

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

March—2010

The following series is **free, downloadable small-group materials** based on each week's Mass readings and taking into account the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group's discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minute format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.
2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, "What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?" or "What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?" As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction.
3. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. **Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.**
4. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.
5. You can either read this week's Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, **so do not feel like you need to force a connection.** However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, "How do you see this passage tying into the theme of the readings?"
6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.
7. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Gospel Reading, and the Second Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.
8. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear the Scripture is read and taught. **We would appreciate knowing if you are using the *Reflecting on Sunday's Readings*, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail.**

Sincerely in Christ,

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Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT—March 7, 2010

Introduction: In this week's Gospel Reading through the parable Jesus tells he puts a premium on fruitfulness. He does this first by stressing the vineyard owner's severe judgment of the fig tree that has continued to bear no figs. The vineyard owner is ready to remove the fig tree because it is totally unproductive. Secondly, he focuses on the importance of being fruitful by underscoring the vinedresser's unusual concern and attention to try and insure the fig tree's future productivity. Both in the vineyard owner's judgment and the vinedresser's care, one message comes through loud and clear; fruitfulness is essential.

This focus on bearing fruit takes on added importance when we recall Jesus' last conversation with his disciples in John's Gospel. In John 15:16 Jesus said, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." Earlier in verse 8, he stated that this is the way his Father is glorified, "that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." Clearly, as Jesus was preparing to leave his disciples and begin the ordeal of his crucifixion he did not merely discuss trivial things with them, but shared his very heart and soul. And at the heart of what he said was his expectations for their fruitfulness.

When the subject of fruitfulness comes up it is not unusual to see opinions vary regarding what is meant by fruit. Some would suggest that fruitfulness is simply Christian character, others that it is Christian deeds, and still others that it is Christian converts. I would suggest that to some degree it is inclusive of all of these because the three types of fruit mentioned are interdependent and interconnected.

However, it is interesting that when we study the nature of fruit we discover that fruit always contains the seed of new life. So it is with both Christian character and Christian deeds, they are never intended to dwell alone, but are the seeds of new life, converts; "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Our Christian lives and deeds should result in non-believers' desiring to also become believers. If we as a community of believers are not seeing conversions take place through us, we need to be concerned.

How does all of this fit into Lent? Lent should be both a time of pruning and of cultivation. It is the time of year when we pay special attention to Christ and our relationship with him. As we focus on Christ, and add to our lives disciplines that enhance our spiritual consciousness and receptivity to him, it allows the Holy Spirit to begin tilling up the hardness of our hearts. Lenten missions, more frequent attendance at Mass and other celebrations, Lenten discussion group studies, and personal prayer and reflection are all means which the Holy Spirit can use to rework the dry, hard ground of our hearts. As these stony portions are broken up, and turned over, our hearts become more receptive to the nourishing nutrients that bring about growth and fruitfulness; sacred Scripture, Christ's Presence, and prayer to seek God's will.

We are faced with the same decision as the disciples, will we, or will we not go and bear fruit so that the Father is glorified? Pope Paul VI in *On Evangelization in the Modern World* clearly calls us to this realization. "The Church is born of the evangelizing activity of Jesus and the Twelve. She is the normal, desired, most immediate and most visible fruit of this activity..." And he earlier states, "Those who have received the Good News and who have been gathered by it into the community of salvation can and must communicate and spread it." May this Lent be a time of preparation for just such fruitfulness, and may Easter be a time when we invite those who don't know Christ to "Come see!"

First Reading — Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15

1 Meanwhile Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There an angel of the LORD appeared to him in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed. 3 So Moses decided, "I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned." 4 When the LORD saw him coming over to look at it more closely, God called out to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." 5 God said, "Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. 6 I am the God of your father," he continued, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 But the LORD said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. 8 Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the country of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.

13 "But," said Moses to God, "when I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?"

14 God replied, "I am who am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you." 15 God spoke further to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. "This is my name forever; this is my title for all generations.

1. What areas of enslavement do you see among God's people today?
2. In what ways can Lent become a process of turning aside to see and hear from God?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 103:1-4,6-8,11

1 Bless the LORD, my soul; all my being, bless his holy name! 2 Bless the LORD, my soul; do not forget all the gifts of God, 3 Who pardons all your sins, heals all your ills, 4 Delivers your life from the pit, surrounds you with love and compassion,

6 The LORD does righteous deeds, brings justice to all the oppressed. 7 His ways were revealed to Moses, mighty deeds to the people of Israel. 8 Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger, abounding in kindness.

11 As the heavens tower over the earth, so God's love towers over the faithful.

Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

1 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, 2 and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3 All ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ. 5 Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert. 6 These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. ...

10 Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer. 11 These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. 12 Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.

3. For what behavior did God express displeasure with Israel? How would you restate in positive terms the lesson this passage teaches?

Gospel Reading — Luke 13:1-9

1 At that time some people who were present there told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. 2 He said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? 3 By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! 4 Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? 5 By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!"

6 And he told them this parable: "There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, 7 he said to the gardener, 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. (So) cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?' 8 He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; 9 it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.'"

4. Why do people feel that another's misfortune is the result of personal sinfulness?
5. What are the conditions that bring a person to repentance?
6. What needs to take place in your life, or the life of your community to enhance fruitfulness?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT—March 14, 2010

Introduction: Here it is, the great accusation, the compelling indictment against Jesus—“*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*” This indictment is also the unknowing restatement of the Good News by his ungrateful, self-righteous critics—“*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*” Perhaps this is a sign we should hang around the necks of our Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion to remind us that this is what takes place at every Eucharist meal—“*This man [Jesus] receives sinners and eats with them.*”

Luke is often called the Gospel of meals, for in Luke's Gospel he records ten meals in which Jesus participated and two major parables which Jesus positioned around meals. In our own lives meals play a major role. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, weddings, graduations, promotions, all are examples of when we gather with our loved ones around a meal or a banquet to remember, to honor, and to rejoice over the high points of our lives. And though it is less so in today's hectic society the daily meal is a place of belonging and nurture where the family can unite. Ultimately, as in each of the Gospels, Jesus becomes the life saving meal of our redemption.

The parable of the Prodigal Son which we read in this week's Gospel Reading, reflects elements of both celebration and of belonging. The wayward son returns, having rejected both his family and his family's values. In desperation he finally comes to his senses and returns home. Occasions of such repentance are not the time for recriminations but for celebration! One who was *as dead* is alive again. The father of the Prodigal Son who is illustrative of our heavenly Father was watching for his wayward son's return and runs to welcome the Prodigal home. He immediately sets about to have a banquet in his son's honor. Like Jesus—“*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*”

Similar to the religious hypocrites, who challenged Jesus, so the elder son murmured against his father and challenged his merciful behavior. The Prodigal came home in guilty remorse saying, “I am not worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants,” and the elder son's attitude shouted, “That's right, he's not worthy!” implying that he, the elder son, *is* worthy. These are the flies in the ointment of their understanding that Jesus came to destroy. The lie of the Prodigal son's guilty conscience and the deceit of the elder son's self-righteousness both seek to convince us that though we are children of God we are unworthy of his love. Unfortunately, neither the Pharisees and scribes, nor the two sons understood that the Father does not receive us based on our worthiness. Rather, having been made worthy through the merits of Christ we can be assured of the Father's mercy and grace because—“*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*”

During Lent we must stop listening to the voices of condemnation and hear the voice of invitation to “Come, eat and commune with me.” We must repent of viewing the Eucharist as a fast food meal and recognize that Jesus wants to daily feed us with himself through communion with him around his Word. As Jesus told Mary and Martha at another meal in Luke's Gospel, sitting at his feet and feasting on his words is choosing the “better part” and the necessary thing. And so we should, for—“*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*”

“I now realize that there are two things especially necessary to me ... You have therefore given me in my weakness Your sacred Body to be the refreshment of my soul and body, and have set Your Word as a lamp to my feet. Without these two, I cannot rightly live; for the Word of God is the light of my soul, and Your sacrament is the bread of my life.” (Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ*) Lent is the ideal time to reject spiritual anorexia. With the Scriptures and the Eucharist the table is set. Now is the time to reject self-imposed spiritual starvation and to avail ourselves of the spiritual nourishment Jesus provides. Accept Jesus' invitation to dine with him, and on him, daily.

First Reading — Joshua 5:9-12

9 Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.” Therefore the place is called Gilgal to the present day.

10 While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month. 11 On the day after the Passover they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. On that same day 12 after the Passover on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

1. What does this passage teach about celebrating reconciliation?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 34:2-7

2 I will bless the LORD at all times; praise shall be always in my mouth. 3 My soul will glory in the LORD that the poor may hear and be glad.

4 Magnify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together. 5 I sought the LORD, who answered me, delivered me from all my fears. 6 Look to God that you may be radiant with joy and your faces may not blush for shame. 7 In my misfortune I called, the LORD heard and saved me from all distress.

Second Reading — 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

17 So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. 18 And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him..

2. What are the key components to the message of reconciliation?

Gospel Reading — Luke 15:1-3,11-32

1 The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, 2 but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 So to them he addressed this parable. ...

11 Then he said, "A man had two sons, 12 and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. 13 After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation.

14 When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. 15 So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. 16 And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any.

17 Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. 18 I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.'" 20 So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. 21 His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' 22 But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, 24 because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began.

25 Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. 26 He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. 27 The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. 30 But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' 31 He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. 32 But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'"

3. Which son best illustrates your journey?
4. How do we, who are Catholic Christians, avoid embracing and communicating an attitude similar to that of the elder brother?
5. What does this passage teach us about our Heavenly Father? About reconciliation?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT—March 21, 2010

Introduction: “One afternoon my four year old niece and my six year old daughter started an argument, which grew louder and louder. I was about to intervene when my daughter stomped down the stairs, ‘Mom,’ she yelled, ‘Jesus wants us to be salt of the earth and Paige is being the pepper!’” (Cherish Ann Marie Eile, in the *Christian Reader*) Though comical, this incident aptly introduces the subject of this week’s Gospel Reading, which is the difference between righteous judgment and unrighteous judgmentalism.

“What do you say about her (the adulteress)?” is the question with which the Pharisees and scribes confronted Jesus. It was not a legitimate question for they had already determined their views about her. In their minds condemnation and the consequential stoning of this woman was the conclusion to which they had already jumped. Now having caught and condemned her, they used this occasion and this question to endeavor to catch and condemn Jesus. But Jesus, “knowing what was in the heart of all men,” authorized the ones without sin to begin the stoning process. These men, so accustomed to condemning others, now could not escape self-condemnation, so in guilt they slunk away one by one.

Did Jesus by his actions condone this woman’s behavior? Of course not! What he did was to judge righteous judgment, but simultaneously avoided judgmentalism. Righteous judgment recognizes the difference between right and wrong, but it also with mercy and grace properly assesses the situation. This woman, like many of us, was experiencing a desert and wilderness experience in her life similar to that which is spoken of in this week’s First Reading. Also, like many of us who turn to the empty things of the world in hope of finding our way and finding something to satisfy, this woman turned to adultery, which failed to satisfy her as it always does. Righteous judgment not only recognizes the problem but it also recognizes the solution. In this case the solution was mercy and forgiveness, forces which compel us to stop living for ourselves and to begin living for him who is the source of this love. (2 Corinthians 5:14) Righteous judgment accompanied with mercy and forgiveness offers a way in the wilderness and water in the desert, it offers life.

The judgmentalism of the Pharisees and scribes also recognizes right and wrong behavior, but it is not based on the nature and character of God, but on one’s own supposed self-righteousness. And because self-righteousness can only be maintained by making others less righteous, judgmentalism always roots out sin in others and condemns it ruthlessly while ignoring one’s own sin and failure. Unlike the First Reading, judgmentalism does not offer “a way in the wilderness,” or life giving water “in the desert,” but instead speeds the dying process. Ultimately that is what this incident is all about, judgmentalism. In their self-righteousness the Pharisees and scribes wanted to be able to condemn Jesus. If he let her go without punishment they could accuse him of ignoring the Law. If he also condemned her they would accuse him of hypocrisy. In their minds they had already condemned Jesus, now all they needed to do was to find an acceptable accusation against him. In the end their spirit of condemnation ensnared them, as the pointed finger of accusation turned to focus on their own unrighteous histories and reckoned them, “Guilty!”

Hopefully, as we near the end of our lenten journey, we have been able to assess our relationship with Christ and our commitment to follow him in obedience. But we must ask ourselves whether our view of ourselves, and others, is being controlled by aspects of righteous judgment or by judgmentalism? If it is the latter we will find our spirit dragged down by a sense of guilt and condemnation. If it is the former we will find our long faces turning to joyous smiles as we recognize Jesus’ saying also to us, “*Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.*” We will understand the truth Monsignor Romano Guardini proclaims in his book, *The Lord*, that, “God is moved by the suffering human heart; the pain of it clouds his face, and we understand who he is and what St. Paul means when he speaks of the goodness and kindness of God.”

First Reading — Isaiah 43:16-21

16 Thus says the LORD, who opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, 17 Who leads out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army, Till they lie prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick. 18 Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; 19 See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers. 20 Wild beasts

honor me, jackals and ostriches, For I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink, 21 The people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise.

1. What is meant by a “desert” or “wilderness” experience?
2. How has God used desert or wilderness experiences to “make a way” which you ultimately recognized as his new and good direction for you?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 126:1-6

1 A song of ascents. When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, then we thought we were dreaming. 2 Our mouths were filled with laughter; our tongues sang for joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD had done great things for them."

3 The LORD has done great things for us; Oh, how happy we were!

4 Restore again our fortunes, LORD, like the dry stream beds of the Negeb.

5 Those who sow in tears will reap with cries of joy. 6 Those who go forth weeping, carrying sacks of seed, Will return with cries of joy, carrying their bundled sheaves.

Second Reading — Philippians 3:8-14

8 More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith 10 to know him and the power of his resurrection and (the) sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ (Jesus). 13 Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.

3. Explain what it means to have “a righteousness of my own.”
4. Restate in your own words Paul’s desires, found in verses 9 and 10. Which part of Paul’s statement is most meaningful to you?

Gospel Reading — John 8:1-11

1 While Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. 4 They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" 6 They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. 7 But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. 10 Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more."

5. In what aspect of life do you find yourself being most judgmental?
6. How can we develop and maintain righteous judgment about things, yet insure that we don’t become condemning in the way we relate to people?
7. Regarding Jesus’ statement, “Neither do I condemn you,” would you say that you quickly mirror this response towards others or are you usually slow in applying this attitude?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION—March 28, 2010

Introduction: This Sunday, Passion Sunday, completes the Season of Lent and introduces the beginning of Holy Week, the most memorable week of the liturgical year. For one week of the year we are encouraged to focus all of our faculties on recalling and reliving Jesus' Passion, culminating in an explosion of joy at Jesus' resurrection. We must all confess that in some years Holy Week has been much more meaningful than in others, usually depending on the degree to which we have been able to grasp the significance of his death and resurrection for us.

Jesus' Passion is introduced with the joyous acclamation of the people of Jerusalem proclaiming, "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord," as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Jesus' Passion nears its end with many of the same people tumultuously yelling "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Jesus comes humbly riding into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, and exits by being taken outside of Jerusalem to be crucified and carried in burial garments to a tomb beyond the city's gate. One thing holds true in this week of contrasts, that is the disciples' inability to grasp what is taking place or the significance of this Passover. Praise be to the Holy Spirit who later made all things clear to them and caused these things to be recorded for our edification for all eternity.

In this recounting of Jesus' Passion there appear many characters in whom, with just a little bit of reflection, we can discover ourselves. With dismay we may find ourselves among those who contributed to his death. For as Fr. Richard John Neuhaus points out, "For whom does he pray forgiveness? For the leaders of his own people, a fragile, frightened establishment that could not abide the threat of the presence of a love so long delayed. For pitiable Pilate, forever wringing his hands, forever soiled. For the soldiers who did the deed, who wielded the whip, who drove the nails, who thrust the spear, it all being but a day's work on foreign assignment, far from home. **And for us he asks forgiveness, for we were there.**" (From *Death on A Friday Afternoon*) If it is with dismay that we discover our complicity in Jesus' death, it is with relief and joyous exaltation that we also discover that we are included among those for whom Jesus prays, asking the Father to forgive.

Fr. Neuhaus rightly draws attention to our inclusion both among the guilty standing at the foot of the cross and among those forgiven by Christ from the cross. Sin and its accompanying guilt has been with humankind since the beginning. Someone has jokingly said, "Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving." Unfortunately, never ending guilt is no joke when it remains unrecognized, unclaimed, and unforgiving. Rather, guilt hangs over us like an ever-abiding cloud blotting out the Son's warmth.

If there is no recognized guilt, then there can be no recognized forgiveness. So it is important as we enter Holy Week that we come face to face with both our guilt, and Christ's forgiveness. We must, looking through the eyes of Christ, see ourselves standing in the crowd, unwittingly participating in his crucifixion. However, it is also imperative, lest we not be able to bear it, to hear ourselves included in Jesus' request to the Father for forgiveness. If Christ died to secure our forgiveness and relieve both the penalty and guilt of our sin, we do him and ourselves a great disservice by not acknowledging his completed work of forgiveness, and claiming it as our rightful inheritance as his followers. As the reality of forgiveness grips our soul we too will experience an explosion of joy.

First Reading — Isaiah 50:4-7

4 The Lord GOD has given me a well-trained tongue, That I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear; 5 And I have not rebelled, have not turned back. 6 I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. 7 The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame...

1. What does this prophesy indicate about the Messiah?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

9 "You relied on the LORD--let him deliver you; if he loves you, let him rescue you." 10 Yet you drew me forth from the womb, made me safe at my mother's breast. ...

18 that I can count all my bones. They stare at me and gloat; 19 they divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots. 20 But you, LORD, do not stay far off; my strength, come quickly to help me. 21 Deliver me from the sword, my forlorn life from the teeth of the dog. ...

24 "You who fear the LORD, give praise! All descendants of Jacob, give honor; show reverence, all descendants of Israel! 25 For God has not spurned or disdained the misery of this poor wretch, Did not turn away from me, but heard me when I cried out.

Second Reading — Philippians 2:6-11

6 Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. 7 Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, 8 he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. 9 Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

2. What aspect of Jesus' humility is most significant to you?

3. What ramifications should verses 9-11 have on the way in which we live in the future?

Gospel Reading — Luke 23:1-56

6 On hearing this Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean; 7 and upon learning that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod who was in Jerusalem at that time. 8 Herod was very glad to see Jesus; he had been wanting to see him for a long time, for he had heard about him and had been hoping to see him perform some sign. 9 He questioned him at length, but he gave him no answer. 10 The chief priests and scribes, meanwhile, stood by accusing him harshly. 11 (Even) Herod and his soldiers treated him contemptuously and mocked him, and after clothing him in resplendent garb, he sent him back to Pilate. 12 Herod and Pilate became friends that very day, even though they had been enemies formerly.

13 Pilate then summoned the chief priests, the rulers, and the people 14 and said to them, "You brought this man to me and accused him of inciting the people to revolt. I have conducted my investigation in your presence and have not found this man guilty of the charges you have brought against him, 15 nor did Herod, for he sent him back to us. So no capital crime has been committed by him. 16 Therefore I shall have him flogged and then release him." 17 [He was obliged to release one prisoner for them at the festival.] 18 But all together they shouted out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us." 19 (Now Barabbas had been imprisoned for a rebellion that had taken place in the city and for murder.) 20 Again Pilate addressed them, still wishing to release Jesus, 21 but they continued their shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" 22 Pilate addressed them a third time, "What evil has this man done? I found him guilty of no capital crime. Therefore I shall have him flogged and then release him." 23 With loud shouts, however, they persisted in calling for his crucifixion, and their voices prevailed. 24 The verdict of Pilate was that their demand should be granted. 25 So he released the man who had been imprisoned for rebellion and murder, for whom they asked, and he handed Jesus over to them to deal with as they wished.

26 As they led him away they took hold of a certain Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country; and after laying the cross on him, they made him carry it behind Jesus.

27 A large crowd of people followed Jesus, including many women who mourned and lamented him. 28 Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves and for your children, 29 for indeed, the days are coming when people will say, 'Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.' 30 At that time people will say to the mountains, 'Fall upon us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' 31 for if these things are done when the wood is green what will happen when it is dry?"

32 Now two others, both criminals, were led away with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. 34 [Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."] They divided his garments by casting lots.

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