Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

August 2020

The following series is free, downloadable small-group materials based on each week’s Mass readings and 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 minutes 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. (The booklet A Facilitator’s Guide: is available from Emmaus Journey to provide additional practical training for leading lively and informative small-group discussions.)

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 that this passage ties 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 Scripture 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,

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**Introduction:** Spiritual anorexia seems to be a plague in our western world. People are choosing to starve themselves spiritually because they choose not to eat. Though we are surrounded by opportunities to feast spiritually and to have our hunger filled, many continually choose to abstain and waste away, committing spiritual suicide a day at a time. Contrasted with this spiritual anorexia is the spiritual abundance that many of us experience. We have found in Christ, the Bread of Life, true nourishment indeed. We both know him who satisfies the hungry soul, and know how people can come to him and partake of the Bread of Life. Yet, how do we respond to the spiritual anorexia which surrounds us?

The Church is faced with two enigmas of great magnitude. First, how do we create a desire within the hearts and minds of people for spiritual food? As we know, the number of people in this country who claim to be Catholic Christians is in the sixty millions, yet, only a small portion of them attend Mass on a regular basis and even fewer avail themselves of the opportunities their parish provides to grow spiritually.

Second, how do we respond to the multitudes who are hungry for spiritual food and insure that they are fed? The Gospel passage in today’s readings provides an analogy from which we can learn our responsibility. One choice we have is that we can choose to ignore the problem and hope that those who are starving will go away, so that our meal and comfort is not disturbed. This choice requires us to suppress our compassion, the compassion that naturally resides in us as temples of Christ the compassionate healer, and instead communicate that “it is every man for himself.”

A second choice is to feel compassion for those who are hungering and thirsting for life giving spiritual food, but become so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem that we are immobilized by inaction, leaving the problem for others. Both of these alternatives are unacceptable.

The better solution is seen within the disciples’ experience. Jesus’ intention is to meet the needs of the hungering multitudes through the multiplication and mobilization of disciples. In recent years there has been a growing call for everyday Catholic lay people to get involved. The work of Christ, the work of the Church is not to be done solely by the ordained but must involve the laity as well. The ministry of the ordained is to prepare us, the laity, to create in the heart of the non-believer a desire to know Christ, and to help feed and form the hungry.

This vision of a mobilized laity taking Christ to the world is captured by the words of Saint Pope John Paul II “The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world’s great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring laborers who work in the Lord’s vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God’s grace, these are the great builders of the Kingdom of God in history.”

As Christ’s disciples we should not only feel compassion but be moved to be compassionate. We should take the plight of the spiritually and physically hungry to Jesus in prayer, and make ourselves available to be used by him to feed the multitudes. Though there were seemingly little resources available, the disciples shared what they had, and God multiplied the impact. This is a critical principle of ministry: when we lovingly and obediently invest the little resources and gifts we have, Jesus multiplies the return on our investment. You may not know a lot of information and/or techniques for resolving these two enigmas, but if you know Christ and will share your experience of him and his love with those who are hungering, God will use you to bring nourishment to them.

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1. **From your experience, why do people not have a hunger for spiritual food?**
Responsorial Reading — Psalms 145:8-9, 15-18

8 The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
9 The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made …
15 The eyes of all look to thee, and thou givest them their food in due season.
16 Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfisest the desire of every living thing.
17 The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.
18 The LORD is near to all who call upon him.

Second Reading — Romans 8:35, 37-39

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? … 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
38 For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2. In light of this passage, how do you explain the times when you have felt separated from the love of Christ?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 14:13-21

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick.
15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” 16 Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” 17 They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” 18 And he said, “Bring them here to me.” 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

3. Where do you see yourself in this story?

4. What “fish” do you have to share with a hungry world?

5. What principles of evangelization do you see revealed in this incident?

Reflecting On Sunday’s Readings

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 9, 2020

Introduction: “It’s always darkest, just before the bottom drops out,” or so people jokingly say. In this week’s passages probably both Elijah and the disciples were feeling this way. Each found themselves in situations where they felt totally alone and abandoned. Each was buffeted by the circumstances that surrounded them.

This feeling of isolation and darkness is an all too common experience for many. In the midst of doing our best among the pressure and stresses of life, suddenly negative circumstances take life right out of our control. A sense of foreboding begins to engulf us and threaten our very existence. We begin feeling cornered and abandoned, and start losing all sense of perspective. Though for Christians this should not be normative, we too often feel that Paul’s description of the Gentiles in Ephesians 2 as “having no hope and without God in the world,” really fits us.

Fortunately, Ephesians 2 also introduces the phrase “but God.” This phrase, “but God,” contains two of the most poignant and hope-filled words in sacred Scripture. They introduce a divine interruption to life on our behalf. Life’s circumstances are about to overwhelm us, “but God” appears to interrupt the turmoil and devastation and bring peace, calming our fears. He may appear either in a still, quiet voice, or in some miraculous walking-on-water event, making himself present to our plight and involved redemptively on our behalf. We do not know how he will appear, but the hope that sustains the Christian is that most assuredly he will appear. God does not abandon his people.

You may recall that the disciples had another nautical experience that revealed the nature of Christ. Their boat was caught in a terrific storm, but that time Jesus was with them asleep in the stern amidst the turmoil. He awoke and calmed the storm with but a word. This time they were having to deal with the storm on their own.

Chrysostom believes that Jesus allowed this incident as part of their training: “Now he is leading them into a greater degree of challenge...This was all for their training that they might not look for some easy hope of preservation from any earthly source. He then allows them to be tossed by the storm all night! This had the purpose of awakening their stony hearts in a most complete way. .... He cast them directly into a situation in which they would have a greater longing for him and a continual remembrance of him.”

I don’t think we can conclude from this that Jesus sends into our lives all of the storms we experience. Many storms are of our own making, others are created by the capriciousness of people. However, in the midst of our storms we can pray that God will use it to break up our stony hearts and give us a more complete love for him and dependence on him.

In the disciples’ experience in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus must have seemed far off. He went up to the mountain to pray and they were several furlongs from the land in a boat that was about to be swamped by wind and wave. But they learned that distance did not separate them from Christ’s love and care. Sometimes we too feel distant from Christ. He ascended into heaven, where he lives to pray for us. When life’s wind and waves seem like they are ready to swamp us we need to reflect on the disciples’ experience and learn that he is never far off, but is always ready to come and rescue us. Whether we are huddled in the dark isolation or buffeted by the dark threatening storms in our life, our responsibility is to listen for his voice and to look for his appearing.

1 From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol. Ib.

First Reading — 1 Kings 19: 9, 11-13

9 And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 11 And he said, “Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. 13 And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

1. How would you respond if God called you by name and said, “What are you doing here?”

2. What was God revealing about himself by not being in the wind and fire?
Responsorial Reading — Psalms 85:8-13 (85:9-14 in the NAB)

8 Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints, to those who turn to him in their hearts. 9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land.

10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. 11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

12 Yea, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. 

Second Reading — Romans 9:1-5

1 I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 2 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. 3 They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 4 to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, be blessed for ever. Amen.

3. Why do you think Paul felt such a strong concern for the lost-ness of the Israelites?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 14:22-33

22 Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was many furlongs distant from the land, beaten by the waves; for the wind was against them. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. 27 But immediately he spoke to them, saying, “Take heart, it is I; have no fear.” 28 And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; 30 but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

4. What lessons can we draw from the disciples’ experience?

5. How can we prevent the stressful experiences of the wind and waves of life from creating fear and doubt?

6. Describe Jesus’ care for the disciples during this trial.
Reflecting On Sunday’s Readings

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 16, 2020

Introduction: If you have ever watched a toddler eat who is just learning to feed themselves, you will understand the popularity of dogs as pets. Food ends up everywhere—face, hair, ears, down both arms and on their chest. No matter how carefully you place something under the highchair to catch the falling food, it still seems to get all over the floor. That’s where the popularity of dogs comes in. While one of the parents cleans up the kid, the dog does a nice job cleaning up the food that has dropped from the table. That’s what is better known as a working dog.

In this week’s Gospel reading we have this concept, invoked by a Gentile mother, to persuade Jesus to heal her daughter. It can be a disturbing passage for it seems like Jesus is a little unfeeling toward this woman’s plight. “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs,” he responded. Not only did he indicate that he wouldn’t agree to her request, but also that he was contrasting the “children” of Israel with the Gentile “dogs.”

We know, and as this lady found out, Jesus is not so heartless. Rather he was communicating the order, or plan, of salvation that was consistent with the Father’s will. The Holy Trinity always intended to bring about the Gentiles’ salvation but to do so decently and in order, after Jesus first brought salvation to the people of Israel. St. Augustan explains, “We accordingly understand that he had to manifest in due sequence to that people [Israel] first the presence of his body, his birth, the display of miracles and then the power of his resurrection. It had thus been predetermined from the beginning, such and such had been foretold and fulfilled, that Christ Jesus had to come to the Jewish people and to be seen and killed and to win for himself those he knew beforehand.”

Many of the early Church Fathers see the Gentile woman as a type for all the Gentile peoples. As such she was a commendable representative for she humbled herself. In contrast many Israelites responded to Jesus in pride, boasting, “Are we not Abraham’s seed?” She believed and exercised her faith when many Israelites doubted and rejected Jesus’ authority. She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs.” So Jesus granted her desire.

Her obedience of faith, and Jesus’ granting of her request presages the engrafting of the Gentiles, by faith, into the promises given to his chosen people, Israel. This access to the Father through faith in Christ also keeps open the door of salvation for a nation that previously rejected Jesus.

What hope this story should bring to us who feel that we have so little to offer. This woman had little going for her. She was a Gentile Canaanite woman coming from a territory that Jesus had warned his disciples to avoid, and to not engage these people in conversation. She seemed to have a pretty hopeless situation; a daughter possessed by a demon. In addition, she was asking Jesus to interrupt his plan to help her. Hopeless? It certainly seemed that way. But that is where we find hope. When she turned to Jesus, she found mercy and grace both for herself and for her daughter. There is no person so unworthy that Jesus will ignore their humble request for help, not any situation so hopeless that Jesus cannot turn it completely around. But it necessitates exercising faith to ask for his help.

The next time you see a little child spewing its food around, especially if there is a little dog sitting there to catch what falls, let it remind you to exercise the faith of the Gentile woman and call upon the power and mercy of our Savior to help in one of your messy situations.

1 From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol. Ib.

First Reading — Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

1 Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed. … 6 “And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

1. How should our understanding of God’s inclusiveness affect the way we relate to people, and appreciate our faith?
Responsorial Reading — Psalms 67:1-2, 4-5, 7 (67:2-3, 5-6, 8 NAB)
1 May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, [Selah] 2 that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power among all nations. …
4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for thou dost judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. [Selah] 5 Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee!
7 God has blessed us; let all the ends of the earth fear him!

Second Reading — Romans 11:13-15, 29-32
13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry 14 in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. 15 For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? …
29 For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. 30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. 32 For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

2. What makes this passage an excellent presentation of the Good News?

3. If the Trinity has gone to such lengths to include all men in salvation, how should it affect our participation in spreading the Gospel?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 15:21-28
21 And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” 23 But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying after us.” 24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26 And he answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” 27 She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28 Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

4. Describe what you think the disciples were feeling.

5. What was there about the Canaanite woman’s faith that compelled Jesus to label it “great” in magnitude?

6. How does one acquire great faith in Christ?

Introduction: The question we find in this week's Gospel reading, “But who do you say I am?” raises the question of Jesus’ authority in our lives. Authority is something everyone knows we need and everyone thinks should be present, but nobody wants to submit to. God plan of authority, and man’s, are frequently not the same, and are often in direct opposition to one another. At the center of God’s plan of authority is a concern for reconciling humanity to the Father, and to one another. However, frequently at the center of mankind’s concept of authority is simply a quest for self-preservation, and self-concern for power, riches and fame.

God’s authority in our lives should be pre-eminent, overruling both human authority and self-concern. His is the authority, the understanding of which primarily comes from the experience of surrender to his will and the subsequent good we encounter. We do not discover it from dwelling in isolation, “me and God,” but by living in community and in communion with the body of Christ, “we and God.” The community to which we belong, the Church, helps us to understand God’s will and pledge allegiance to it. When conflict arises between God’s authority which is just, and human authority which is capricious, we must come down on the side of God.

People frequently choose their leaders based on charisma, appearance, and their own self-interest. But God often turns the scheme of things upside down and places into a position of authority a simple servant who will cooperate with his purposes.

“There is a story that Francis once emerged from the woods at Porziuncola, where he had been praying, and was met by Brother Masseo. ‘Why does the whole world follow you? Why you? You’re not handsome, not clever or educated, and you don’t come from a noble family. How do you explain it?’ According to the story from the Fioretti, when Francis heard this he spent some moments gazing up to heaven and his heart was with God. Finally, he said, ‘You want to know why the whole world chooses to follow me. It is because the Lord could find no more miserable creature for the miraculous work he wished to accomplish—that is why He chose me. To put to shame nobility and greatness and power and beauty and wisdom.’” (From Francis of Assisi: A Prophet for Our Time by Fr. N.G. van Doornik)

Those in authority are constantly evaluated and judged. Some come through with flying colors, while others are bemoaned and castigated for the way they exercise authority. Many times, we judge our leaders, especially our spiritual leaders with a pretty sanctimonious spirit. Often, we do not have the full information of the situations they are having to deal with, nor of the pressures they encounter. Yet we do not hesitate to criticize and to resist their leadership either passively or openly.

Rather than simply engaging in the judgmental process of criticizing those in authority over us and over our parishes we need to focus more attention on our own response to authority. Jesus’ words, “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged,” provide a chilling warning to our critical and rebellious nature. Quite often we can better understand the extent of our submission to the authority of Christ by the way we respond to the authority he has placed over us. Before we rail too vigorously against those placed in positions of authority over us we must answer two questions. First, have they been placed over us by God’s power, to accomplish his purposes? Secondly, what is our responsibility to help them exercise authority in the name of the Authority?

First Reading — Isaiah 22:19-23

19 I will thrust you from your office, and you will be cast down from your station. 20 In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah. 21 And I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. 22 And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. 23 And I will fasten him like a peg in a sure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father’s house.

1. What does this passage imply about God’s involvement in human structures?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 138:1-3, 6-8
I give thee thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing thy praise; 2 I bow down toward thy holy temple and give thanks to thy name for thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness; for thou hast exalted above everything thy name and thy word. 3 On the day I called, thou didst answer me, my strength of soul thou didst increase. …

6 For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he knows from afar. 7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, thou dost preserve my life; thou dost stretch out thy hand against the wrath of my enemies, and thy right hand delivers me.
8 The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; thy steadfast love, O LORD, endures for ever. Do not forsake the work of thy hands.

Second Reading — Romans 11:33-36
33 O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” 35 “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.

2. Define the terms “unsearchable” and “inscrutable” in your own words.

3. Explain your understanding of God’s involvement in the details of our lives.

Gospel Reading — Matthew 16:13-20
13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” 17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

3. Considering the diverse answers to Jesus’ question, what insight does this incident provide regarding revelation?

4. How do you think Peter felt at this pronouncement?

5. State in your own words the promises Jesus gave to Peter.

**Introduction:** When, like Peter in this week’s Gospel reading, we volunteer spiritual advice to another person, is it simply our own opinion we offer, or does the advice we give reflect God’s view and opinion?

This week’s Gospel reading is a continuation of last week’s Gospel reading, and together they pose quite a contrast. Previously, Peter was commended by Jesus for answering correctly, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” a truth revealed to Peter by God, and differing from those responses of the other disciples. Now, in this week’s reading, Peter once again boldly offers his opinion to Jesus, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” Immediately, Jesus strongly rebukes Peter and tells him that he is taking the side of men and like Satan is presenting a hindrance to Jesus doing God’s will. Surely Peter must have experienced some confusion and loss of confidence. Which one of us, out of our love for Jesus, would not have replied the same?

These two incidences put in sharp perspective the wisdom of James 1:19, “Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak …” How often are we presented with opportunities to provide counsel and advise, wherein we quickly expound on what we believe is right, or what we believe is God’s opinion. Granted we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which Peter did not have at this point in his life, however we must also remember that we have a healthy portion of our fallen nature as well. We would also do well to remember God’s admonition to Israel, “For my [God’s] thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” We need to realize that our first, automatic understanding of God’s words may well not be anything more than a superficial understanding of truth. It is often not much deeper or more insightful than would be that of an enlightened unbeliever. God’s thoughts and ways become ours when our mind, over time, remains open to the Holy Spirit to receive the wisdom of God, and when we allow him to shape our will to embrace his ways.

“neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD.”

In some sense our mind is like a sponge. Whatever it is saturated with is what will come out when probed. If our mind mainly takes in the world’s messages and opinions through the things we read, listen to, watch and think on, we should not be surprised when it responds with spiritual insight which is in keeping with mankind’s view of things. On the other hand, the more we saturate our minds with sacred Scripture, with prayer, and with the wise thoughts of the Holy Spirit, the more we will stand in amazement as we hear our lips express thoughts consistent with God’s view of things.

We should avoid thinking that we will develop and experience this transformation in thinking in isolation. The wisdom of the Church, both past and present can provide valuable insight and be used by the Holy Spirit to make the complex things of the Spirit, clearer. Thomas à Kempis is an example of what we mean. He said “Blessed are the ears that listen to the Truth teaching inwardly, and not to the voices of the world. Blessed are the eyes that are closed to outward things, but are open to inward things.”

We have had 2000 years of the Holy Spirit’s leading the Church into Truth. How foolish it would be of us to insist on re-discovering his lessons on our own. It is not only foolish but impossible. A counselor becomes wise by walking with, listening to, and thinking with those who are wise. Let’s ask God to give us the wisdom and understanding to seek his wisdom and understanding.

**First Reading — Jeremiah 20:7-9**

7 O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; thou art stronger than I, and thou hast prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; every one mocks me. 8 For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. 9 If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

1. What do you think Jeremiah was really struggling with?
Responsorial Reading — Psalms 63:1-5, 7-8 (63:2-6, 8-9 NAB)
1 O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is. 2 So I have looked upon thee in the sanctuary, beholding thy power and glory. 3 Because thy steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise thee. 4 So I will bless thee as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on thy name. 5 My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat, and my mouth praises thee with joyful lips, … 7 for thou hast been my help, and in the shadow of thy wings I sing for joy. 8 My soul clings to thee; thy right hand upholds me.

Second Reading — Romans 12:1-2
1 I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

2. Explain the various motivations this passage provides for living a sacrificial life.

3. What would a life “conformed to this world” look like?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 16:21-27
21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day he raised. 22 And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” 23 But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.” 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? 27 For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done.

4. Practically speaking, what does it mean to “deny” one’s self?

5. What does the symbolism of a cross mean and why would someone choose to take it up?

6. Identify the values revealed in this passage, both those that are godly and those that are worldly.

7. For the average person in the pew, what does it mean to lose one’s life for Jesus’ sake?