Reflecting on Sunday’s Readings

January 2021

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 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 EPIPHANY OF THE LORD SUNDAY—January 3, 2021

Introduction: During the past, several weeks of Advent we have been conscious of Christ’s light penetrating our darkened world. We have celebrated God’s grace manifested through his Son, Jesus, and glorièd in this heavenly visitation. In the book *On Being Human*, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen explains, “But Christmas is not a man making himself a god, but God becoming a man, without ever ceasing to be God. In the first instance, there is exaltation or self-inflation by which man makes himself what he is not. In the second instance, there is humiliation, for God takes on the form and habit of man.” What a glorious truth!

During Epiphany we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus the Christ to the Magi, which in turn represents the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. About these Gentiles Paul later says, “you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” No wonder the Magi fell down in praise and worship. Paul later explains, “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.” No wonder they experienced such joy.

For many of us who have not experienced ostracism because of our race or social standing it is difficult to fathom the importance of this early and inclusive manifestation. Perhaps only a country like India where the caste system is so pronounced between the “untouchables” and the elite can we find a modern day parallel. Throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, though God chose and blessed the nation Israel, he always maintained the witness that the salvation of ALL MANKIND was at the heart of his concern and plan. Consequently, right from the beginning of Jesus’ earthly existence God chose to manifest the Savior to both Jew and Gentile. He was to be, and is, the Light of the World for all people for all time.

In the midst of our rejoicing at the significance of this wonderful truth we must recognize that it also calls forth a gift response from us as it did the Magi. Not merely a gift of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but one of cooperation and participation in God’s concern and plan that all mankind might be united in Christ. “This is a task I wish to invite all local churches to undertake,” writes Pope John Paul II in *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*. “In each of them, gathered around their Bishop, as they listen to the word and ‘break bread’ in brotherhood, the ‘one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative.’ It is above all in the actual situation of each local church that the mystery of the one People of God takes the particular form that fits it to each individual context and culture.

“In the final analysis, this rooting of the Church in time and space mirrors the movement of the Incarnation itself. Now is the time for each local Church [and each individual] to assess its fervor and find fresh enthusiasm for its spiritual and pastoral responsibilities, by reflecting on what the Spirit has been saying to the People of God …” The Epiphany of the Lord, falling as it does at the beginning of a new year, provides an ideal reminder and opportunity to reassess our commitment to our Lord’s concerns and plans, and to align our lives and gifts with his. Begin this process by making a gift to Christ of a block of your time, where you can sit and allow the Holy Spirit to lead you through this realignment process. Every child adopted into a family receives not only the privileges and joys of belonging, but also the responsibilities. As Gentiles we should rejoice that we have been adopted into God’s family, and we also should rejoice that we can affirm our significance by sharing in its responsibilities and purposes.
THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD SUNDAY—January 3, 2021

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Isaiah 60:1-6

1. In what ways has Christ’s light been manifested to you?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13

Second Reading — Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6

2. What different aspects of our salvation are emphasized by the following terms: “fellow heirs,” “members” of Christ’s body, and “partakers of the promise”?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 2:1-12

3. Where do you feel you are in your journey to make Jesus your Ruler and King?

4. What do the titles “Ruler” and “King” imply to you about Jesus and our responsibilities as members of his kingdom?

5. What precious gifts can you bring to Jesus as tokens of your love and worship?

Introduction: The Baptism of our Lord was made newly visible to me through an icon at a retreat in Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon. The icon showed a loincloth clad Jesus being helped by an angel into a flowing stream, surrounded by the faces of humanity. With one foot on the bank and the other submerged well into the stream the icon depicted Jesus’ willingness to enter into our humanity and identify with us in our need. Imagine, he who knew no sin allowed himself to be numbered among sinners, among those who responded to John’s call for confession of, and repentance from their sins.

During this act of humiliation and solidarity with humanity the Father testifies about his Son and anoints him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Catechism explains, “The messianic consecration reveals his divine mission, for the name ‘Christ’ implies ‘he who anointed,’ and ‘the very anointing with which he was anointed.’ The one who anointed is the Father, the one who was anointed is the Son, and he was anointed with the Spirit who is the anointing.” Thus, in this baptismal event his earthly ministry as the Messiah was inaugurated. His baptism was a twofold witness, first the witness of Jesus testifying of those he came to save, and secondly by the Father testifying that Jesus was in fact the Savior.

The Lord’s baptism, like his incarnation and crucifixion definitively answers for all time the question of the Father’s love for us. For in each of these salvation events, the incarnation, baptism, and crucifixion, Jesus identifies with us in our stained humanity. In each instance as Jesus identifies with us the Father reaffirms that he is “well pleased” with Jesus, for he knows that Jesus is making possible that which has been impossible. “So, it happened not only that the Lord was being baptized—he also was making new the old creation. He was bringing the alienated under the scepter of adoption. For straightway ‘the heavens were opened to him.’ A reconciliation took place between the visible and the invisible. The celestial orders were filled with joy, the diseases of the earth healed, secret things made known, those at enmity restored to amity. … So, when the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove and the Father’s voice spread everywhere, it was fitting that ‘the gates of heaven should be lifted up.’” (Hippolytus in “The Discourse on the Holy Theophany,” from Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol. II.)

As we worship and reflect together on the Baptism of the Lord, we should take hope and receive challenge. Our hope rests in the witness of the Father, and of the Scriptures that Jesus has fully entered into our humanity and into our spiritual dilemma. The book of Hebrews says that he was “tempted as we are, yet without sin.” As we slog our way through the muck and mire of life it is easy to get discouraged not only with our own sinfulness and disobedience but also with that of the world around us. How easy it would be to choose to give up, or to wallow in guilt and discouragement at our spiritual and practical shortcomings. But the baptism of our Lord should give us hope that by entering into our humanity he also understands our battles. The author of Hebrews encourages us that Jesus is “a high priest, who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses,” and encourages us to “then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Where does his humility and obedience in baptism leave us? How are we to identify with him? In what ways does his mission now rest on us who are his body? Jesus later refers to his death on the cross as a baptism with which he is to be baptized. Does not our gratitude for his identification with us both in the baptism of water and the baptism of the cross demand our identification with him in life and mission? We should be challenged by the grace which Jesus’ humility bestows on us to also identify with others willingly in their humanity by bestowing his grace on them.
BAPISM OF THE LORD SUNDAY—January 10, 2021

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

1. How would you describe in your own words the Lord’s mission as explained in this passage?

2. Why do you think that justice is such an important issue with God?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 29:1-4, 9-10

Second Reading — Acts 10:34-38

3. What are some of the ways in which we can demonstrate that God shows no partiality?

Gospel Reading — Mark 1:7-11

4. How do you view both Jesus’ willingness and his decision to be baptized?

5. How does this incident in Jesus’ life testify to his authenticity as God’s Son?

6. What does this passage regarding Jesus’ baptism reveal about the Trinity?

Introduction: “How can I know the will of God?” is one of the questions most frequently asked Christian leaders. This question comes from a natural longing for certainty, and a natural aversion to having to live by faith with only partial light. With some it is asked in an atmosphere of fear, believing that they might somehow miss solving life’s puzzle and suffer for it. Often the question is asked in genuine sincerity, however, at other times it is only used as a smoke screen to enable a person to practice continued disobedience. The implication of the question is, “If I know what God wants me to do, I’ll do it.” This week’s readings help to shed some light on knowing God’s will.

A godly older friend of mine always precedes any discussion about knowing God’s will, by stating, “Ninety percent of knowing God’s will is using the wisdom God has already given us.” He is referring to the fact that God’s Word, Christ’s character, and Church teachings provide abundant principles and values for knowing how to live. If we just use our mind to learn and grasp these truths, ninety percent or more of daily decisions will be clear to us. In addition, the assumption is that God isn’t endeavoring to hide his will from us, rather, because we are his instruments, his earthly body through which he often works his will, he delights to reveal his will to us.

Samuel discovered God’s will regarding a specific, unusual situation by doing two simple things; he listened, and he responded to God’s call. For many of us the biggest handicap to overcome in discovering God’s will is the handicap of being spiritually deaf, deaf because we choose not to listen. Because of the dissonance or static which our lifestyles create we often cannot hear God speaking unless he is hollering at us—which is not his normal mode of communication. I do not know many Christians who are in open rebellion against God, however, it is not uncommon to find Christians floundering without purpose or direction in a passive state of non-commitment. In some cases, Christians are clearly living contrary to God’s revealed will, that will which we can easily discover by using the wisdom God has given us. We need to learn a lesson from Samuel and schedule moments of solitude in our lives, where we can stop, and do nothing but listen, listen, listen for the still, quiet voice of God.

When Samuel heard God speaking, prompted by Eli, he was ready to do God’s will; he responded, “Speak Lord, for thy servant hears.” When the disciples began to discover Jesus and inquire after him, Jesus simply said, “Come and see.” Both Samuel and the disciples responded in obedience. In fact, the root meaning of the word obedience is to listen attentively or “attentive hearkening.” In each case God began to unfold his will to these individuals. They did not see ahead, months and years down the road, but they saw far enough to respond in obedience to what God had revealed. God’s will for you also will become apparent if this coming year finds you listening attentively.

“Praying is first and foremost listening to Jesus, who dwells in the very depths of your heart. He does not shout. He does not thrust himself upon you. His voice is an unassuming voice, very nearly a whisper, the voice of a gentle love. Whatever you do with your life, go on listening to the voice of Jesus in your heart. This listening must be an active and very attentive listening, for in our restless noisy world God’s loving voice is so easily drowned out. You need to set aside some time each day for this active listening to God if only for ten minutes. Ten minutes each day for Jesus alone can bring about a radical change in your life.”

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—JANUARY 17, 2021

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — 1 Samuel 3:3-10, 19

1. When have you had an experience of God getting your attention?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 40: 1, 3, 6-9 (2, 4, 7-10 NAB)

Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 17-20

2. What do you learn about your body from the 1 Corinthians passage?

3. Explain how we “glorify God” in our body.

Gospel Reading — John 1:35-42

4. What does the expression “Lamb of God” tell us about Jesus?

5. Who do you identify with in this encounter?

6. If Jesus were to ask you, “What do you seek?” what would you answer?

Introduction: We are now three weeks from having made our New Year’s resolutions. For some these resolutions have already been long discarded, for others the need remains to inaugurate what often are lightly made resolves. The difficulty with New Year’s resolutions is that they are seldom driven by any eternal mandates, but rather by simple, wishful thinking. Consequently, resolutions are usually begun with difficulty and abandoned with relief.

Do you remember in the year 2000 when Pope John Paul II declared a year of Jubilee? In his encyclical The Coming of the Third Millennium he explained, “that the Jubilee was a time dedicated in a special way to God” that takes place every fifty years. Because in Bible times people’s welfare was closely tied to the agrarian culture and to the possession of land by which they could make a decent living, these years of jubilee freed people from indebtedness and returned to them their ancestral lands. So we see in Leviticus 25:10, “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his family.” Pope John Paul II suggested that the Jubilee year should become a “year of the Lord’s favor, a year of the remission of sins and of the punishments due to men, a year of reconciliation between disputing parties, a year of manifold conversions and of sacramental and extra-sacramental penance, … commemorate the event of the Redemption: the Cross of Christ, his death on Golgotha and the Resurrection.” Now that is a resolution we can get our teeth into!

Imagine what would transpire in our life, in the life of the Church, and in the life of this nation if each of us experienced the full meaning of forgiveness, and each of us granted the full measure of forgiveness to others. Imagine what it would be like for reconciliation to again exist in families, and among individuals and groups of individuals who have previously been at odds with one another. What would take place if reconciliation were to become a reality within Christ’s body? Would we not experience such a massive scale of conversions that we would be overcome with joy? Would we not truly experience the joy of Jubilee?

We are now in the twentieth year of this millennium, this “new springtime of evangelization” of which Pope John Paul II spoke. No lightly made resolve can turn this millennium, or even this coming year, into a Jubilee-like experience. Only a genuine time of reflection, penance, and surrender to Christ the Lord will enable us to make this both an immediate and a lifelong commitment to action. Upon recalling Jesus’ advent and mission the Holy Spirit can enable us to reproduce in our lives individually and collectively the forgiveness, reconciliation and renewed freedom Jesus brought in the past, and promises for the future. Consequently, as we release others from their guilt by granting them our forgiveness, we experience afresh, and magnify the joy of our own forgiveness as we remember how Jesus releases us from our guilt.

Perhaps now, this coming week, we should set aside a time of reflection to nail down a real Jubilee-like resolution, driven by eternal values which will be life changing not only for us but also for others. “Until we forgive, we cannot be free. Until we forgive, we are enslaved, in chains to the past, in bondage to hurtful memories. We can only be healed through forgiveness, and we can only gain freedom through forgiveness.”

1-3 On the Coming of the Third Millennium, an Apostolic Letter by Pope John Paul II (12).
4 Living with Contradictions by David Steindl-Rast (page 64).
THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—JANUARY 24, 2021

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Jonah 3:1-5, 10

1. What message do you think God wants proclaimed to cities today?

2. What lesson(s) does Jonah’s expectations and the Ninevites’ response teach about conversion?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 25:4-9

Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

3. How do you feel about the time that has been allotted to you?

4. To what extent do you think God has appointed you the time that he has, for a particular purpose?

Gospel Reading — Mark 1:14-20

5. What if any is the correlation between “repent and believe” and “follow me?”

6. What would compel a person to “follow Jesus” as definitively as did these disciples?

7. Explain what it means to “follow” Jesus. Should following Jesus be equally as demanding today as it was in the New Testament?

8. What are the “nets” in your life which God is calling you to abandon to follow him?

Reflecting on Sunday’s Readings

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—January 31, 2021

Introduction: In one of Aesop’s fables an old Mother Crab says to her son, “Why do you walk sidewise like that my son? You ought to walk straight.” The little crab responds by asking, “Show me how, dear Mother, and I’ll follow your example.” Though the Mother Crab tried in vain to walk straight she could only move sideways. She quickly saw how unreasonable her advice to her son was. The moral of the fable is obvious, it is easier to tell than to do, and an example is more authoritative than a lesson.

Jesus came teaching with authority as we learn in this week’s Gospel Reading. He advanced his ministry by being the Master Teacher. Jesus communicated truth in simple but powerful word pictures, parables, and then reinforced his teachings by using his miraculous power to heal and do good. Intertwined throughout, he lived an exemplary life responding to lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, and his dearest friends with the same consistent love and righteousness. Jesus’ teaching authority did not come from utilizing the latest teaching techniques, or by practicing recommended communication skills. His authority came from within, from who he was, Emmanuel, God with us, and from the truth he taught—the very Truth of God. He lived and shared truth that transcended mere human wisdom, no matter how insightful our earthly wisdom may be. In a similar way, those who followed were able to share in this authority when they allowed God’s truth to flow through them unpolluted by human understanding.

Not many of us are called to publicly teach, speaking for God and on his behalf. Perhaps that is fortunate. But like the old Mother Crab mentioned by Aesop in his fable, we spend a lifetime teaching character and values of one kind or another. We do this not primarily by what we say, but most certainly by how we live. Usually our example speaks so loudly, that others cannot hear what we are saying. What an awesome responsibility is then laid at our feet; to communicate Truth by our lives. Jesus is attempting to authoritatively communicate to those around you the truth and love of God, and he has chosen you to be his simple but powerful word picture. You have been chosen to be his living parable and invited to be a living icon of Jesus Christ. The purpose of an icon, as C. S. Lewis explains, “is not to fix attention upon itself, but to stimulate and liberate certain activities … in the worshipper.” This is the role of an example; to authoritatively focus people’s attention on the Lord of our life, so that they in turn can be freed to worship him. What an awesome invitation is given us to illustrate his message of grace and love.

Pope Paul VI explains it this way; “… for the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal. As we said recently to a group of lay people, ‘Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.’ St. Peter expressed this well when he held up the example of a reverent and chaste life that wins over even without a word those who refuse to obey the word. It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness to fidelity to the Lord Jesus—the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity.”* Our lives of chastity, reverence, sanctity and obedience to Jesus empowers and brings authority to the Church’s message of Jesus and his Kingdom, and our effectiveness as his living witness.

* From Evangelization in the Modern World by Pope Paul VI, 94).
THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—January 31, 2021

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday’s Readings please either consult your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1. What is the prophet’s primary concern?

2. Why do you think people do not heed the messages from God?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 95:1-2, 6-9

Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 7:32-35

3. On a scale of 1–10, with 1 being purely your desires, and 10 being totally God’s will, how would you evaluate your driving force for making life’s decisions?

4. What are three characteristics of undivided devotion?

Gospel Reading — Mark 1:21-28

5. Who is the most effective teacher you have known? What made this person effective?

6. Describe the difference between teaching with authority and teaching without authority.

7. How can we allow Jesus’ teachings to be more authoritative in our lives?