

Lk 4:31-37; Tuesday, September 3, 2019 – St. Gregory the Great

In today's Gospel, it is fitting that the focus is on Jesus' authority and power much of which Jesus delegated to Peter and his successors. We are fortunate to have lived at a time when three of Peter's successors: Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, and Pope John Paul II are canonized saints. Today we honor Christ in the gift of another pope, St. Gregory the Great.

Gregory was raised among saints. His mother is St. Silvia and two aunts on his father's side are St. Tarsilla and St. Aemileana. Gregory's ardent desire was to surrender his all to Christ. It led him to enter a monastery in Rome at a young age. Later he obtained permission from Pope Pelagius II to become a missionary to Britain with some of his fellow monks. However, Gregory was so loved by the people of Rome that they demanded that messengers be sent to recall him back to Rome. Then in 590, Gregory was elected pope upon the death of Pope Pelagius. His 14-year pontificate was one of the most remarkable in the history of the Church.

Gregory was the first pope to call himself *servus servorum Dei* – the “servant of the servants of God.” As Pope, he lived with great simplicity. Every evening he shared his simple meal with 12 poor people. Immediately upon becoming the Pope, St. Gregory called for penance and prayer. Also, at the outset of his pontificate, Gregory published his *Liber Pastoralis Curae*, or the “Book on the Office of a Bishop,” in which he lays down how bishops should fulfill their office. It's a remarkable document that should be must reading for every bishop. In 596, he selected forty monks under the leadership of their prior Augustine to evangelize Britain. Their success was astounding. On Christmas Day the following year, after Augustine was consecrated Bishop of Canterbury, the monks baptized 10,000 converts. Pope Gregory was also instrumental in the conversion of Reccared, the king of Spain, whose tutor was St. Leander. Gregory was so highly esteemed that individual churches as distant as the Caucasus looked to his leadership. Pope Gregory and St. Augustine of Canterbury died in the same year, 604. Let us pray for our bishops and priests to become holy like them.

Lk 4:38-44; Wednesday, September 4, 2019

Those who follow Jesus always bring the Savior with them. This is one of the wonderful unexpected results of being Jesus' authentic disciple; Jesus always accompanies them. We have experienced Jesus radiance through his saints in the persons of John Paul the Great and St. Mother Teresa. People, particularly other Christians, benefit simply by the presence of their radiant fidelity to Jesus, just as Peter unexpectedly aided his mother-in-law because Jesus was with him.

The scene is a tender one. Peter's mother-in-law had a high fever; literally, she was burning up. In her feverish state, she seemed to lack the strength to cry out for help. What an immense consolation to experience the presence of Jesus at such a moment! Interestingly, the book of Leviticus describes fever as a punishment on those who violate the commandments (Lev 26:16), but this does not imply that situation of Peter's mother-in-law. However, Jesus' therapeutic touch replaces her destructive fever with the fire of his life-giving love that radiates his power.

The response of Peter's mother-in-law is instructive even though she says nothing. She speaks with her actions: “She got up immediately and waited on them.” She becomes Jesus' servant because he first became hers. Jesus said, “the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). It's fascinating that four verbs in our text: “he *stood over* her, he *rebuked* the fever, it *left* her, she *waited on* them,” form in that particular sequence a summary of the whole Christian life. Stated simply, it's Jesus to the rescue, and his healing always leads us to serve others. Jesus raises us from the muck and emptiness of sin so we can evangelize, heal, console and attend him in others. This is how we enter into a permanent relationship of intimate love. The ultimate lesson in today's Gospel is that the fire of Christ's love banishes the consuming fire of sin represented by the fever; then we too can become other-directed. When Jesus heals us we become truly alive.

Lk 5:1-11; Thursday, September 5, 2019 – St. Theresa of Calcutta

This is a fitting gospel as we celebrate the feast of Saint Teresa of Calcutta. Pope John Paul II drew on this passage in his Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, which greeted the new millennium and called all Catholics to the new evangelization. Listen to his words: “At the beginning of the new millennium, and at the close of the Great Jubilee during which we celebrated the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus and a new stage of the Church's journey begins, our hearts ring out with the words of Jesus when one day, after speaking to the crowds from Simon's boat, he invited the Apostle to **"put out into the deep"** for a catch: "*Duc in altum*" (Lk 5:4). Peter and his first companions trusted Christ's words and cast the nets. ‘When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish’ (Lk 5:6).” Subsequently, Pope John Paul added: “Do not be afraid. Do not be satisfied with mediocrity. Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.”

Few of us are called to “put out into the deep” of the poorest of the poor like Mother Teresa or head to the mission fields, but there are two practical things we can do immediately:

1. Make a commitment to holiness. At the World Youth Day in Rio 3,000 young men made a decision to enter the priesthood and 2,000 young women made the choice to enter religious life. Countless, men and women decided to commit their lives to Christ. Why not us as laypersons living in this corrupt world?
2. Get serious about prayer. St. Paul commanded the Ephesians, “Pray at *all times* in the Spirit” (Eph 6:18). In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, he charged: “Pray *constantly*” (1 Thess 5:17). In his First Letter to Timothy, he challenged **us men**, “I desire then that in every place the *men* should pray” (1 Tim 2:8). Let us beg the Holy Spirit to give us the generosity and courage for the gift of prayer.

Lk 5:33-39; Friday, September 6, 2019

We modern Christians have lost our understanding of the importance of fasting. How many ways can we say, “Wimps!” In the early Church, it was common for Christians to fast on bread and water twice weekly, on Wednesdays and Fridays. We have become so soft that even the present mild Lenten fast seems tough. It is noteworthy that Jesus just assumes that his disciples will fast once he is taken from them.

The challenge to discredit Jesus, because his disciples were not fasting, afforded Jesus with the opportunity to identify himself as the Messiah. In the Old Testament, God is depicted as the heavenly Husband. For example:

- Isaiah: “For your maker is our husband, the Lord of hosts is his name” (Is 54:5).
- Jeremiah: “Surely, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel” (Jer 3:20).
- Hosea: “And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband, and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal’. ... I will espouse you forever. (Hos 2:16, 19).

In today’s Gospel, Jesus affirms that he is the divine Husband wedded to the members of his Church. Thus, John the Baptist speaking of his relationship to Jesus said, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom [namely Jesus]; the friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him [John] rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore, this joy of mine is now full” (Jn 3:29). The understanding of Jesus as the heavenly bridegroom is the interpretative key to arriving at the deepest understanding of the Song of Songs (Solomon), which uses romantic marital love to capture Christ’s ecstatic love for us individually and the wild response of our longing for union with this, the greatest of lovers. Thus, in John’s vision, heaven is depicted as the “marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9) when his bride, the Church, is clothed in “the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev 19:8).

Lk 6:6-11; Monday, September 9, 2019

When we recognize that Jesus seeks our love, we discover the excitement of the beloved in the Song of Songs: “Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills...Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows...My beloved speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away! (Song 2:8-10).” Also, in the context of today’s Gospel Jesus comes to the synagogue to gather up his stray sheep. He is the Shepherd of Israel foreseen by Ezekiel: “I myself will pasture my sheep, I myself will give them rest,” says the Lord God. ‘The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal’” (Ezek 34:15-1`6).

Certainly, everyone in the synagogue noticed the withered hand, but only Jesus is prepared to do something about it. St. Matthew tells us nothing about the service in progress. He concentrates solely on that hand as if it was the only thing Jesus himself had noticed on entering. How could it be otherwise? The man’s physical distress, which often symbolizes the human suffering in sin, together with his desire to come to the synagogue in prayer, constitutes in a graphic embodiment of the Psalmist’s plea: “I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a land without water” (Ps 142:6). He is like a sheep with a wounded paw. The text literally tells us the man’s hand was “dry,” that is, it had the characteristics of a dead branch blocked from the life-giving sap of the tree. Jesus is the source of life that gives the sap that restores humans physically and spiritually. Unlike the sad-faced critical scribes and Pharisees, the man with his restored hand can now praise God with the psalmist: “Happy the man who follows not the counsel of the wicked. ... He is like a tree planted near running water” (Ps 1:1, 3). How thankful are we when Jesus’ mercy heals us?

Lk 6:12-19; Tuesday, September 10, 2019

The statement: “He spent the night in prayer to God,” always hits me like a reprimand, because I am confronted with the painful reality that in comparison, I spend precious little time in prayer. Shouldn’t more of my waking moments be filled with sharing my time with the Lord I say I love? Perhaps that is a question we should all be asking ourselves.

My favorite part of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is the magnificent section on prayer. It would be a joy to review this entire section together, but time only allows me to focus on a few paragraphs:

2631 The first movement of the prayer of petition is *asking forgiveness*, like the tax collector in the parable: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!”

2650 Prayer cannot be reduced to the spontaneous outpouring of interior impulse: in order to pray, one must have the will to pray.

2672 The Holy Spirit, whose anointing permeates our whole being, is the interior Master of Christian prayer.

2685 The *Christian family* is the first place of education in prayer. ... For young children in particular, daily family prayer is the first witness of the Church’s living memory as awakened patiently by the Holy Spirit.

2697 Prayer is the life of the new heart. It ought to animate us at every moment. But we tend to forget him who is our life and our all.

2710 The choice of the *time and duration of the prayer* arises from a determined will, revealing the secrets of the heart.

2725 Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort.

2732 The most common yet most hidden temptation is our *lack of faith*. It expresses itself less by declared incredulity than by our actual preferences.

2744 *Prayer is a vital necessity*. Proof from the contrary is no less convincing: if we do not allow the Spirit to lead us, we fall back into the slavery of sin. How can the Holy Spirit be our life if our heart is far from him?

Lk 6:20-26; Wednesday, September 11, 2019

In St. Luke's Gospel, the evangelist juxtaposes a short summary of the Beatitudes with four covenantal curses or Woes. Perhaps thinking of the covenant as two giant umbrellas standing side by side will prove helpful. On one umbrella is written the word, "Blessings." On the other umbrella, the word "Curses" is engraved. We can choose to live our life under either umbrella, but in the end, we will receive blessings or curses based on our choices. My mother lived into her nineties, which is a long life, yet it is merely a fleeting moment of time in comparison to eternity. Jesus guides us to live for eternity where the present difficulties, struggles, and suffering give way to eternal peace and happiness.

St. Ambrose taught that the Beatitudes in Luke reflect the four cardinal virtues lived by those who are poor in spirit. 1) **Temperance:** The *poor* practice *temperance* as they shun the excessive pleasures of this world. 2) **Justice:** The poor are *hungry* - long for and practice *justice*, for they share the plight of the lowly and are generous with others who have little or nothing. 3) **Prudence:** Those who *weep* exercise *prudence* as they shun the vanities of this world and focus on eternity. 4) **Fortitude:** Finally, those *hated* by others exercise *fortitude* because they remain faithful when they are discounted and persecuted for their fidelity to Jesus.

The poverty that pleases God is the detachment from material things so our hearts can be attached to God and remain free to care for others. There is a sense that the poor in spirit inhale the presence of God as they are wholly dependent upon God's mercy and providence. As in all things, Jesus gives us the benefit of his example: "You know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ," wrote St. Paul, "he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Jesus reminds us that wealth is dangerous because it easily leads to selfishness and pride. If wealth is such a great blessing, why was Jesus so poor?

Lk 6:27-38; Thursday, September 12, 2019

There is a saying that goes like this: Nature never forgives; men sometimes forgive; God always forgives. However, Jesus commands us, "Love our enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." Humanly speaking, doesn't that sound like madness? Is loving our enemies difficult? No, it is just humanly impossible apart from grace.

The opposite experience of the forgiveness Jesus commands is exhibited in the world of hostility that is all around us in the murders and other acts of violence that occur so frequently in our cities. Then, too, there is the tragic bitterness and unforgiveness that burns in the hearts of those who have been abused, betrayed, and mistreated. Let's consider a positive example.

Callixtus was a slave you lived in the third century. His Christian master placed him in charge of a bank that was designed to protect the meager funds of widows and orphans. Callixtus squandered the money with a combination of embezzlement and imprudent investments. As a result, he was given a life sentence to be changed to a grinding wheel. However, the widows and orphans Callixtus had reduced to poverty pleaded for his release with the local magistrate. Callixtus was freed. After other misadventures that warranted a death sentence, Callixtus finally came under the influence of a holy priest, St. Zephyrinus. Eventually, Callixtus converted and embraced a life of holiness. He was put in charge of the catacomb that now bears his name, and was ordained a priest to the consternation of those who were unforgiving of his sinful past. Eventually, Zephyrinus was elected Pope. When he died the ex-slave and embezzler Callixtus was elected to become his successor. At that time there were rigorists in the Church who wanted to deny absolution to repentant sinners who committed serious sins like: apostasy, murder, and adultery. Pope St. Callixtus, the man who once needed mercy, decided on the side of forgiving any sin. Praise God! When we forgive, we become like Jesus. When we hold on to unforgiveness we imbibe Satan's poison!

Lk 6:39-42; Friday, September 13, 2019 – Feast of St. John Chrysostom

Judgmentalism is a noxious gas that poisons the human heart. The only cure for this malady is to put on the mind of Christ by seeing others through Jesus' eyes, which always radiates love and forgiveness. One of the great challenges we all face is to see ourselves clearly. Our ability to rationalize our sins seems limitless. I know in my own case, when I reflect on my past sins, I am inclined to say to myself, "How could I have been so stupid!" Yet, there I was.

There are two great dangers in judgmentalism. The first is interior blindness that leads to the utter lack of spiritual perception. Jesus' explains this danger with two exaggerated metaphors. First, "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?" Secondly, "Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but not perceive the wooded beam in your own?" Yes, we can and should judge *behavior*, but we cannot judge another's *interior motivation* and sinfulness. Only God is the all-knowing just judge. Only he can adequately judge souls. Those who are inclined to demand justice need to focus on granting mercy because at the end of our life most of us would be much safer if we receive God's mercy and not his justice.

Secondly, Judgmentalism is rooted in the sin of pride, which is a multithreaded cancer. Consider the proud men who wanted to kill the woman caught in adultery. They were totally blind to their own sins, which were much worse, for their pride and hatred propelled them to murder their Redeemer. Jesus, in contrast, said to the woman caught in adultery: "Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again" (Jn 8:11). We are called to imitate Jesus, not the Pharisees. So, today's lesson is that we must be content to let God do the judging. We need to remember that we are just poor sinners in need of his mercy.

Lk 7:1-10; Monday, September 16, 2019

Jesus had returned to Capernaum, a border town with a customs post that probably had a military garrison under the command of a centurion. This gentile's slave, whom he holds in high regard, is so ill he is about to die. The village elders come to Jesus to intercede on the centurion's behalf. They present two reasons why he "is worthy" of Jesus' help: 1) He loves the Jewish nation and 2) he built their Jewish synagogue. Subsequently, St. Luke will introduce another centurion in Acts – Cornelius who is "respected by the whole Jewish nation" (Acts 11:22). These two centurions form examples of the marvelous unfolding of God's universal plan of salvation.

As Jesus approaches, the centurion's envoys inform Jesus that the centurion is aware he is not fit to have Jesus enter his house, adding that he does not even consider himself worthy to approach Jesus in person. This is a remarkable declaration from a Roman centurion. However, he is a man who understands authority. Therefore, he believes that his servant can be healed by Jesus' word alone. Jesus responds in two ways. First, he heals the centurion's servant from a distance. Secondly, Jesus praised the centurion's faith as greater than anything he has seen in Israel, but in what sense? It seems that the centurion's faith goes beyond his belief in Jesus' healing power. So, we may find the answer in the emphasis on "authority." It appears that this pagan centurion possessed the humility and openness to accept Jesus as possessing divine authority in his own name, which is remarkable, to say the least.

Here we discover an important lesson. The depth of one's faith is not based on religious background or education, but a person's humble receptiveness of grace. This, perhaps, is also the lesson of paraphrasing the Centurion's words before we receive Holy Communion: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." Do we believe in Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist with a faith equal to the centurion?

Lk 7:11-17; Tuesday, September 17, 2019

After miraculously healing the centurion's slave, Jesus leaves Capernaum and goes to the city of Nain, a small Galilean village about six miles southeast of Nazareth. As he neared the gate of the city, Jesus was met by a funeral procession that would have consisted of the deceased, relatives, neighbors, paid mourners and musicians. St. Luke informs us that Jesus was deeply moved at the sight of the grieving widow who was burying her only son who was also her only means of support. She was doubly bereft. Can we doubt that Jesus saw in the suffering of this poor woman a foreshadowing of the agony his own widowed mother would experience on Calvary?

Moved with "compassion" – from the Latin meaning "to suffer with" (*cum passio*) – Jesus took the initiative to say to the mother, "Do not weep." Note that the tender compassion of Jesus' heart came first, and then the miracle followed. When Jesus "touched the bier" all the spectators must have experienced shock. The Mosaic Law declared that any physical contact with the dead rendered a Hebrew ritually unclean for an entire week. However, when Jesus said, "Arise," he eliminated the cause of defilement because "the dead man sat up, and began to speak." The amazed crowd "glorified God" and declared that Jesus was "a great prophet." St. Luke intentionally connects this miracle to Elijah resuscitating the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17-24), because the expression, "he gave him to his mother" is taken word-for-word from that episode.

The mother's joy on receiving her son back to life reminds us of the joy our heavenly Mother experiences when we are raised to supernatural life from spiritual death in the sacraments of baptism and confession. Jesus told us, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Lk 15:7). We should never be afraid to repent. We must heed our heavenly mother's instruction, "Do whatever he tells you." At Fatima, she admonished us: "Do not sin any more for my Son is already so grievously offended."

Lk 7:31-35; Wednesday, September 18, 2019

In today's Gospel, Jesus used a children's rhyme to teach us an important lesson. The use of the plural, "We," highlights the inseparability of Jesus' ministry with that of his forerunner, John the Baptist. Only the modes of their ministry were different. John stressed lamentation and penance; whereas Jesus focused on exultation – life in the Kingdom. John was the "voice crying in the desert," while Jesus was the voice of the Bridegroom. Tragically, the response of most of Jesus' contemporaries was indifference. Like bored children idle in the market place, they refused to engage in the process of their salvation either by beating their breasts in mourning or rejoicing with a dancing heart with the heavenly Bridegroom. The way of penance, lamentation, self-denial, in a word - the ascetical life - was perceived as being so taxing that John was accused of being possessed by a demon. He was viewed as a gloomy fanatic; someone who would spoil their ongoing love affair with the world's vanities. Their response said, "John you depress us, so just leave us in our self-contentment." Then Jesus arrived on the scene, piping the flute of divine joy and mercy while he ate and drank with anyone who would share his table. Can you imagine? He even dined with sinners! They brushed Jesus off as a fool, someone who was a glutton and a drunkard, and, worst of all, "a friend of sinners." Their response said, 'Jesus, you challenge us to reevaluate our priorities and the direction of our life. This makes us feel uncomfortable. So, just leave us alone in our complacency.'

The lesson here is this. Those who reject the need to repent will also reject transforming joy. God calls his people to a path of intense spiritual activity and transformation. Spiritual lethargy is always the enemy of God's Kingdom. In simple language, the enemy is laziness, indifference, apathy, and sloth. Does that strike home?

Lk 7:36-50; Thursday, September 19, 2019

This is the first of three occasions that St. Luke records Jesus dining with a Pharisee. Why he invited Jesus is puzzling because he neglected to offer Jesus the customary kiss of greeting, water for his feet, and perfumes. The guests reclined on low couches leaning upon a cushion on their left side, eating with their right hands. A woman, moved by grace, came behind Jesus and began to anoint his feet with ointment and the tears of repentance. Cornelius a Lapide, the 16th century biblical scholar, identified her as Mary Magdalene in *The Great Commentary*, but her identity is uncertain. The host only saw someone who was notoriously immoral. His judgmentalness missed the significance of her encounter with Jesus – love met Love

Jesus used the Pharisee's internal criticism to give us an important lesson from God's perspective. Jesus presented a parable of two debtors. One owed an amount equal to 500 days wages and the other only 50 days wages. If the creditor forgave both debts, "Which of them will love him more?" The Pharisee answered correctly, "The one to whom he forgave more." Then Jesus made the application: "I tell you, her sins, which are many are forgiven, for she loved much." Then he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace." It's easy to imagine Jesus' heart bursting with joy as he made that statement. Jesus' heart is always irresistibly captured by love and remorse.

St. Gregory the Great made the following application to today's Gospel: "True righteousness is compassionate; whereas false righteousness is indignant. There are many people like this Pharisee: forgetting that they themselves are poor sinners. So, when they see other's sin, they immediately become indignant; instead of taking pity of them they rush to judge them or sneer at them. They forget that St. Paul says: "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

Lk 8:1-3; Friday, September 20, 2019

Today's Gospel speaks of the faithful women who accompanied Jesus and attended to his and the apostle's needs. They remained close to Jesus for four reasons. 1. They wanted to show their gratitude because he had cured them from diseases and delivered them from demons. 2. They cling to the heavenly physician because they knew he would protect them from attacks by devils. 3. They knew that Jesus would guide them to holiness by his preaching, example, and companionship. 4. Most important – they ardently loved Jesus.

Several of the Church Fathers taught that the seven demons Jesus expelled from Mary Magdalene represented the seven capital sins: pride, avarice, gluttony, lust, anger, envy, and sloth. In other words, Satan had complete possession of this Mary, who when she was freed from the tyrannical clutches of demons, gave herself completely to Jesus. She is a great witness of the power of repentance and grace. Would that we could all love Jesus with the passion of Mary Magdalene.

Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's treasurer, was rich. Her love for Jesus prompted her to give financial support to the disciples. Similarly, in ancient Rome Saints Flavia, Lucy, Priscilla, Pudentia and other noblewomen supported Saints Peter and Paul and the apostolic Church in Rome.

Susanna's name means "lily" in Hebrew. Early Christian writings speak of her as a distinguished woman who was healed by Jesus and then became his disciple and patroness. They speak of the purity and fragrance of her life, which matches her name. Saint Bede spoke of the golden fervor of her love for the Lord. May we follow the example of these holy women who even stood courageously by Jesus on Calvary.

Lk 8:16-18; Monday, September 23, 2019

It's morning, and in today's Gospel Jesus gives us a spiritual wake-up call! In the parable of the lamp, Jesus drew on a practice familiar to his audience. Every evening in Jewish homes a ritual of lamp lighting would take place. The ancients had a horror of the darkness. We get a sense of this in the introduction of John's Gospel: "In him was life, and the life was the *light* of men. The *light* shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." To combat the darkness in a home, a lamp would be brought into a room and lit. Then pious Jews would recite a blessing, thanking God for the light. Clearly, no one would then cover the lamp or place it under the bed. No! They would put "it on a stand, that those who enter may see the light."

Similarly, Jesus, the light of the world, gives us the spark of his teaching in order to illuminate our hearts so we can dispel the darkness in the places we enter with our daily activity. Therefore, it is critical that we allow his light to penetrate deep into us. To experience Christ's illumination, and then do nothing about it, would be senseless, like lighting a lamp and then hiding its light. The measure of our openness to be lit up by Christ is not the depth of our knowledge, but the degree it has illuminated our behavior and then radiates out to others.

Jesus reminds us that there is nothing hidden that will not become manifest to everyone, nor is anything secret that will not come to the light. All our deeds will one day be known – and judged. Therefore, Jesus warned: "Take care, then, how you hear. To anyone who has, more will be given, and from him who has not, even what he seems to have will be taken away." This life passes very quickly. Eternity lasts a very, very long time!

Lk 8:19-21; Tuesday, September 24, 2019

To understand today's Gospel, it is useful to consider the importance that family and tribe played in the culture of the ancient middle east. Indeed, we have many examples of the importance placed on family and tribe in the current middle east. Jesus, of course, is not revoking the fourth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother." Rather, he is keeping everything in its proper order by stressing the first commandment that places the love of God above all things – yes, even family. So, while it is a distinct honor to be biologically related to Jesus, it is vastly more important to be related to him spiritually. This unique bonding occurs through obedience, which is love in action. Therefore, Jesus said, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and *act on it*."

In his first letter, the apostle John explicitly makes the connection between obedience and love: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments" (1 Jn 5:3). Then he adds a statement that is rather startling: "And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 Jn 5:3). Really?? Which of us has found keeping the commandments easy? Can't most of us identify with St. Paul who wrote to the Romans, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of death" (Rom 7:24)? Then Paul answers his question: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 7:25)! Writing to the Corinthians the saint explained, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). Relying on Jesus as the source of Pauls' strength, as he wrote to the Philippians, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). Jesus is also willing to give us his strength, but do we want it? Do we ask for it?

Lk 9:1-6; Wednesday, September 25, 2019

Jesus selects twelve men who will universalize the vocation of Israel, which must expand to incorporate the whole world becoming the new Israel. A person can only give what he has. Thus, in creation, God makes humans in his image and likeness. As the twelve are about to set out on their first mission, Jesus gives them a share of his own divine authority. This is an amazing example of how God calls his disciples out of the nothingness of sin and is eager to impart to them qualities of his own Divine Being. There is no limit to the authority he now gives to the twelve over diseases and demons. Jesus is restoring the work of creation that was wounded by sin. Twelve broken men have been chosen to heal other broken men by the power of God's love and mercy. The powerlessness of devils is humiliating because weak men can now kick them out. It's deliciously ironic to reflect on the degradation of these proud spirits who aspired to be like God. The very vulnerable humans they hate can defeat them. The twelve were commissioned to proclaim that the kingdom of God has come with the advent of the divine bridegroom Messiah. The arrival of the Kingdom is inseparable from the founding of Christ's Church, which is his bride and Mystical Body. The apostles are the visible nucleus of his Church. They are sent to the needy, not to those deemed most deserving or most receptive. Their call and Jesus' power are gifts. Therefore, they must always give freely. Jesus not only imparts gifts, but he also instructs them on the manner of giving because both reflect his nature.

Finally, the disciples are to go without the necessities a person might prudently take on an ordinary trip. They are to become God's poor pilgrims. They are not businessmen looking for a deal, nor are they CEO's running a corporation. Their strength and any future success rest solely on God's strength. Like the conquest of Jericho, the battle of spiritual warfare is the Lord's, so also must be the means. I know a priest who transformed his parish. The winning strategy was prayer, fasting, and hours in the confessional. With prayer and fasting, we can transform our families and the whole world.

Skip: Thursday 9/26 & Friday 9/27

Lk 9:46-50; Monday, September 30, 2019

The Apostles thought of themselves as grown-ups as, indeed, we do also. In addition, they were called to leadership in Jesus' Church. Therefore, it was not surprising that their all too human ambition would pop up. Jesus used their debate about "which of them was the greatest" to give them and us a very important lesson. God sees us, as we are, baby boys and girls still in the diaper stage of life. Only those who recognize their littleness and trust in God actually become "one who is great." This should make us think. "Which of us does everything perfectly? Who does not stumble in some way every day?" We desperately need to recognize that we are just needy and helpless little children, so God can lift us up.

Jesus gave a second important lesson to his beloved disciple. John felt threatened by an exorcist who "does not follow in *our* company." Isn't it interesting, that John did not say, "does not follow *you*." Jesus simply replied, "Do not prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you." This is the same respectful attitude Catholics should have for godly Christians who are not card-carrying members of our Church, but who love the Lord.

In today's secular environment, when powerful forces are working together to expunge Christianity from any expression in public life and to remove any vestige of Christian moral principles from our laws, Christians urgently need to come together in love; first and foremost in our love for God and secondly, in our love and respect for other another. Finally, we should be grateful that the love of God is so abundantly poured out upon us that we have in the Church the fullness of truth. In our world of confusion and misinformation, Catholics

need to heed Peter command: “Always be ready to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15).