—to do so. Jesus shows us how to love. He does not tell us to love people when and if they deserve it, or to the extent that they have shown love to us. He does not tell us to love only those who are lovable or those who have treated us with kindness or at least decency. No, we are to love even our enemies, even those who hurt, persecute and even kill us, and we are to love them as Jesus loves us.

Of course, to follow such a commandment is to be super-human and that is where the really good news comes in. Christ does not ask us to perform this impossible task without giving us the strength to do so. He invites us, especially in the Eucharist, to partake of his own life; his is the love with which we can love others as he commands.

Through Jesus, we have the power to transcend our sins and flaws. Not only can we be forgiven for our mistakes, but we can share in God's own power to reach out to others who need hope and healing. Jesus continues his work on earth through his body, the church—through us. We have seen a great light and it is now our task to shine that light on others.

January 8, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Tuesday after Epiphany

**Theme:** More than enough.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Jn 4:7-10 (213)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

Love is not something that originates with the human condition. Love originates in and from God. The fact that humans can love one another indicates that they somehow know God and share an intimate relationship with God. This author goes so far as to say that one who loves is actually “begotten by God.” In typical Johannine fashion we are presented with a contrast. An absence of love indicates an ignorance or lack of knowledge of God. The author clearly affirms that love describes the very being of God. However this is a description that translates into ethics for the believer. The love of God is manifested in our loving one another.

The love of God has been made manifest to humans in the incarnation. This was a one of a kind event and therefore Jesus is designated as God’s “only Son.” This distinguishes him from other humans who also share in the love of God. For this author God has expressed his all-embracing love preeminently in the giving of God’s only Son. This supreme act of love gives believers access to God’s love through their knowledge, acceptance and faith in God’s only Son.

The remarkable aspect of this teaching is that it is rooted in God’s amazing love for us. God started this whole process by loving us first and freely without any merit on our part. When we love one another we are doing nothing more than sharing this wonderful gift with others. This is not abstract theory. It has been made concrete and practical in and through the presence of God’s Son in the world. In fact, for this author, God’s only Son is our only access to the love of God.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 6:34-44(213)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

This story of the feeding of the five thousand was so important and popular in early Christian tradition that it found its way into all four canonical Gospels. The primary emphasis that the story makes is that Jesus miraculously feeds a large crowd of people with only five loaves and two fish. The original audience hearing this story would be reminded of that other great feeding story involving Moses and the people wandering in the wilderness with no provisions. As God miraculously feed all the people with manna from heaven through the intervention of Moses, so here God miraculously feeds the five thousand through the agency of Jesus the Son of God. A secondary and important emphasis

this story would have had for the early Christians would be the eucharistic overtones it has.

Mark begins his version of the story by highlighting Jesus’ pity and compassion for the people. They were without direction or leadership. Using a familiar OT image Mark says, “they were like sheep without a shepherd.” In the process of teaching the people many things the day grows late and they are in deserted place without provisions. The disciples offer a common sense solution. The people should be dismissed while there is still time for them to find food in the surrounding area. Jesus counters with a solution that must have sounded like pure nonsense and totally impossible. “Give them some food yourselves” (Mk 6:35-37).

No details are given as to how Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes. All we are told is that all of a sudden the deserted place was covered with green grass where the five thousand people sat in groups of hundreds and fifties. While Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes it is the disciples themselves who distribute the food to the people. The point of all this is that not only was everyone was fed and fully satisfied, but there were twelve baskets full of fragments left over and collected. Not only does Jesus feed the people, he feeds them in abundance. For Mark this is an image of salvation.

## Homily Suggestion

*Kathleen M. Carroll*

A new cable television series called “Pantry Raid” features a celebrity chef surprising a homeowner and preparing a gourmet dinner from only the ingredients he finds in the refrigerator and pantry. The idea is that good food is not a matter of expensive ingredients or lengthy preparation time, but creativity and a willingness to try new things.

Today’s Gospel reading features perhaps the most famous celebrity chef of all—Jesus—doing much the same thing. After a day of preaching and teaching to a throng of five thousand, his disciples remind him that these folks will probably need to eat at some time. Jesus resists their suggestion to send the crowd home and offers an astonishing alternative, “Give them some food yourselves.”

Now, so soon after many of us have completed our Christmas dinner extravaganzas, we have some idea of what goes into feeding a family gathering—a few days of planning, shopping and preparation and a good deal of money. But an on-the-spur-of-the-moment feast for five thousand? It really does seem as though Jesus is simply asking too much of his followers. Clearly, even if money and time were no object, no twelve men could carry a meal for five thousand—it is beyond imagining that what little they might have to offer could provide more than an insulting morsel for the gathered crowd.

Jesus, though, takes what is not enough and makes a feast. It is simply what God does—taking void and nothingness and creating the universe; taking a nation of slaves and creating the chosen people; taking a race of sinners and creating sons and daughters of God.

If we are to be true followers of Jesus, we cannot allow ourselves to be discouraged by the facts. We must allow the inner reality of our faith to triumph over the outer reality of what we see on the nightly news. We must believe, and help bring to pass, all that God has promised us.

January 9, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Wednesday after Epiphany

**Theme:** Walking on water.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Jn 4:11-18 (214)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

Knowing how much God has loved us requires a fitting response. That response is that we also must love one another. In other words our faith in and knowledge of God must be expressed concretely in how we interact with one another. The author stresses the need for this concrete behavior not because it would be a nice thing to do and it would help us all get along. His concerns are far more profound and theological. No one has direct access to God. Our experience of God comes from our experience of how God loves us. We keep that love alive by sharing it with one another. The more we do this, the more mature the love grows and the deeper is our relationship with God. This is what it means for his love to be brought to perfection in us (1 Jn 4:12).

How do we know if we really have this love of God? First of all we affirm it through our faith. This faith is rooted in our acceptance of Jesus as the incarnation of God's Son. This has established the divine mutual relationship between God and the Son and ourselves. Now the author declared that an additional testimony as been added and that is the Holy Spirit. The key term for expressing all this is "remain" (some translations have "abide"). The key to all authentic Christian living is to remain in God's love which is manifested practically in our love for one another (1 Jn 4:13-16).

The more we remain in God's love the more mature we come in that love. The result of this maturity is confidence that when the final day arrives we will be fully prepared because we have been transformed by remaining in God's love. This is something we experience in the world and therefore we can live out our lives in love which is not subject to fear. God's love is a perfect love and it drives out all fear (1 Jn 4:17-18). To live a life of love without fear is what it means to live in Christian freedom.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 6:45-52 (214)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

The miracle story of Jesus walking on the water follows the episode of the feeding of the five thousand. Again our focus is not to be on did Jesus really do this and, if so, how did he do it. The challenge is to determine what message this story is attempting to communicate. On the part of the disciples there is still the issue of who Jesus really is. In the community of Mark the question is whether or not Jesus, even as the risen Lord, is still with them.

Frequently in the Gospels Jesus is portrayed as withdrawing from the crowds in order have solitude and to pray. That is what he does here (Mk 6:45-46). In the meantime the disciples headed across the sea to Bethsaida and their boat encountered stormy weather. In the early Christian community a boat being battered by a storm was often used a metaphor for the church especially during time of persecution and hardship. Jesus is depicted as walking on the sea, perhaps with the intention of going past the boat, but he is seen by the disciples. He is seen but not recognized. They think he is a ghost which only adds to their terror. He addresses them directly: "...it is I..." As soon as he gets into the boat the storm subsides (Mk 6:47-51).

The disciples' response is one of astonishment and not one of recognition. Jesus' self-revelation of "I am" is intended to make the connection with the self-revelation of YHWH in Exodus as "I am who am." But the disciples do not make the connection because they never understood the episode with the loaves. Mark attributes this to their hardness of heart (Mk 6:52). On the other hand, Mark is encouraging his own community that, no matter how difficult things seem to get, Jesus is still with them in the boat. The boat might get battered a bit, but it will not sink. Recognizing that Jesus is still with the community is an act of faith. In this story the disciples do not have that requisite faith. Mark is encouraging his own community not to be like them.

## Homily Suggestion

*Kathleen M. Carroll*

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus performs dozens, even hundreds, of miracles. In almost every instance, though, he does so to reach out to someone else—to heal them, restore their sight, rescue them from persecution or forgive their sins. We don't see him flying from one place to another to save time or disappearing to avoid answering a sticky question posed to him by one of his enemies. At first glance, though, the story of Jesus walking on the water seems to be different.

Seeking some time alone to pray, he sent his disciples ahead to row across the Sea of Galilee. Sometime around the middle of the night, he caught up with them by walking on the water—not even calm water, since there was a storm raging. This seems a bit flamboyant for Jesus, a bit out of character. Why would he take such an extreme step? Why do something so startling that even your closest friends are terrified to see you?

I believe the problem is that we focus on the walking on the water. That is how we refer to the story, that is how most Bibles label these verses. But Jesus' focus was not on what he was doing, but why he was doing it. His disciples had been rowing against the wind in a ferocious storm. They feared for their lives. Getting to them and saving them was all that mattered to Jesus. He simply did what was necessary.

This story is the salvation story in microcosm. God does not balk at doing whatever it takes to get to us, to save us. In the mission of Christ, in the ministry of the church and in the thousands of ways we feel the divine reaching through to us, God is always performing miracles to save his people.

January 10, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Thursday after Epiphany

**Theme:** Now for something completely different.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Jn 4:19–5:4 (215)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

The author re-emphasizes the point that the only reason we humans can love at all is because God first loved us. Again this gets manifested in practical concrete living. Love of God must be demonstrated by loving others. We cannot love God in the abstract, therefore it is pure deception to say that we can love God whom we cannot see when we fail to love others who we can see. Love of others is a commandment and carrying out that commandment is obedience.

It is important that we love God and that we manifest that love by loving others, but that is not enough. More important still is our belief that Jesus is God's divine Son. This is the belief in which our authentic love of God is based. What we believe about God shapes our very understanding of love. The test of this love is to be found in our obedience to God's commandments. Apparently some who had broken off from the community declared that this obedience was overly burdensome. This author sees it as just the opposite.

Obedience is based on acute listening, which stems from a situation of mutual relationship. The love of God and the love of others—rooted in our belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—flows naturally into obedience. Therefore obeying God's commandments is not at all burdensome. In fact it is this obedience on the part of believers that conquers evil in the world. However, the content of that conquering faith is that Jesus of Nazareth is God's unique Son. The author continues to say the same thing in a variety of ways. Ultimately, however, it is all about divine mutuality and the power of love that flows from it.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Lk 4:14-22a (215)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

In Mark this incident occurs after Jesus' ministry is well under way. In Luke it occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in order to set the stage for what is going to happen. A preface to the episode tells us that Jesus' Galilean ministry has been very successful. This can no doubt be attributed to the fact that is working under the power of the Holy Spirit. He has also been well received in the synagogues where he is often portrayed as teaching and preaching.

Having experienced success in Galilee Jesus now returns home for the first time since his ministry began. Being a traditional Jew he attends synagogue on the Sabbath and has been asked to read the lesson. Apparently the scroll of Isaiah

had already been designated but Jesus is portrayed as picking a specific passage to read. He reads a combination of Is 61:1-2 and 58:6. What Jesus reads in effect describes his own Messianic ministry. He has come to bring good news to all those who are oppressed in a wide variety of ways. He is the one who has the Spirit of the Lord upon him, the Messianic prophet about whom Isaiah is speaking.

When Jesus finishes reading, all eyes are glued on him. They are not really prepared for what they hear. He proclaims that "today" what they have just heard has been fulfilled in himself. The people are amazed and confused at the same time. How can Joseph's son be anything special? Certainly he could not be the one spoken about in the text from Isaiah. In the next scene the people become outraged at what Jesus says and they attempt to throw him off a cliff. This is only the first of many rejections by the very people he came to serve and to save.

## Homily Suggestion

*Kathleen M. Carroll*

A student complained to his teacher that he just couldn't appreciate the writings of Shakespeare. "Is it the language he uses?" his teacher asked. "No, the language is tricky, but I can understand it all right." "Is it the difference in culture?" "No, I'm good in history and I'm pretty clear on what was happening back then." "Well, do you know exactly what the problem is?" the exasperated teacher asked. "These stories are just like a hundred others I've read or seen in movies," the student offered. "They're just so predictable!"

The Jesus story can certainly seem predictable to us. After all, most of us have known since childhood who Jesus was, why he came, what he did and what we're supposed to do about it. But that was not the case for the people living in Palestine during Jesus' earthly ministry. Without understanding what God had promised the chosen people, and what the people actually expected the Messiah would mean for them, it is hard to see Jesus the same way his contemporaries did.

Jesus was simply not the Messiah the Jews expected. He was not a great military leader who led them against their enemies and punished all those who had oppressed them. If we are honest with ourselves, we might have to admit that Jesus is also sometimes not the Messiah we hope for. When we are downtrodden we want a savior who will vindicate us, not one who will encourage us to bear our sorrows with patience and pray for those who abuse us.

Just about everything Jesus did was outlandish. The very notion of the incarnation—of God taking on human flesh—was thought blasphemous not only by the chosen people, but the larger gentile culture. His birth in poverty, his humility, his execution—these are not the qualities we expect in a great leader. Jesus turns all of our expectations upside down—the poor are blessed, those who mourn are comforted and the rich are to be fearful of their futures.

In the Eucharist we have the greatest sign of this: a God who deigns not only to become one of us, to die for us, but who even gives himself as food for us.

January 11, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Friday after Epiphany

**Theme:** I do will it.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Jn 5:5-13 (216)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

God defeats evil by means of believers. However the content of the belief must be the conviction that Jesus is the Son of God. This affirmation has become a constant refrain throughout this entire letter. Now the author wants to carry this further by presenting witnesses who substantiate the affirmation that Jesus is the Son of God. According to the understanding of the time two witnesses were necessary to make a testimony legal (Dt 17:6). The author surpasses that by listing three: water, blood and Spirit.

None of the witnesses are mere humans. Water and blood recall two aspects of Jesus' life where his divinity was manifested. One was his baptism where the voice from heaven declared Jesus' divine identity. The other was when his side was pierced on the cross and water and blood flowed out. The Spirit, of course, was present also at the baptism, giving witness to Jesus as God's Son. The power of this threefold witness is considered overwhelming by the author and every believer should find it so. There is nothing to say to those who still do not believe in the face of these three witnesses.

The content of this threefold testimony is not only that Jesus is the Son of God. He is also God's gift of eternal life to those who believe in him. By faith we are able to take into ourselves and possess the reality of the Son of God who has come to us in the person of Jesus. By possessing the Son of God we at the same time possess eternal life. The contrary of this is that those who do not have this faith and do not accept Jesus as the Son of God forfeit this gift of eternal life. The author concludes by saying that he has written all this to assure the believers that they do indeed eternal life.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Lk 5:12-16 (216)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

In this episode Jesus is confronted by a person full of leprosy who is convinced that Jesus can make him clean if he so wishes. He even refers to Jesus as Lord. No details are given as to how or why the leper knew about Jesus. We do, however, know about the stigma of leprosy. It was a skin disease which was not limited to what we today call Hansen's disease. At the time of Jesus leprosy totally marginalized the sufferer from all forms of social interaction. It also rendered the sufferer religiously impure and one was not restored to purity until declared so by a priest (Lv 13-14).

Jesus shows no hesitation whatsoever even though it was

forbidden for him to touch a leper. Technically Jesus is made impure by his action of touching the leper. Again no detail are given to describe the process of the cure. Jesus touches the leper and immediately he is made clean. This action of Jesus shows a concern that Luke will describe many times in his gospel—the restoration of the marginalized. Jesus is not only concerned about eternal life. He has great compassion for people who are suffering in the here and now and he constantly reaches out to them and gives them life.

There are two aspects to this healing. The first is the actual cleansing itself which Jesus accomplished by touching the leper. The second is the official declaration of cleanness which can be granted only by a priest. Here Luke employs the so-called messianic secret by having Jesus order the clean leper not to tell anyone what happened. This is to avoid misunderstanding the real mission of Jesus which will not be disclosed until his death and resurrection. Instead, Jesus orders the leper to follow the law, even though Jesus himself had broken it, and show himself to the priest. As is usually the case, word of what Jesus did spreads quickly. Jesus' response is to withdraw to pray manifesting that while he mediates the power of God, he is still dependent on the Father.

## Homily Suggestion

*Kathleen M. Carroll*

A teenage girl was making dinner for her new babysitting charges according to their parents' instructions. The toddler readily ate what was put on the table, but his five-year-old brother steadfastly refused most of what was put on his plate. "Is there a problem with the peas?" the babysitter enquired. "Well," the boy said, "I like them, but my mom says I'm not allowed to eat vegetables."

Parents often encounter this sort of absurdity when dealing with children. Charges like "You don't love me as much as Tommy's parents love him," or "You just don't want me to have any friends" are common. Of course, any parent worthy of the title regularly makes great sacrifices to provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for his or her children, and we readily laugh at the misperceptions of children to the contrary. Yet, we can be guilty of the same behavior when we consider our relationship with our heavenly parent. It is not unusual for people to see personal troubles or even natural disasters as the result of someone's sin or mistake and the ensuing divine retribution.

If we imagine that God waits on the throne of heaven for us to make a mistake, we need to turn again to the Scriptures. In Jeremiah we read of God's plans for us: "...plans for your welfare, not for woe! plans to give you a future full of hope." In Isaiah we read, "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even if she should forget, I will never forget you."

Today's Gospel tells of a leper's plea to Jesus, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean." His words express the doubt a lot of us have when approaching God. But Jesus' response should give us the confidence we need: "I do will it. Be made clean." God's will for us is the same as any loving parent for a treasured child. Often we have only to realize the good God wills for us in order to receive it.

January 12, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Saturday after Epiphany

**Theme:** He must increase.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Jn 5:14-21 (217)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

This passage constitutes the epilogue to 1 Jn. The author begins on a strong note of confidence reminding his readers that through their faith in the Son of God they have eternal life. This confidence therefore should also be extended to their prayer. Given the intimate relationship the believers have with God through Jesus they can be assured that God will hear any prayer they ask according to God's will. This same point was made in 1 Jn 3:21-22, but here the author elaborates on it. The subject is intercessory prayer and the confidence the believers can have that God actually hears them.

The author makes a point of stressing when intercessory prayer is appropriate and when it is not. He does this by focusing on sin. There is a kind of sin that is not deadly. Whenever one encounters that kind of sin in a brother or sister it is most appropriate to pray that God will restore that person to life. Deadly sin is another matter. It is pointless to pray for those who have deadly sin, because there is no life in them. There is nothing to restore. The author does not explain what qualifies as deadly sin, but obviously it must be serious—denying that Christ is the Son of God or apostasy. It is even worse that what we today would term "mortal sin." Those in the state of deadly sin would never seek God or eternal life.

The closing verses substantiate that the believers can be confident because of what they know. They know that no one begotten by God continues to sin in any way that would be deadly or mortal. The two are opposed to one another. Believers also know that they belong to God in distinction from those who belong to the world which is the arena of the evil one. Finally, the believers know that the Son of God has provided them with the discernment necessary to know the true God and his Son.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Jn 3:22-30 (217)

*Eugene Hensell, O.S.B.*

The Gospel of John and the Synoptics do not agree on the relationship of John the Baptist to Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels John the Baptist precedes Jesus and serves as his forerunner. John takes a different approach. John's Gospel is the only one that says Jesus had a ministry of baptizing. Scholars think that this is probably historically true. We do not have to be overly concerned about which Gospel is cor-

rect because none of them are attempting primarily to be historically accurate. Their emphases are made for theological reasons and therein lies the real message.

Before John was put into prison he and Jesus were simultaneously engaged in a ministry of baptism. Jesus was in Judea and John in a place called Aenon. A dispute arose between John's disciples and a Jew over ceremonial washings. The disciples bring this dispute to John the Baptist with the concern that Jesus is baptizing on the other side of the Jordan and many people are coming to him. John's disciples seemingly were expecting him to defend his own ministry and perhaps criticize Jesus. John does just the opposite.

The entire point of John's response is perfectly summarized in the last line: "He must increase; I must decrease." The function of John is to point to Jesus and be a witness to him. Therefore John uses a series of images all of which stress that Jesus is the Messiah and John is not. Rather than being upset at what Jesus is doing, John rejoices. All of this reflects the theological perspective of the gospel writer who wants to make clear that no mistake is made about who is the Messiah and who is the witness to the Messiah. This point is made so strongly that one can assume it was a problem in the author's community. Followers of John the Baptist were still around and they were proclaiming that John was the Messiah and not Jesus.

## Homily Suggestion

*Kathleen M. Carroll*

As a historical figure, John the Baptist was famous. He drew crowds to repentance and conversion on the banks of the Jordan. He was embroiled in one of the more unsavory political scandals of his day, openly chastising the king for his immoral lifestyle. He was executed as a birthday gift. Several historians of the era mention John and the effect he had in his lifetime. With the perspective of time and faith, though, we see that John's true significance comes only when we consider his relationship to Jesus. He is the precursor, the one preparing a path, the voice crying in the wilderness. Despite his prayer and asceticism, his unique holiness and sanctity derive from his role in the life of Christ.

As with all the saints, John's example is good for us to follow. Our best efforts at holiness fall short without Christ and, happily, our most grievous sins are wiped away with Christ. *What* we do matters very little; that we do all in and through Christ matters a great deal.

At the beginning of every new year we make resolutions to improve in some way. Most of us will resolve to drop a few pounds or be more careful with our finances. Some will aspire to be more productive at work or more pleasant at home. But as long as we focus on how we can improve ourselves, by ourselves, we will be disappointed.

As Christians, as Catholics, as members of the body of Christ, we are called to answer to a higher standard and a higher authority. Our resolutions should consider how we can strengthen each other in Christ, how we can advance the work of the church, how we can bring Christ to others. In seeking to have Christ increase and ourselves decrease in our own lives, we bring a greater dignity and purpose to all that we do. Our significance depends on Christ and so should every decision of our lives.

January 14, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Monday of the 1st Week of the Year

**Theme:** Barren or bearing?

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 1 Sm 1:1-8 (305)

*Mary Ann Getty*

The Book of Samuel begins with our reading. We hear of the plight of one of the poorest of Israel, the childless Hannah who is the constant victim of her rival's taunts because she is barren. Although she has the love of her husband who is himself bewildered by their common sorrow in not having children, Hannah has the greater burden since her husband has other children. Further, in ancient times barrenness was always attributed to the woman and it was extremely important to her not only to have children, but to have sons. A woman was passed from her father to her husband to her sons who, in turn, were responsible for her care and maintenance since she could do nothing to assure these for herself. A barren woman was only slightly less pitiable than a childless widow because the former at least had hope of someday conceiving. Since conception was beyond human control, prayer was the sole recourse. God, the source of life, is thought to have "made her barren," just as God could have a change of mind and allow Hannah to conceive. So it is that Elkanah's pilgrimages to Shiloh are linked to Hannah's barren condition.

As in other biblical stories that describe God's intervention in the face of barrenness (Rachel, the mother of Samson, Elizabeth), the biblical author is preparing the reader for the birth of a great leader who can only be the product of God's grace, power and will. In the case of Hannah and Elkanah, their first son, Samuel, will be an influential and wise prophet. He will ultimately identify the first king of Israel, Saul, and anoint him in the service of God and the people. God will speak to the king through Samuel who will bring Israel through the transition from the time of the tribal confederacy when the people are ruled by judges and priests, to the time of the united monarchy when they are ruled by kings and prophets.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 1:14-20 (305)

*Mary Ann Getty*

Our Gospel reading contains Jesus' announcement of the arrival of the reign of God and the call of the first disciples who will witness to his words and deeds. In fact, Jesus' brief inaugural announcement is a summary of the whole gospel. Mark began with some OT prophecies about the Messiah and then described the work of John the Baptist, the last prophet, who was in the desert preaching the repentance of

sin. Mark has no infancy account. He begins the Gospel with the appearance of Jesus who is baptized by John. Because Jesus inaugurates a new age, John recedes as Jesus and his mission comes into full focus.

According to Mark, Jesus is a teacher, but a person of few words. The Gospel comes with power and Jesus is presented in the entire first half of the Gospel as one who teaches with "authority" or "power"—often through miracles. Our reading contains the first spoken words of Jesus as he announces that the "time" of fulfillment has come and the reign of God is at hand. He calls on people to reform their lives and believe the Gospel. This is a well-packed announcement. The "reign" of God is a familiar promise among the prophets who spoke of a world ruled by God and characterized by obedience to the Torah, justice, harmony and peace. It was to be inaugurated by the Messiah. Jesus' announcement has implications for his identity. Jesus is the Messiah bringing in the reign of God which demands a reform of sinful ways.

Jesus' first act is to call two sets of two brothers who will serve as witnesses to his words and deeds and will become his first disciples. Three of these, Simon (Peter), James and John, will form the nucleus of Jesus' inner circle; they will be privileged to witness his Transfiguration as well as his suffering in the Garden the night before his crucifixion. They respond generously and enthusiastically, leaving everything in order to follow Jesus. Although their commitment will be tested and even though, in Mark, Jesus often laments his disciples' lack of faith, these and other disciples will continue to follow Jesus, despite suffering, confusion, disappointment, fear and doubt. Mark is addressing a frightened church and he portrays Jesus' companions as people just like us. We are beckoned to wade deeper into the mystery of the Gospel and to believe with all our hearts.

## Homily Suggestion

*Virginia Smith*

Longtime barrenness in biblical parlance is often merely a prelude to bearing much fruit. Children born to women who have waited long and endured much are generally towering figures who bear abundantly in the vineyard of the Lord. Hannah's son, Samuel, was certainly such a person.

Mark has Jesus opening his public ministry with the announcement, "This is the time of fulfillment." Both Samuel and Jesus (plus other surprising biblical sons) constitute bridges. Samuel was the last of the Judges and the first of the great prophets. As he implies in his announcement, Jesus fulfills the First Testament and inaugurates the Second.

All very interesting, but how does it apply to our own lives? Most of us would agree that one of the themes of Jesus' ministry is his call to his followers to bear fruit. From the fishermen he summoned from their nets to ourselves whom he summons from our daily lives, every disciple is not only invited but expected to bear fruit. Exactly how that takes shape differs in every individual life. So perhaps our time would be well spent today in taking inventory of our fruits. What are they? Might they be multiplied? How?

What will be laid at the Father's feet at the end of our earthly sojourn? We arrive barren at our own risk.

January 15, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Tuesday of the 1st Week of the Year

**Theme:** Our way or God's way?

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 1 Sm 1:9-20 (306)

*Mary Ann Getty*

Hannah is described as bitter and weeping—miserable because she has no child. But she is also faithful. She prayed relentlessly and insistently, using the occasion of her husband's pilgrimage to enter the sanctuary and pour out her heart to the Lord. The old priest, Eli, observed her and at first mistook her tears for drunkenness. When he accused her, Hannah explained her desperation and Eli pronounced a blessing on her, adding his own prayer to hers. Our reading concludes with the remark that from then on Hannah no longer appeared downcast. It was as if she knew that some miraculous and wonderful thing was happening to her. Finally Samuel was conceived because the Lord "remembered her" and her prayers.

Although the religion of the OT is often described as male-dominated, the extraordinary thing is that women are sometimes the focus of the story. Such is the case in the story of Hannah. She is an outcast, the object of ridicule because of her barrenness. But she persists in her prayer and her hope and finally her disgrace is removed. In the OT, conception, is in God's hands. Barrenness is part of the mystery of life and only God can remove it. Hannah not only prays ceaselessly, but she allows herself to be transformed by prayer when the moment of God's blessing of life comes upon her. She will fulfill her vow to God and dedicate her son to his service. Consequently God blessed her abundantly with other children. Samuel will be especially pleasing to God. He will become a great prophet, exemplifying the integrity of his mother's faith and perseverance.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 1:21-28 (306)

*Mary Ann Getty*

Mark plunges into the middle of Jesus' ministry, describing frenetic activity during the first two days of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum. Jesus' deeds, however, appear as part of a loaded agenda. Often in Mark the time and place are significant: this miracle, for example, happens on the Sabbath, in a synagogue. Witnesses (including readers) are almost forced to make some judgment of their own. "What does this mean?" As if to answer this partially rhetorical question, Mark adds that the people seemed to know the meaning. Jesus speaks with the power of God to back up his words. Like the prophets of old, Jesus is recognized by the common people and even by the demon because his words are effec-

tive. They are accompanied by deeds. In fact, once again, Jesus' words are few. He commands the demon, "Come out of the man!" And immediately the man is healed and the crowds are astonished. The deeds of Jesus are credentials of his identity as the Messiah bringing the reign of God. But it will not be until Jesus' death that anyone understands this enough to confess Jesus' true identity. Finally the centurion says, "Truly this man is the Son of God" (Mk 15:39).

Already in his first chapter Mark hints of divisiveness and trouble brewing because of Jesus' works. The crowds realize that he teaches with "authority, and not like the scribes." The religious leadership was suspected of all kinds of falsehood. The Gospels describe a people yearning for justice and hope who are sadly disappointed in their leadership. This is not only an indictment against that leadership but also a warning that people in authority should act with integrity. Soon the differences between the leaders' and the people's appraisals of Jesus will become more clear and more strident. By the end of the first cycle of five miracles, Mark indicates that some among the leaders wanted to put Jesus to death (3:6). According to Mark, the decision to either follow Jesus or to resist him carries consequences. Following Jesus means acceptance of suffering, doubt, rejection and outright persecution. Mark is writing for a church facing persecution in the Roman Empire. When Mark was writing in the mid-60s, some leaders, like Peter and Paul, had recently been put to death under Nero. Disciples wondered if they were right to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Mark invites us, as disciples and as readers of his Gospel account, to identify with the frightened, discouraged disciples and answer the question for ourselves: Who is Jesus?

## Homily Suggestion

*Virginia Smith*

Both of today's readings pick up precisely where yesterday's ended, so we still find ourselves commiserating with the unfortunate Hannah. However, there's this to be said for Hannah: she prayed for a son; she got a son. No fuss, no muss, no bother. Isn't that the way we all want our prayers answered? Most of us can recall occasions when we've skated into church on one foot and, in one form or another, laid this before God: "Okay, Lord, listen up. I don't have much time. Here's the problem. Here's the solution. Here's your part. Let's go." Having already devised the pre-programmed answer to our prayer, we stare fixedly ahead awaiting God's action. When it doesn't appear, we grump away making little muttering noises about prayer not being answered.

God probably thinks we're pretty funny. While we're looking directly in front of us, God may be sneaking around behind our left ear, whispering urgently, "The answer is over here." We don't hear that because we're tuned into our own frequency. What we must learn is the same lesson Hannah learned: Lay the situation before God and then wait with open mind and heart for any direction the reply may take. It could be just what we expected, or it might be something we would never have considered. Whatever it is, it will be the best of all possible resolutions to our current state of affairs, taking all circumstances, not just ours, into consideration. This laid back approach is not easy to learn, but it will serve us best over the long haul.

January 16, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Wednesday of the 1st Week of the Year

**Theme:** Who is speaking and who is listening?

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Sm 3:1-10,19-20 (307)

Mary Ann Getty

Samuel was presented to the Lord in the temple, just as his mother had promised before he was conceived. Thus Samuel grew up in the service of Eli, whose sons failed to follow in the line of faithful priests. The biblical writer is making a transition from the time of the priests and judges to the time of the kings and prophets. Thus he links the priest Eli, descendant of Aaron the brother of Moses, not with the past, but with the future, with Samuel who will anoint the new king of Israel. To make this transition, Eli is described as an old man and his sons unworthy to be in the service of God.

To illustrate the reliability of Samuel's call, the author describes God's speaking to the boy three times. This repetitive device is often used in storytelling; it is especially effective for a listening audience. Each time the Lord calls, the young Samuel spontaneously answers, "Here I am." He has been prepared by his mother and by Eli to respond generously and courageously to the Lord's call. Although Eli is first confused when the lad appears at his bedside in the middle of the night, the persistent call cannot go unanswered. Samuel is instructed to make his response more specific, expressing his readiness to do whatever God wills.

From that time on, Samuel promises to be "listening" when God speaks. So it was that as Samuel grew and matured, God never permitted any word of his to be ineffective. The prophet speaks on God's behalf and the power of the prophet to perform great signs is meant to demonstrate that God is working through him.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 1:29-39 (307)

Mary Ann Getty

Mk 1:21—3:6 links a series of five miracles together, illustrating that Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom of God with power. Our reading tells of the cure of Simon's mother-in-law, followed by a summary of Jesus' miracle-working activity into the evening on the first day of his ministry. He was in Capernaum, a village by the Sea of Galilee. It was the Sabbath and in the synagogue nearby Jesus had just healed a demoniac. Now he enters the house of Simon, who was to become a great leader of the church. The synagogue would not accept Jesus, but he would be successful in making followers who would gather in house-churches and there worship and minister to the gospel, as Simon's mother-in-law did.

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law is intriguing for a number of reasons. Whereas other miracles are amazingly powerful and dramatic, this one has to do with a common illness and its outcome is that the woman returns to her everyday duties. It is very simply told. Simon's mother-in-law has a fever and takes to her bed. "They," apparently referring to the four original disciples, inform Jesus about her illness and he immediately heals her. She rises and begins to minister to them. Her restoration to everyday life confirms the extent of the miracle that suddenly cures her. The term Mark uses, *diakonia*, means service at table and suggests the regular household chores that constitute hospitality, usually chores done by women. The term came to signify the mission of the church in attending to the needs of the poor, especially the just distribution of the community's goods to the needy.

After describing Jesus' first miracles, Mark summarizes the activity of that first day in Capernaum. Large crowds of people came to Jesus hoping to be cured of all their illnesses. After healing them, Jesus went off to the desert to pray. This is a dynamic which will often be repeated in the Gospel: Jesus' ministry is fueled and refreshed by prayer. Simon and the others searched for him and found him and requested that he return with them to the town where people awaited him once more. Jesus replies that he must move on to other villages to preach the gospel and expel demons. For Mark, exorcisms are symbolic of Jesus' entire mission: He will confront evil and cast it out. He has come to proclaim the reign of God with power. There is an urgency about his mission and about the people's acceptance of him. Who will recognize him and follow him?

## Homily Suggestion

Virginia Smith

Today's first reading is one of the more familiar passages from this section of the Bible. Nearly everyone has heard, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." We may even have co-opted that line for our own prayer. Certainly it's one we could all use with profit. Truthfully, however, for all our good intentions, we're more likely to pray something like, "Listen, Lord, for your servant is speaking." If we're honest, we must admit we spend a lot more time bending God's ear than allowing him to whisper into ours. Prayer is conversation, and conversation is interactive. Once we have put our petitions before the Lord, an equal amount of time could advantageously be spent in quiet reflection, listening for that still, small voice Elijah once heard.

Jesus did that as we see in Mark's comment that, "Rising very early before dawn, he [Jesus] left and went off to a deserted place where he prayed." In Mark's Gospel particularly, Jesus seems to be constantly hemmed in by people who want something from him. Even today we read, "The whole town was gathered at the door." If Jesus needed a quiet time and place to hear the voice of God, how much more do we? At first, it may be difficult to program a few moments of serenity into our hectic schedules, but once we get used to it, we may wonder how we ever got along without it. We will then have our priorities straight and will be speaking and listening in proper proportion.

January 17, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Thursday of the 1st Week of the Year

**Theme:** Separating faith from superstition.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Sm 4:1-11 (308)

*Mary Ann Getty*

The Deuteronomistic writer attributes everything in history to God, victory as well as defeat. All contains a message about God's will. For Israel, the negative events of history ought to be instructive of what the people are doing wrong. Sinners such as Eli's sons are dead and this is part of God's judgment against them. Yet the defeat of God's people not once but twice is confusing. The question of how it is to be interpreted sets the stage for the grown Samuel who is about to emerge, to act and to be recognized as one of the great prophets. The author of 1 Sm is poised to explain the transition to the monarchy when kings will be attentive to the word of the prophet who speaks on God's behalf. And together, king and prophet will shape the future of Israel.

The narrator of our story will ultimately account for the transference of the ark from Shiloh to Jerusalem. The ark is brought from the sanctuary into battle and is stolen from the Israelites by the dreaded Philistines. It is almost as if the ark is thought to possess magical powers. After the first defeat of Israel, the elders wondered how God could permit the Philistines to overtake them. To prevent that from happening again, they order the ark to accompany the troops into battle. Even the Philistines take this as a dangerous omen and anticipate that Israel would win the second battle because of the ark. But the second defeat is worse than the first and the ark is captured by the enemy. Along with the loss of the ark, Israel suffers the loss of thirty thousand soldiers, including Eli's sons. The era of Eli is over.

The Philistines had fought the second battle more fiercely than ever and must have considered the capture of the ark a great booty. But it will bring nothing but trouble to them and they will be eager to return it, along with guilt offerings for having taken it. The ark is not magical, but a symbol of the covenant God has with Israel. Israel will have to relearn to value the ark as symbolic of God's power, and also of God's presence among them.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 1:40-45 (308)

*Mary Ann Getty*

A leper came to Jesus asking to be healed and expressing his faith that Jesus could cure him if he willed. Jesus was willing and, with a word, cured the man. The miracle is simply told. But what follows is one example of the Marcan theological device called the "messianic secret." Mark expresses

this "secret" or "mystery" in a number of ways. Sometimes, as here, the man is told to be quiet and not to speak of the miracle he has experienced. Sometimes, despite the power of the miracle, as in the case of the stilling of the storm, the disciples or other witnesses simply do not understand. They are amazed and frightened, but they do not "get" it. They miss the connection between the miracle and Jesus' identity as the Son of God. For Mark, no human being recognizes Jesus' true identity until the cross when the centurion confesses that Jesus is the Son of God. For Mark it is necessary to journey with Jesus to the cross and witness not only his miracles and parables, but his death and ultimately his resurrection.

A curious thing happens in our reading. The man who had just been healed by Jesus defies his orders to remain silent. He does exactly the opposite of what he had been told and starts proclaiming the whole matter openly and freely, spreading it far and wide. Mark makes the point that the gospel could not be contained or kept silent. But when he joins this assertion to the messianic secret, readers are sometimes confused. Mark is actually pointing out the continuum between real healing and becoming a disciple who is commissioned, on the authority of his own experience, to share his faith and spread the word.

With his emphasis on the cross, Mark implies that suffering must be expected. Like the first generation of disciples, believers will experience doubt and fear, resistance and persecution. They should not be scandalized by these. There is no resurrection without the cross. Writing for a persecuted church, Mark is trying to encourage his readers to realize that Jesus' identity is a mystery and that miracles only lead to faith if there is commitment to the person of Jesus.

## Homily Suggestion

*Virginia Smith*

We may be puzzled by the importance placed on the presence of the Ark of the Covenant in today's first reading. Placing faith in an object rather than in God seems to us superstitious, and in our day it most certainly would be. But in ancient times, gods were, to a certain extent, portable. They belonged to particular people in specific locales. When Jacob moved his family to Canaan many years earlier, Rachel grabbed the household gods from her father's home, and he promptly ran after the émigrés to try to retrieve them.

We understand God as being in all places at all times, a much more accurate notion that has developed gradually over centuries. Still, if we're honest, vestiges of that earlier belief system remain. How many drivers insist on slapping a St. Christopher medal on their dashboards, even though Christopher was somewhat demoted after Vatican II and his medal never did insure safety if one sped precipitously the wrong way down the interstate? How many Catholics plunk their hands in the holy water upon entering a church and make something vaguely resembling the sign of the cross in the general direction of their heads and torsos without having the slightest idea why they're doing it?

Perfectly valid religious practices, such as holy water, can easily degenerate into superstition if their purpose is not understood or if there seems to be a sort of magical attribute to them. All the more reason to not only know what we believe, but more important, why.

January 18, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Friday of the 1st Week of the Year

**Theme:** Sometimes God can't save us from ourselves.

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 1 Sm 8:4-7,10-22a (309)

*Mary Ann Getty*

The "elders" of Israel are painted as disrespectful of both Samuel and God. Yet they cannot completely deny Samuel's authority as God's prophet. So they come to him with their demands, intent on becoming "like other nations," the exact opposite of what God wants and expects of them. Repeatedly they have been told that they are not like other nations and peoples, that God has chosen them not because they are the most deserving or the greatest, but because the covenant with God has distinguished them from every other nation on earth. Reluctantly, Samuel takes their demands for a king to God, who repeats his instructions to the prophet in the simplest of terms: "Give them what they want. They are not rejecting you but they are rejecting me." Implied is the caution, "Let's see what their own will produces."

Samuel is obedient, but he points out the sum of the experience with a king that the "other nations" have had. If they persist in their demand for a king, God will grant them one and they will not like the outcome. Even though the biblical writer does not share our contemporary concern for human freedom, in this case he is emphasizing that when people insist that they know better than their Creator what is good for them, they just might get it. And it will hurt or even destroy them. Samuel offers no redeeming qualities of a king. Later authors will chronicle a long list of sins the kings commit, many of them against their own people. Despite their frailties and shortcomings, some kings like David and Solomon will remain beloved icons among the people. But by far most of the kings will disappoint and even betray the people's hopes. The biblical author is still explaining how the events of history reflect either faithfulness to the covenant or resistance to it, but all history is under the power of God.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 2:1-12 (309)

*Mary Ann Getty*

Mark has started Jesus' ministry with dramatic healings and people all over are responding. The common folk are positive and enthusiastic, realizing that they have never seen anything like this. They come to Jesus in droves and even bring along some of the most needy, those who cannot walk or stand, their companions who are in need of healing. By contrast, their leaders, represented here by the scribes, are skeptical, critical and challenging.

Miracles, according to Mark, raise further questions

among witnesses, especially about Jesus' identity. They may not even be the best way of discovering who Jesus is. Jesus has the power to perform mighty works, but more importantly, Jesus has the power to forgive sins. With faith the man's inner transformation matches what happens to him outwardly. The reign of God is present when and where people recognize God at work in their lives, give thanks and praise to God, and live in harmony with all creation. Real healing involves spiritual healing. The leaders refuse to believe this. For Mark their refusal is just beginning to reflect their true, inner selves.

Jesus heals the paralytic to show that he has the power to forgive sins. Everyone would agree that only God can forgive sins. So when his words effect the healing of a man who formerly cannot walk, that speaks volumes about Jesus' identity. But for the scribes, this miracle becomes the occasion for controversy, revealing their own insincerity. Jesus proclaims that he does this miracle "so that you may know that the Son of Man has the power to forgive sins." But this miracle does not convince those whose hearts are already hardened. This miracle stirs up the first of many controversies between Jesus and the leaders.

The Gospels identify Jesus as the "Son of Man," a title and an image derived from Daniel that portrays one like a human being who is given power and authority and glory by the "ancient of days," a figure symbolizing God. Often this is the title Jesus uses for himself. The image connects Jesus' earthly ministry of teaching and healing with his death, his resurrection and his ultimate ascent into glory. Jesus' humanity does not in any way diminish his messianic divinity. As the Son of Man Jesus reveals the power and the glory of God.

## Homily Suggestion

*Virginia Smith*

At the time the people come to Samuel requesting a king, they have been living over two centuries as self-regulating tribal units with no central government. This has left them open to being raided and invaded by their stronger neighbors, all of whom have kings. Aha, think the Israelites. That's what we need, and all our troubles will be over. Samuel is just as certain that, on the contrary, their troubles will be just beginning. As he lays out a disturbing list of negatives involving monarchy, we can almost see heads shaking and folks insisting, "Well, it may have been that way for others, but it won't be that way for us!" We always seem to think we can easily avoid the pitfalls so many before us have pitched into headlong. As in this case, we're generally wrong.

The most curious line of the passage, however, may be, "When this takes place, you will complain against the king whom you have chosen, but on that day the Lord will not answer you." Why not? These headstrong Israelites are still the Chosen People, are they not? Oh yes, but what we sometimes forget is that when we set events in motion, even God cannot stop them without stopping everything else along with them. We're all interconnected. Once a snowball starts rolling downhill, it simply gathers size and speed. Asking it to roll itself back to the top of the hill is probably impractical. God would probably like to save us from ourselves upon occasion, but the freedom he has built into us makes that impossible. That might be a great reason to listen to people like Samuel.

January 19, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Saturday of the 1st Week of the Year

**Theme:** God often selects unusual candidates for greatness.

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 1 Sm 9:1-4, 17-19; 10:1a (310)

*Mary Ann Getty*

Several traditions are entwined in 1—2 Sm and 1—2 Kgs. An example is the choice of Saul as the first king of Israel. One tradition says that the people themselves identified Saul as their king when they drew lots. But our story precedes that version and shows the consistent theme that God, through the prophet, ordains the events of history. God, through Samuel, first chooses Saul as king; later the people just think that it is they who make the choice. Saul is chosen before he accomplishes anything or is preparing for anything.

Samuel meets Saul as he was searching for his father's property. Saul seeks the "seer" who might help him in his search. While for Saul the encounter may seem fortuitous, to Samuel it is revealed that Saul will be the first king of Israel. Saul asks for Samuel's help, but Samuel follows the Lord's revelation, telling Saul he must wait until the next day for information about the lost donkeys. First, Samuel will anoint Saul for service to the Lord and to the people. Saul's own agenda will remain secondary. Later the people will think that they themselves have chosen Saul as King. For the time being, this encounter between Samuel and Saul will remain secret and so, of course, will Saul's anointing. The biblical historian will insist that the king serves by God's will and at God's pleasure. If only Saul would be as faithful as Samuel in establishing and maintaining the priorities God has ordained for them.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 2:13-17 (310)

*Mary Ann Getty*

As Jesus proceeds on his mission, he extends the call to others, in addition to the two sets of two brothers he originally commanded to follow him. Mark will periodically note that all kinds of people were attracted to Jesus; any of these could have and probably did continue to follow him and listen to him. But with certain people, Mark also tells us, Jesus took the initiative. In the case of this tax collector, for example, Jesus approaches him and says, "Follow me." Without hesitation, Levi leaves everything behind, just like Simon and Andrew, James and John did. In chapter 3, Mark will name twelve who acted in this same way. As the Gospel continues, we learn that not even these twelve realized com-

pletely who Jesus was or the implications of his mission for them. They will appear sometimes dull and uncomprehending, insensitive when Jesus speaks about his upcoming Passion, without understanding when he speaks in parables or even when he performs miracle after miracle. But these original followers are described as eager and generous, spontaneous and unhesitant as they surrender all that they have and do and set out to become Jesus' disciples.

Tax collectors did not enjoy a good reputation. There were many taxes and tolls and people were suspicious either that the collectors skimmed off money for themselves and/or that they worked too hard for the Romans as a government that enslaved them. So generous was Levi in his response to Jesus that he hosted a supper for his new master and invited many others like himself. Strict Jews, notably the Pharisees, kept kosher homes and shrank from eating with sinners or anyone who would render them "unclean." It is such people who protested that Jesus was eating and associating with sinners. At the same time, the implication was that these Pharisees were not sinners. Mark makes it clear that Jesus could read people's hearts as well as their actions. Jesus' response to his critics is to quote the proverb saying that it is the sick, not the well, who need a doctor. Jesus has come to call sinners, not the healthy. But if the Pharisees continue to reject the message Jesus brings, the implications are clear. They will be rejecting the Messiah and all the blessings of the kingdom of God come. Those who are self-righteous pronounce themselves righteous and therefore not in need of God or God's blessings. They will in turn be pronouncing themselves out of reach of God's grace.

## Homily Suggestion

*Virginia Smith*

Any high school teacher will tell you that the seniors who march up the aisle at graduation with potential greatness written all over them are not always those who return to their class reunions ten or twenty years later with marks of success. Surprisingly, it can be the student who barely qualified for graduation who has blossomed in ways no one could have conceived.

Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, to see some of the candidates for prominence God selects. Today we have two of the most unlikely. Saul's family stems from the smallest and most insignificant of Israel's tribes. Granted, Saul is tall, dark and handsome, but those are hardly qualifications for leadership. Yet, he is God's choice for Israel's first king. Samuel continues to have serious reservations about the whole business (reservations that will later be borne out), but he anoints Saul anyway and hopes for the best, probably sighing mightily as he does so.

Tax collectors, Levi among them, rarely headed anybody's popularity list. There were a host of reasons for Jesus to pass him by, and only one to select him, namely that he was the person Jesus wanted for the job.

We may think we'd be the last person God would earmark for special distinction, but God doesn't think the way humans do (for which we can be immensely grateful). Each of us has a role, a mission in life, just as Saul and Levi did. Our task is to discover what that is and live it out as fully and wholeheartedly as we can.

January 21, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Monday of the 2nd Week of the Year

**Theme:** What kind of wineskin am I?

**Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Sam 15:16-23 (311)**

*John J. McDermott*

The tragic story of King Saul sets the stage for David's rise to power. Saul illustrates the human shortcomings of God's chosen ones, yet it also comes back to a theme that has been present from the beginning of the Bible's story of humanity: God will try again and again to establish a good relationship with people. From the sins before the flood to the lack of faith during the journey through the wilderness, and now to Saul's failure, God will always come up with a new way to restore the relationship.

In this story, Samuel, God's spokesperson, had told Saul to attack the Amalekites and completely destroy every man, woman and child, and all of their livestock, a practice referred to as "the ban." The Amalekites were old enemies of the Israelites, having attacked them on their journey to the promised land (Ex 17:8-16), and that old animosity may explain the harshness of Samuel's orders. Still, the story is not trying to justify the harsh practice, but to show that the king must always follow the words of the prophet. As it turns out, Saul does not follow the orders, but keeps the king alive and saves the best of the livestock to sacrifice to the Lord.

Saul's actions may seem understandable and even admirable, since he doesn't disobey for any personal gain, but to offer praise to God. But the story has shown this as a pattern of behavior with Saul. This is the second time he disobeyed Samuel (cf. 1 Sm 13), and here he reveals that he knows he is guilty by trying to shift the blame to his soldiers. Samuel is aware of this pattern of behavior; he equates disobedience with divination, an illicit practice of which Saul is also guilty. Saul repeatedly demonstrates that following the prophet's words are not a high priority; therefore he is unfit to be king.

**Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 2:18-22 (311)**

*John J. McDermott*

This incident occurs early in the Gospel, when Jesus has begun to attract attention, both positive and negative. At this point the question about Jesus' disciples not fasting is not necessarily hostile. Jesus is unquestionably different from other religious teachers, and even those who supported him had genuine questions about his behavior.

Fasting was required on the Day of Atonement, but in the Hebrew Scriptures public fasts were frequently proclaimed for other occasions as well. By New Testament

times fasting as a routine practice had become common, and had a public dimension to it. Fasting was a way of calling on the community to repent, and of showing God that the community was worthy of saving.

Jesus responds with two images. The first, of celebrating in the presence of the groom, is a statement that God's salvation has already begun. There is no need to fast because God is already saving us whether we are worthy or not. But Jesus says there will be times to fast when the groom is gone. In the Gospel the kingdom of God is both already here and not yet come; there are times to celebrate and times to fast.

The other image is of cloth patches and wineskins. Old ways of thinking are not only inadequate, but are destructive. There is something entirely new about Jesus and it can no longer be religion as usual or even reform as usual. While the image recognizes the value of preserving the old, it calls on Jesus' followers to rethink all practices, including fasting.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Auer*

One day a couple approached me after Mass and asked, "Why do we sometimes sing all the verses of the opening hymn and sometimes only one?" I told them, "How can the congregation sing four verses when the organist plays only one? When more are played, the result varies. It is physically impossible for pigs to look up at the sky, and cows can be identified by nose prints."

If you see little or no sense in my answer, don't feel bad. In fact, if it makes perfect sense to you, you might consider worrying about yourself. I was trying to illustrate the feeling we may get from today's Gospel. Jesus seems to answer the question about fasting—although we're not entirely sure we understand it—but in the next breath he begins talking about clothing repair and winemaking. Let's work on finding a connection and an application.

New wine was put into goatskin sewed tightly together at the edges to form a watertight container. As the wine aged, it stretched the goatskin. A second batch of new wine poured into an already stretched, taut goatskin would cause it to burst. Jesus was new wine. Accepting him and his message called for being or becoming a new wineskin—flexible and willing to be stretched, especially in service to others. The Pharisees in particular had become old wineskins, so set in their pious practices that they resisted and resented Jesus.

We can ask ourselves: What kind of wineskin am I? Am I flexible and open to the ways God may want to stretch me? Or am I tight and closed because I have everything all figured out? This has little to do with age itself. Many eighty-year-olds are wonderfully flexible (at least mentally), and many eighteen-year-olds are set in their ways. Here's a test: Choose a topic that's not absolutely essential dogma, but one on which you have a strong opinion. Now imagine that Jesus himself urges you to adopt a very different view on it. What's your first reaction? "But Jesus would never do that because other views are wrong"? That may be a sign of needing to become a newer wineskin.

January 22, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Tuesday of the 2nd Week of the Year

**Theme:** Trusting God's decisions.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 1 Sm 16:1-13 (312)

*John J. McDermott*

After Saul's disobedience of Samuel's orders, God tells Samuel to stop grieving and go to Bethlehem and anoint a new king. It is noteworthy that Samuel is grieving over Saul's failure, and at the same time he is afraid Saul will kill him if he finds out he is seeking a new king. The human side of being a prophet comes through here. Like Jeremiah, who lamented at length about the difficulty of his mission, Samuel, too, experienced emotional distress and the threat of physical danger as he carried out God's orders.

Samuel avoids the threat of Saul discovering his intentions by going to Bethlehem under the pretence of offering a sacrifice. Trickery is not unusual for those chosen by God, and the type of sacrifice Samuel comes to offer (*zebach*) is the most general type, which could be used for almost any occasion. The vagueness of his intent causes the elders of Bethlehem to fear Samuel: He may be offering a sacrifice because of some sin they have committed. In any case, the ploy works, and Saul discovers nothing.

The choice of David follows a typical biblical motif, that of the youngest son being chosen by God. David is not even present at the assembly, but is out shepherding the flocks, as if there could not possibly be any reason for the great prophet to meet him. But when God tells Samuel that David is the one, Samuel does not hesitate to anoint him, being obedient to God's word even if it is not what he expected.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 2:23-28 (312)

*John J. McDermott*

In every encounter with the Pharisees Jesus has silenced them, and not surprisingly they are becoming more hostile and watching every move of his to catch him at something. The Sabbath was to be a day of rest "even in plowing time and in harvest time" (Ex 34:21). As time went on the biblical law became more detailed, with long legalistic distinctions on what could and what could not be done on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, Essenes and others disagreed on many of the specifics, but all agreed on the importance of keeping the Sabbath. Clearly, the disciples' casually picking grain as they walked through a field violated the Pharisees' interpretation of the law.

The first part of Jesus' response is an example from Scripture. David's men ate the bread reserved for priests

(1 Sm 21:1-6), showing that there are circumstances in which it is necessary to make exceptions to the rules. Jesus is not arguing with the Pharisees over the correct interpretation of the Sabbath law, but saying that whatever interpretation one accepts, it is not to be followed in a legalistic way.

Jesus continues his response by going back to the original purpose of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. This would make sense even in a purely secular sense, since regular times of rest have value. But Jesus takes it further, saying that the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not about detailed legalisms, and is more than physical rest. It is a time to recognize one's relationship with the Lord.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Auer*

A principal named Sister Mary Ann once took over teaching duties in a second grade classroom when a substitute could not be found for the teacher who was ill. She was enjoying this temporary return to classroom teaching, and in particular she enjoyed putting her own stamp and style on the lesson plans for the day. But apparently it was a departure from the regular teacher's format and style. About two thirds through the morning, a small girl raised her hand and said, "Sister, you're doing everything all wrong."

God is like Sister Mary Ann at times. Sometimes to our thinking God just doesn't use good sense—or even follow the rules. Today's readings are excellent examples. Out of all the sons of Jesse, whom does God choose to be King of Israel? Not the stalwart and seasoned Eliab nor any of the older sons of Jesse. No, God chooses the kid David, the caboose of the brood. And when the disciples of Jesus break a Sabbath law and hear about it from the Pharisees, Jesus in effect tells the Pharisees, "Come on, lighten up." We grow up with certain ideas of what makes sense and what doesn't. They come from our family, our friends, our political affiliations, and even from our religion itself—as we understand and interpret it. Every now and then, God nudges his way into our cozy circle of set ideas and says, "No, that's not how it's supposed to be."

As God noted in our reading from First Samuel, "Man sees the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart." God looks not only into the hearts of persons but the heart of any situation. From appearances, we may think the situation calls for retaliation, but God knows that it calls for nonviolent dialogue. From appearances, we may think the situation mandates strict enforcement of the law, whereas God knows that circumstances call for lightening up—or vice versa.

We can't be expected to see people or situations with God's eyes. But it's an awfully good idea—even when we feel pretty certain about something—to ask God, "Is this the way you see it? Is this what you want?"

January 23, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Wednesday of the 2nd Week of the Year

**Theme:** Facing my own Goliath.

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 1 Sam 17:32-33, 37, 40-51 (313)

*John J. McDermott*

Although the Spirit of God immediately rushed upon David when Samuel anointed him, he does not actually become king for some time. There are actually two traditions of how David came to national prominence; besides this story of his battle with Goliath, there is a story of his musical abilities bringing him to Saul's court (1 Sam 16:14-23), showing the wide range of gifts God might use in a person.

This story emphasizes David's experiences as a shepherd in qualifying him for leadership. Initially David is not at the battlefield because he is watching the sheep, and when he offers to fight Goliath, Saul dismisses him because he is "only a youth." But in fact, David points out, in protecting the sheep he has gotten experience fighting off wild animals. At the same time, David does not take personal credit for his exploits, saying it was the Lord who saved him from their attacks. Thus David shows two key requirements for the leader of the chosen people—human experience and faith in God.

David's victory over Goliath relies on a bit of deception. The stones are hidden in David's pouch, and Goliath thinks that David is coming at him with only his shepherd's staff as a weapon. After Goliath taunts him, David says that weapons are irrelevant: It is the Lord who will protect him and the Israelites. He also says the purpose of his victory will be "so the whole land shall see that Israel has a God." Like other major events in the story of the chosen people, beginning with the promises to Abraham, the purpose is never simply for the Israelites' own benefit. The whole world will learn about this God who protects those who seem to have no power.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 3:1-6 (313)

*John J. McDermott*

Mark reports another dispute over the Sabbath, an indication of the importance the issue had. Jesus is in a synagogue and encounters a man with a withered hand, which the Pharisees see as an opportunity to catch him violating the law. Jesus responds to the Pharisees' hostility with a question: "Is it permitted to do a good deed on the Sabbath—or an evil one? To preserve life—or to destroy it?" In fact, issues like this were among those on which Jews were in disagreement. The Pharisees held that it was acceptable to save the

life of an animal on the Sabbath, while the Essenes said it was not. As in the previous incident of picking grain on the Sabbath, the Pharisees are looking at it legalistically, and Jesus is using it to teach about the meaning of the Sabbath and about himself.

Jesus' question to the Pharisees is making use of their own position. If they believe it is acceptable to save an animal, then all the more should it be acceptable to heal a person. One might object that the man's withered hand doesn't put his life in danger and Jesus could just as well wait a day to heal him. But in the gospels, especially in Mark, Jesus is about immediate action. If the action is good, do it now. To make the man wait a day just to observe some legalism is to devalue his life.

For Jesus the Sabbath is about giving life. To reduce it to an argument over the specifics of what constitutes work and rest is to miss out on the life God gives and, in effect, to destroy life.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Auer*

Most people like to root for the underdog—unless they're the underdog's opponent—so we enjoy David and Goliath stories, at least when David wins. Let's hear it for Rocky Balboa and the high school Hoosiers from tiny Milan, Indiana. But what exactly is the point of the original, biblical David and Goliath story? That God likes underdogs, too? Does it illustrate the comforting adage, "If you have faith, you and God are an overwhelming majority"?

Perhaps the story will be most useful to us if we see it not just as one of the mighty deeds God arranged a long time ago, but as something very modern, very contemporary...up close and very personal.

What is your Goliath...your interior Goliath, the Goliath that's part of you and perhaps frightens you? What challenges and sneers at the idea of your becoming a saint, as Goliath challenged and sneered at the army of Israel? Saintliness is, after all, your calling. For some of us, Goliath is a sinful habit that keeps repeating until it reaches Goliath proportions and seems unconquerable. For others, it's a hidden dependency or addiction. Many of us have a paradoxical Goliath of ordinariness that sneers, "You're a very common, ordinary Christian. You're not Mother Teresa or Francis of Assisi, and you never will be one of God's elite, so stop deluding yourself with aspirations to holiness." Closely related is a Goliath of boredom because our spiritual life is stagnating. For still others of us, Goliath is our personal history, a past filled with things we wish we hadn't done and which still seem in many ways to define us.

What can the original David and Goliath story teach us about our personal one? Probably the first lesson is that we must face Goliath. Preferably now, not next year when Goliath will have grown another foot and put on another hundred pounds of belligerent bulk. Perhaps facing Goliath means receiving Reconciliation, seeing a counselor or spiritual director, doing some pertinent spiritual reading, making a methodical plan, rekindling spiritual enthusiasm, or spending more time in prayer. The second lesson we can learn is to remember how the first David and Goliath story turned out.

January 24, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Thursday—Francis de Sales

**Theme:** When they admire somebody else more.

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 1 Sm 18:6-9; 19:1-7  
(314)

*John J. McDermott*

The story of David's rise to power continues. He has been successful in battle, so Saul has put him in charge of the warriors. Along the way he has become close friends with Saul's son Jonathan. In this incident we see the continuing decline of Saul's mental state. Instead of being grateful for David's defeat of the Philistines, he is unreasonably jealous because some women are praising David more highly than him, and eventually he makes plans to kill David.

In many ways Jonathan is an unlikely ally for David. David is an obstacle if he himself has any ambitions to the throne. (In the verses skipped by the lectionary David marries Saul's daughter Michal, giving him some legitimacy to a royal claim.) Jonathan is repeatedly referred to as "Saul's son," even as he takes David's side in the conflict. The story shows the power of human friendship in bringing about God's plan, while military and political power are getting in the way of God's plan.

Jonathan is able to persuade his father not to kill David, but that will not be the end of the situation. Saul will go back and forth, accepting David's service but then again becoming mad with jealousy, and he will end up driving David out of his court. David began as an outsider, a mere youth from whom no one expected anything. He again becomes an outsider, separated from the court of the nation he will soon lead. David's rise to power is a story of God choosing unlikely people and using unexpected means to save the chosen people.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 3:7-12 (314)

*John J. McDermott*

After his encounters with the Pharisees, Jesus withdraws to the lake with his disciples. He not only wants a break from the arguments with the Pharisees, but is also wary of the crowds, and has his disciples have a boat ready in case he wants to get away. The crowds are enthusiastic, but do not yet have a full understanding of who Jesus is.

Mark describes the crowd as coming from both Jewish and gentile territories. This looks ahead to the time when the church will go out to all the nations after Jesus' lifetime. Jesus' reputation as a healer has spread to neighboring countries, but such a varied crowd would have different understandings of who he was. He is more than a healer and mir-

acle worker, and more than a wise teacher, but the full story of who he is will come out only slowly.

As Jesus expels unclean spirits, they cry out, "You are the son of God!" Often the enemies of Jesus have a better awareness of who he is than his supporters do. Even the Pharisees and other religious leaders see how dangerous Jesus is to the status quo, while the adoring crowds seem unable to see beyond the healing Jesus can do for them.

Jesus orders the unclean spirits not to tell anyone who he was, a theme of secrecy that continues until the end of the Gospel. Jesus will later tell his disciples not to reveal who he is, after Peter says Jesus is the Messiah. Any explanation of who Jesus is will be misleading unless it includes his death and resurrection.

**Homily Suggestion**

*Jim Auer*

Chances are some teachers can relate to Saul's situation in today's first reading. The teacher returns to the classroom after a substitute has taken his or her place for a day or more. Let's call the substitute Mrs. Evans. "How did things go while I was gone?" the teacher asks. The kids fill the air with comments like, "Mrs. Evans really knows how to make school fun," "Mrs. Evans knows about so many things!" "Did you know Mrs. Evans used to be in the army?" No matter how mature and professional the regular teacher is, comments like those produce a twinge that can develop into an ache. Obviously it was not a feel-good experience when Saul heard people singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

There's more involved in these situations than simply being liked or not, having people enjoy your company or not. That something more is being admired, being looked up to. Parents feel that twinge when a child comes home filled with hero worship for a coach, a teacher or a classmate's parent. Political incumbents who lose an election in spite of having worked hard for their constituents' best interests feel it.

Most of us are able to handle it; in fact, we usually get over it fairly quickly. We know that we're called to do the work God assigns us. If we're admired and celebrated for it, that's a very nice perk, but it's not a guaranteed part of the calling. But Saul didn't get over it. He decided to remove the threat, David. Although today's reading ends with a reconciliation, we know from the rest of the story that it was temporary and Saul soon changed his mind.

We're not likely to adopt murderous intentions toward someone who receives more admiration than we do. But it's easy to harbor a bit of resentment that can take the edge off our devotion to duty. Call this understandable human nature, or call it foolish pride and the result of original sin. But if we feel it, we need to make certain it doesn't grow into a malignant festering, as it did with Saul.

January 25, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Friday—Conversion of Paul

**Theme:** Big Brother Paul.

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** Acts 22:3-16 (519)

*John J. McDermott*

In his letters Paul frequently uses his personal experiences to explain his theological beliefs, and Luke portrays him the same way in Acts. In defending himself to the crowd by telling the story of his conversion, Paul is also telling them what it means to be a follower of Christ. In this incident, Paul is visiting Jerusalem, and a crowd of Jews recognizes who he is and attacks him. The Romans intervene to stop the uproar, and arrest Paul, but before they take him away he addresses the crowd.

Paul begins by saying, "I am a Jew," in the present tense. Both in his letters and in this speech, Paul refers to himself as someone who is still a Jew, not someone who used to be a Jew but is now a Christian. Paul was not cutting himself off from the past. He was embracing his tradition, and at the same time saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the promises of that tradition. Paul goes on to describe his strict education and his persecution of Christians, making the point that he was zealous and committed to the faith all his life. Thus only something as profound as his experience on the road to Damascus could change his point of view. His personal encounter with Christ was so profound that it did force him to radically rethink his views.

The encounter also left him helpless and unable to see, so he is dependent on the help of those who were with him and of a stranger, Ananias in Damascus. Whereas in the past he relied on his education and personal zeal, he now relies on others. Ananias also gives him his sight back and teaches him to see the meaning of what happened on the road. It was to send him on a mission to all the world to witness to Christ. The very personal encounter on the road was not meant for Paul alone, but for everyone he could reach.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 16:15-18 (519)

*John J. McDermott*

This passage was not part of Mark originally. The Gospel ended at 16:8, with the report that the women left the tomb, terrified. Apparently, that seemed too abrupt to some in the early church, and additional endings were added. Although not part of the original, these additions provide more closure and address issues the early church was facing in a more direct way than rest of the Gospel does. They are considered both inspired and canonical,

These words of Jesus occur at a post-resurrection appear-

ance to his disciples, addressing the mission of his followers. He tells them to go out to all the world and proclaim the good news. During his lifetime Jesus had told his disciples and others who recognized who he was not to reveal it to anyone, but now the disciples are to proclaim him openly.

He also tells them that various signs will accompany those who believe. Some are the same as what Jesus had done: expelling demons, healing the sick. Others are strange abilities, like handling deadly snakes and drinking poison without harm. These signs reveal the diversity in the early church; the rest of the New Testament does not promote handling snakes or drinking poison (although Lk 10:19 mentions treading on snakes), but evidently there were some who were familiar with the practices. Whether one looks for signs or not, faith does make a person new, and that will manifest itself in some way.

**Homily Suggestion**

*Jim Auer*

Some of us are lucky enough to grow up with a big brother or big sister (or both) whom we could count on for help when needed. But all of us have a huge family of big brothers and sisters who have reached full Christian adulthood—the saints in heaven. Many have their own field of expertise, so to speak; we call them patron saints. Lose something? That's Saint Anthony's department, of course. Today we celebrate the Conversion of Saint Paul. Of what or whom is he the patron saint? Victims of divine lightning strikes? One Catholic Internet site lists no less than fifty-three patronage items for Saint Paul, including hailstorms, snake bites and public relations work. Fifty-three is a lot for one saint to handle, but Paul himself said he had become "all things to all people," so he can probably handle a few more.

Have you ever felt a combination of foolishness and shame because you were dead wrong about something you had loudly and militantly claimed to be right about? Paul knows about that. He was on his way to Damascus to search out and haul in those subversive villains who followed Jesus. They needed to be brought to justice and if necessary wiped out. Or so Paul thought and lived—until Jesus knocked him off his, let's say, donkey, and onto his...let's say donkey again.

Have you ever gotten the cold shoulder from practically everybody—precisely for doing the right thing? Paul knows about that, too. He embraced faith in Jesus—the right thing to do. The result? His Jewish brethren considered him a traitor. When he told his new Christian brethren, "I'm one of you now," they said, "Yeah, right."

Have you ever had a disagreement with a close, beloved friend that became so intense you just couldn't be together anymore? Perhaps you were even working for the same cause, but now you had to work separately. That's painful, and Paul knows about that, too. He and Barnabas had been missionaries together, sharing a multitude of adventures for the spread of the Gospel. But as Acts 15:39 tells us, "The disagreement between them became so sharp that they parted company."

Paul lived life and the Christian faith with such broad strokes that there's scarcely an experience he didn't have. Whatever is going on in your life these days, chances are you can talk to big brother Paul about it.

January 26 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Saturday—Timothy and Titus

**Theme:** Children in the faith.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 2 Tim 1:1-8 (520)

*John J. McDermott*

The pastoral letters (Titus and 1 & 2 Tim) were written at a time the church was evolving. Compared to other letters in the New Testament, they are less focused on issues of a church expanding into new areas, and more on the ongoing issues faced by settled communities. Every generation needs the message of the gospel addressed to its particular circumstance. While Titus and 1 Tim address issues of church structure and leadership, 2 Tim has a more personal tone, purporting to be from Paul in prison as he is near death. It is in the form of a last testimony, encouraging Timothy to be faithful in his leadership and in his personal faithfulness. Most scholars do not believe it was written by Paul himself, but by someone after Paul's lifetime who was inspired by his work.

The opening greeting is similar to that in other letters. Timothy is referred to as Paul's "child," i.e., that it was from Paul that Timothy was given his mission. Timothy is mentioned numerous times in Paul's authentic letters and in Acts as an associate of Paul who often worked closely with him. He is thus an appropriate person to receive final exhortations to continue being strong in faith.

Like other Pauline letters, this one includes a section of thanksgiving. Paul gives thanks for Timothy's faith, which had also been the faith of his grandmother and mother. According to Acts 16:1-3, Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father, and had not been circumcised until after he met Paul. The letter shows Paul crediting Timothy's mother and grandmother with shaping his faith, even though it seems they had never had him circumcised. Paul's own role is described as laying his hands on Timothy and passing on the Spirit—a Spirit which prompts one to spread the faith and to endure hardships.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 3:20-21 (316)

*John J. McDermott*

This incident occurs right after Jesus names his twelve disciples, which took place up on a mountain. Mountaintops are places of divine encounters, so the mention here that Jesus and his disciples returned to a house is a return to ordinary life. Becoming a disciple does change a person, but there is still ordinary domestic life and the same problems everyone else faces.

One of the problems they face which is the same as before is the crush of the crowds becoming too much, in this case, to

the extent that they can't get food—in part just a practical problem, but a particular one for the disciples, since previously Jesus had said they are to be celebrating instead of fasting as long as the groom is with them.

That Jesus has allowed the situation to get out of control like this has obviously alarmed his family, and they come to get him, claiming that he is out of his mind. This is a serious claim, since in biblical times insanity and demonic possession were often equated, and Jesus' opponents will explicitly accuse him of being possessed by a demon. A consistent theme throughout Mark is that those who might be expected to be closest to Jesus are often the least understanding of who he is. Jesus will frequently criticize the disciples for their lack of understanding, even though they hear all of his teachings and witness all of his healings. With Jesus, no one has a lock on the best understanding of who he is.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Auer*

We celebrate the feast of Timothy and Titus today. Paul was their mentor in the Christian faith, and he looked upon them as his beloved children, as is evident in the tender introductions of his letters to them. "To Timothy, my child whom I love." "To Titus, my true child in our common faith." We too have "children in our common faith"—all of us, not just bishops, pastors, catechists, and those brave people who volunteer to help out with Vacation Bible School.

Many of us have our own biological children. We brought them up in the faith—and some of them practice it, and some of them don't, at least as we see it. Maybe they faithfully share the Eucharist with us, even if we're separated by many miles. Maybe they've become Christmas and Easter churchgoers, or not even that. Maybe they're into New Age crystals and cosmic consciousness instead. In any and all these cases, they are still our spiritual as well as biological children. Frequently all we can do is pray for them. Unfortunately, that phrase "all we can do is pray" sounds as though prayer is a feeble, last ditch measure. That is definitely not the case. Ask Saint Monica, who had an unruly child named Augustine.

Many of us have been godparents and Confirmation sponsors. This is far more than a social or family honor. It sets up a permanent spiritual relationship, whether one or both parties are active in it or not. If it hasn't been an active relationship, let's revive it in prayer.

All of us are the spiritual children of many people, whom we should remember in gratitude. We may not even know or have heard of some of them personally, such as all the bishops who have prayed for all the faithful of the diocese, past, present and future. There are, of course, our own parents, grandparents, godparents and Confirmation sponsors. In many cases, these people have entered eternal life. Do you think they have forgotten us? From where they are, they can see even more clearly how important our spiritual welfare is, and undoubtedly are doing all they can to aid us.

And of course today would be a great day for a prayer like, "Dear Saints Timothy and Titus: We've never met, but I admire and celebrate your service to the Lord—and, now that we're talking, you know I could use some help with...."

January 28, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Monday—Thomas Aquinas

**Theme:** The logic of forgiveness.

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 2 Sm 5:1-7, 10 (317)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

The northern tribes (“All the tribes of Israel”) recognize David as one of their own. They also recall that it was David who led the Israelites on their campaigns against their enemies. Furthermore, as we read in 1 Sm 18:16, all Israel and Judah loved David for his successes in battle. They also refer to a promise of YHWH that David would lead Israel and Judah. The upshot is that David makes an agreement with them before YHWH and they anoint David as king of Israel.

Even at such a triumphant moment, however, there is a hint of storms ahead. David is now king of Israel and Judah. After Solomon’s death the kingdom will be divided and sometimes north and south will be opposed to one another.

David takes an important step when he captures Jerusalem. Since Jerusalem was located between the northern and southern tribes, it could to some extent unite the kingdom. Later (24:18-25), David will build an altar there—another move to unify the tribes. Because of David’s devotion, God granted relief to the country.

At this point (v. 10) we hear that YHWH was with David and made him steadily more powerful. He seems to be happily in control of God’s people. Within a short time he also administers a crushing defeat to the Philistines and other neighboring kingdoms.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 3:22-30 (317)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

Commentator Wilfrid Harrington entitles Mk 3:20-35 “His Own Received Him Not.” The first two verses of this section were used last Saturday. It is helpful to recall them because they introduce today’s passage by bringing Jesus’ family into the picture. They apparently view his zeal (not even having time to eat) as fanaticism, as bordering on demonic possession (vv. 31-35 will complete the episode).

The scribes take up the same theme. They say it loud and clear: Jesus is in league with the devil. That is why he casts out demons. Jesus counters with parables. The point is that Satan is not so foolish as to destroy his own kingdom. As the second parable indicates, Jesus shows his superiority over Satan by casting Satan out. Jesus is like the stronger man who ties up a strong man and plunders his property.

Then Jesus announces a solemn warning that is loud and clear. By accusing Jesus of being in league with the devil, the scribes are uttering a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This

is “an everlasting sin” since it attributes to Satan what is the work of the Holy Spirit. Anyone who clings to such an attitude cannot be forgiven. Such a person is denying the very source of forgiveness.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Johnston*

To say that Abraham Lincoln was president at a time when the nation was sharply divided is a monumental understatement, but his problems extended beyond the quarrel with the South. There were many even in his own political party who disagreed with him vehemently. Lincoln was, however, able to prevail in many an argument simply through the sheer force of his logic.

Once, having failed to persuade a stubborn opponent from his own party of the error of his reasoning, Lincoln said, “Well, let’s see. How many legs has a cow?”

“Four, of course,” came the opponent’s surly reply.

“That’s right,” said Lincoln. “Now, suppose we call the cow’s tail a leg; how many legs would the cow have?”

“Why, five, of course,” was the response.

“Now that’s where you’re wrong,” said Lincoln. “Simply calling a cow’s tail a leg doesn’t make it a leg.”

In today’s Gospel, the opponents of Jesus seem to think that simply by asserting something they have established it as true. In fact, Jesus is able to use some rather devastating logic himself to dismantle their claim that he casts out demons by the power of Satan. In a bit of reasoning that Lincoln himself later borrowed, Jesus spoke of a house divided against itself being unable to survive. Would Satan be foolish enough to provide the means for his own destruction?

There is a deeper lack of understanding on the part of the scribes that, according to Jesus, makes them susceptible to “everlasting guilt.” They have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, for it is only through the action of the Spirit that God’s activity in the world can be attested. To fail to recognize this action of God (or, better yet, to attribute it to some other power) is blasphemous.

It seems contrary to the whole ministry of forgiveness that characterizes Jesus for him to say of a sin that “it will never be forgiven.” But if the scribes are going to cling to their attitude and not accept the work of the Spirit manifested in Jesus, there is no means by which God’s mercy can reach them. That’s the last piece of logic that seems to have escaped them: only those can be absolved who confess that they have something that needs to be forgiven.

January 29, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Tuesday of the 3rd Week of the Year

**Theme:** All in the family?

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 2 Sm 6:12b-15, 17-19  
(318)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

David is informed that YHWH had blessed Obededom and his whole house because the ark of the covenant was kept in his house. This motivates David to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

The transfer is made amid great festivities. The description of the procession with its repetitious sacrifices, blasting of horns, shouts of joy and dancing paints a picture of unrestrained joy. David himself is in perpetual motion. He wears only a linen apron and comes "dancing before the LORD with abandon." The linen apron or loincloth, the offering of sacrifices and the blessing of the people suggest that David is acting as a priest.

In any case, the celebration's purpose is to worship YHWH and help impress the people with YHWH's magnificence. For the moment, David is satisfied with placing the ark in a tent. Perhaps, though, he was already considering plans to build a house worthy of God's dignity.

After the ark is placed in the tent, David "offered holocausts and peace offerings." The holocausts express the people's total dedication to God. The peace offerings express their union with God and with one another. No doubt it was meat from the peace offerings that was distributed to the people along with bread and raisin cakes.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 3:31-35 (318)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

This is the final scene of "His Own Received Him Not." We learn that the "relatives" mentioned in 4:20 consist of Jesus' mother and brothers. Given the rest of the NT and the teaching of the Catholic Church, we cannot say that Mary shared his brothers' sentiments. (Our faith also tells us that these "brothers" are not children of Mary.) Perhaps Mary is present to bring some semblance of sanity into the situation. The Gospels do indicate that Jesus' relatives did not accept him and his mission until after the resurrection.

Jesus uses the occasion to proclaim an extremely important teaching. Whoever does the will of God is Jesus' brother and sister and mother. The statement tells us about Jesus' intimate relationship with God the Father. Jesus knows what God is all about. He has no hesitation to speak about God's will and what God can do. When we recall Mk 1:1, we have no hesitation in calling God Jesus' Father.

In a word, God's family is Jesus and all who believe in him. Men and women are in a real sense his brothers and sisters. Jesus even views one who does God's will as his mother. Such a designation might imply the mission to which disciples are called: They are to mother people into the divine family.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Johnston*

About a month after the official data from the 2000 census were released, journalist Amy Benfer made this observation: "We all know what the nuclear family looks like: It looks like a cliché, a fond and fuzzy cliché evoked by episodes of *Leave It to Beaver* or *Ozzie and Harriet*." Benfer noted that the "ideal" American family—a father and mother legally married to each other (preferably the first time for each), raising their biological children—was little more than "a stubborn relic, a national symbol that has yet to be retired as threadbare and somewhat unrealistic."

That census of eight years ago showed that, for the first time, the percentage of Americans living in a traditional "nuclear" family dipped to below twenty-five percent of the population. In its place were to be found all the various permutations and "extensions" of family: single-parent households, step-moms, step-dads, step-kids, grandparents acting as parents, same-sex couples with adoptive kids, and unmarried couples with kids from their current (and maybe previous) "union." Yikes!

We've even come up with a new term—"blended family"—to replace the old (and apparently too negative) designation of "broken family." Benfer summed it all up by saying, "Americans have redefined the American family."

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus does some redefining of "family" himself. In the presence of his closest relatives, he declares that his "real" family comprises all those who do the will of God. By using the analogy of what we would call an "extended" family (and stretching it to accommodate so many), Jesus widens the notion of "salvation," implying that it might be available to a much larger number than the scribes (who were still in his audience) would have allowed. It is, says Jesus, one's relationship to God that is all important, and, in that sense, good deeds take on more significance than being able to trace one's bloodline to Abraham.

There is a teaching from the Talmud that says we humans have three "friends," so to speak, on whom we rely. First, there is wealth, but this goes with us only while good fortune lasts. Second, there is our family, but those "blood" relatives go with us only as far as the grave and then leave us there. Third, there are the good deeds that we do during our lifetime. These, says the Talmud, go with us beyond the grave.

From a Christian perspective, we might add that it is these good deeds ("doing the will of God") that make us part of the "extended family" of Jesus, and that relationship will also go with us "beyond the grave."

January 30, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Wednesday of the 3rd Week of the Year

**Theme:** Listen up!

## Exegesis of the First Reading, 2 Sm 7:4-17 (319)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

The context indicates that David has misgivings about living in a house of cedar while the ark of God dwells in a tent. He decides that he wants to build God a worthy dwelling.

God, however, has other ideas. YHWH reminds David that he has been satisfied to live in a tent. After all, it was in a tent that YHWH dwelt all through the desert and up to the present. YHWH has never asked for a house

YHWH reminds David of how he has been present to David in a special way since the day he called David as a shepherd to lead Israel in battle. Indeed, it was YHWH who destroyed David's enemies and will make David "famous like the great ones of the earth."

After that preamble, YHWH promises to be with Israel and protect Israel. Indeed, YHWH will build David a house, a dynasty. David's successor will build a house for YHWH. YHWH "will make his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me." Here we have the beginning of royal messianism. The covenant is now concentrated on David and his successors. God will always be faithful to his promises.

## Exegesis of the Gospel, Mk 4:1-20 (319)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

Jesus prefaces his first parable with the cry: "Hear this!" He ends with: "Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear." The parable offers us a bucolic scene. A sower sows seed. Some of the seed is unproductive because of various circumstances. Yet, there is an abundant harvest. Jesus' preaching as well as that of his disciples and the early church will have its effect. Jesus' followers must never be discouraged.

After this parable, Jesus explains why he uses parables. Here the word *parable* shades over into the meaning "riddle." Apparently these statements of Jesus are meant to explain why many people resisted the words of Jesus and his church. It was within God's plan (see Is 6:9) that some would not believe. This is a difficult notion. However, in the Bible we read that God is in charge of everything and yet humans have the freedom to respond positively or negatively to God's word.

The following explanation in vv. 14-20 is probably an interpretation of vv. 1-9 worked out by the early church.

It may be interesting to compare this section of Mk with Rv. In the latter we have much the same message. In Rv the

bucolic scene is transformed into a cosmic drama. Satan is powerful, but through his Word, God conquers Satan and his minions.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Johnston*

The famous Russian actor and dramatic coach Boris Marshalov was treated to a visit to the spectators' gallery of the House of Representatives. After the visit, Marshalov's host and tour guide asked him what he thought of the proceedings.

"Congress is so strange," responded Marshalov. "Someone gets up to speak and says nothing. Nobody listens—and then everybody disagrees."

There are probably some cynics out there who think this might be a fair summary of the history of Christian evangelization: a good deal of "proclaiming," not enough listening, and plenty of fighting about what was said. Perhaps there are even some frustrated preachers who would see these remarks as capturing the dynamic of their Sunday service and maybe even their whole ministry. They work at their craft, trying to make the Word of God accessible and exciting to those in the pews, but often what they disseminate falls on stone-deaf ears.

In the liturgy of the Byzantine Rite, the reading of the gospel is preceded by this sharp admonition: "Wisdom! Be attentive!" It's like coaches who preface an important message to the team with the phrase "Listen up!"

Before starting the Parable of the Sower, Jesus—perhaps with a sense of irony—says to the audience, "Listen carefully to this" or, in a more succinct translation, "Hear this!" and then goes on to tell a story that highlights a "hearing deficit."

Most of us who sit in the pews and take in this familiar parable today have heard it—and many other Scripture passages like it—so many times that we, in a paradoxical way, have become "deaf" to the message. Jesus seems resigned to this state of affairs, assuming that most of the audience will be like the "pathway," the "rocks," and the "thorns" of the parable, that is, unreceptive. That's a seventy-five percent failure rate when we consider the four situations mentioned in the story.

That Jesus ends the parable with a stern warning should give us some incentive to be among that twenty-five percent represented by the "good soil." Maybe lectors and deacons and priests should drop the familiar "A reading from..." introduction and just start with a loud and stern "Listen up!"

January 31, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Thursday—John Bosco

**Theme:** Being a Christian bum.

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 2 Sm 7:18-19, 24-29  
(320)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

This passage is a beautiful meditation by David. David enjoys a peaceful moment as he speaks to God. The fact that David sits suggests that he is going to have a friendly conversation with God.

David's humility shines through: "Who am I, LORD God,...that you have brought me to this point? Yet even this you see as too little..." David puts total and absolute faith in the promises God has made through Nathan. He knows with utter certainty that God will always be faithful to his descendants. The omitted verses continue in the same vein. They are worth reading in order to drink in the serene atmosphere.

David sees that God's blessings on Israel will redound to God's glory: "Your name will be forever great."

Why is David able to speak with utmost confidence and courage? Because God has spoken. Because YHWH is God and God's words are truth.

David ends his meditative prayer by asking God to "bless the house of your servant." The point is not that David has any doubt about God fulfilling his promises. Rather, David's petition is a way of opening his heart to the blessings God will pour upon him and his descendants.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 4:21-25 (320)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

The parable of the lamp may best be understood in connection with 4:11. There Jesus told his disciples: "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables." The disciples are to be like a lamp that is placed on a lampstand. They are to carry out their mission by proclaiming the mystery of God's kingdom to the world at large. What was hidden from those outside must be announced by those to whom Jesus revealed the mystery.

In 4:9 Jesus said: "Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear." Now he warns his disciples again not only to hear the message of the parables, but also to use every means to announce it to others. God will reward them according to the measure they measure to others. In fact, God will give them even more than they have given to others.

But what of disciples who are lax in carrying out their mission? In a paradoxical statement, Jesus says that those who have not allowed the message to make a difference in

their lives will lose the little that they have. The revelation they received about the mystery of God's kingdom will do neither themselves nor others any good.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Johnston*

Two tramps were sitting with their backs against an oak tree near a rippling stream on a sunshine-filled summer day. Despite the beauty of the scene and the delightful weather, one of them was disconsolate.

"You know, Bob," he mused, "this business of bumming your way through life is not what it's cracked up to be. Think about it: nights on park benches or in a cold barn, traveling on freight trains, always dodging the police, being kicked from one town to another, wondering where your next meal is coming from, unwanted everywhere, despised by most people..." His voice trailed off as he sighed heavily.

His companion shifted his position slightly so as to face his mate. "Well," the second tramp observed, "if that's the way you feel about it, why don't you go and find yourself a job?"

The first tramp sat up with a jerk, opening his mouth in amazement. "What!" he exclaimed, "and admit that I'm a failure?"

There are times when those of us who wear the label "Christian" might just be "bumming our way through" when it comes to our faith, though, like the tramp in the story, we don't particularly want to be called to account for that behavior. Today's Gospel presents a wake-up call to the lax disciple. Jesus indicates that if we're "just getting by" when it comes to our obligation as his followers, we could be in for a rude surprise.

It should be noted that this passage repeats the admonition from the previous parable about "listening," but there's a twist. Jesus ups the ante significantly here. It's not enough to just hear the word of God; we have to get out and take it to the world. To borrow a phrase from the world of fitness and exercise, we have to "use it or lose it" when it comes to the message we've received. That means this gospel is "bad news" for those of us who have let ourselves become Christian bums.

February 1, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Friday of the 3rd Week of the Year

**Theme:** Did I do that?

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** 2 Sm 11:1-4a, 5-10a,  
13-17 (321)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

After David's beautiful prayer in chapter 7, it is a shock to hear of his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. Compounding his crime are a number of factors: He is deceitful toward Uriah and suborns Joab; he is also guilty of the murder of other officers of the army when Uriah and those with him are abandoned in battle.

In spite of all this, it is interesting to read 1 Kgs 11:4. Speaking of Solomon, the text tells us that "his heart was not entirely with the LORD, his God, as the heart of his father David" (see also Acts 13:22). Apparently David is considered faithful because he never went after false gods.

The only person who evidences some nobility in this tragic episode is Uriah. In v. 11 he refuses to go to his house because the army is on the battlefield. War was considered a holy activity, and apparently soldiers did not engage in sexual activity (see 1 Sm 21:6).

Bathsheba becomes important because the second son she had with David was Solomon. She is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus without being named, referred to only as the wife of Uriah the Hittite (Mt 1:6).

Because of tomorrow's feast, we do not read 2 Sm 12:1-17, one of the most marvelous passages in the OT. It would be worthwhile for the celebrant to read it today.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Mk 4:26-34 (321)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

Jesus offers two more parables about the kingdom of God. The first parable allows for some activity by human beings.

Humans scatter seed and harvest the crop. However, the sprouting and growing of the seed is beyond the knowledge and activity of the sower. In other words, the kingdom of God becomes a reality by the mysterious working of God. We are reminded of Paul's words in 1 Cor 3:6, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth." At times we speak of building the kingdom of God, but this parable reminds us it is primarily God's work.

The second parable stresses the marvelous growth of God's kingdom. The success of Jesus and his disciples may seem small indeed, but Jesus promises that the kingdom will grow to mammoth proportions. As the smallest seed becomes a large plant and puts forth large branches, so the kingdom of God will fill the earth.

Mark makes another statement about parables. Here he intimates in a more positive way that parables were meant to help people understand. But he also indicates that further explanation was given to the disciples. Mark gives the overall impression that the people would be able to understand Jesus' message only if they overcame their prejudices and allowed God's grace to work in their minds and hearts.

## Homily Suggestion

*Jim Johnston*

Margaret was not expecting the visit she received one Friday afternoon at the end of a typically draining and discouraging week of teaching her sixth-graders. At Jefferson Middle School in the inner city, many of Margaret's students bore the burden of a home life that was not conducive to good education. "Does anything I do here make any difference?" she found herself wondering. Hearing a soft knock on the classroom door, Margaret glanced up to see a young man of about thirty.

"Mrs. Adams," he said politely, "I'm not sure if you remember me. My name is Antoine Walker and I was in your sixth-grade class twenty years ago."

Margaret wracked her brains trying to distinguish this student from the thousands of other faces over her thirty years of teaching. Grasping for something, she remarked rather lamely, "Aren't you Jerome's older brother?" As she said it, she remembered Antoine as being one of the most quiet and introverted youngsters in a classroom full of brash, aggressive, and sometimes impudent students.

"Yes, ma'am, I am," he replied. "I just wanted to come by to say hello and to thank you for the encouragement you gave me about my writing. I ended up majoring in journalism, and now I have a job writing for a newspaper in Pittsburgh."

Margaret honestly couldn't recall having paid any special attention to Antoine, but she was, nonetheless, gratified that he had taken the time to thank her. She drove home from school musing about the mysterious and often unacknowledged influence that teachers can exert.

The first parable that Jesus offers in today's Gospel allows a place for the activity of humans (who sow the seed and harvest the crop) while still asserting that the sprouting and growth of the seed is beyond the sower's capacity to control. The second parable is all about the marvelous growth that occurs after what might seem to have been an insignificant beginning and only minimal tending.

All that astounding growth took place "without his [the sower's] knowing how it happened." Likewise, we don't know what will happen to the seeds of encouragement or comfort or hope that we sow, but the parable tells us that we will be surprised by the result. We do know, however, that nothing will happen if we're idle at seed time. Have we sown any seeds today?

February 2, 2008

# Weekday Homily Helps

Saturday—Presentation of the Lord

**Theme:** Did Jesus really 'grow'?

**Exegesis of the First Reading,** Mal 3:1-4 (524)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

*Malachi* (see 1:1) means "my messenger" (see 3:1). It may not be the name of the prophet who wrote this book. He continues the temple theme found in Haggai and Zechariah. His ministry must have followed the rebuilding of the temple in 515 B.C. Some place this prophet in or around 475 B.C., some time before the ministry of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Through the prophet God announces that he is "sending my messenger (*malachi*) / to prepare the way before me." In 3:23 this messenger is identified as Elijah. In Mt 11:10 Jesus quotes these words and applies them to John the Baptist.

The next words of the prophet announce that "suddenly there will come to the temple / the LORD whom you see, / And the messenger of the covenant / whom you desire." The "messenger (or angel) of the covenant" is probably an echo of Ex 3:2 where "angel of the LORD" seems to designate YHWH himself. The point is that the new temple will be made glorious because YHWH himself will come to purify the temple, its sacrifices and the people.

The NT and today's liturgy tell us that Jesus' coming to the temple fulfills the prophecy of Malachi. Jesus not only brings God's powerful presence to the temple. His life, death and resurrection will fulfill all the hopes of God's people.

**Exegesis of the Gospel,** Lk 2:22-40 (524)

*Anthony Edwards, O.F.M.*

Mary and Joseph prove themselves dedicated to the law of Moses as they take Jesus to the temple. Luke emphasizes the point by mentioning the law three times within three verses (see also vv. 27 and 39). They present Jesus to the Lord. Thus was every firstborn male to be offered. However, in the case of Jesus, it takes on even more significance. It sets the tone for his whole life. The sacrifice of two turtledoves or pigeons reminds us of their poverty (see Lv 12:6; Ex 13:2, 12).

The Holy Spirit reveals to the devout Simeon that Jesus is the Messiah. In response, Simeon takes him into his arms and blesses God. He is now ready to die because he has seen God's salvation in the flesh—a salvation that reaches both gentiles and Israel.

Simeon blesses the father and mother, but he also alerts Mary that Jesus will not be accepted by all; she herself will suffer with her son.

After fulfilling all the prescriptions of the law, the family returns to Nazareth. There the child becomes "strong, filled

with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. Thus did Jesus mature physically, mentally and spiritually. His early consecration to God grew day by day.

**Homily Suggestion**

*Jim Johnston*

John Henry Newman, a convert to Roman Catholicism and a famous cardinal of the church, once commented that "here below, to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

Those of us who have been struggling through the normal processes of maturation and moral growth can appreciate the wisdom of Newman's words. Has any one of us gone through life without moments of inner conflict, doubt, struggle, and temptation? Isn't that part of what it means to be human?

That last question leads to an issue raised by the closing line of today's Gospel. What does it mean to say that Jesus "grew"? Does it refer simply to his physical development (i.e., he developed physically from childhood to adulthood), or does it imply real human development, that is, emotional, spiritual and psychological progress?

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth took delight in pointing out that the Greek word used to describe the growth of Jesus literally means "to extend by blows, as a smith stretches metal with his hammer." This sounds like the school of hard knocks that most of us adults have spent some class time in, and it surely implies that Jesus was, in the words of another theologian, "like anyone else who tried to change the world, himself changed by it."

It is somehow comforting to know that Jesus probably experienced some of the same trials and tribulations that make our lives so difficult at times. So much of Christian piety has demanded that Jesus have what John A.T. Robinson calls "the static perfection of flawless porcelain" that a line like the one from today's Gospel might slip by unnoticed. It is, however, just such an observation about Jesus that reaffirms a central tenet of our faith: the genuineness of Jesus' humanity. To say that Jesus was a "universal" man is not to say that he had every human quality to the highest degree, but to say that he was the kind of person in whom we see what each of us could be in our own unique way.

To see Jesus simply as the man who had everything (in the sense of his personhood) without working for it is oppressive and ultimately discouraging to us. Today's gospel allows us to take Jesus off that pedestal of pietistic perfection and understand him as a person in whom we can see—because of his hard-earned growth and development—a vision of essential humanity.