

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

August 2015

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,

Richard A. Cleveland
info@emmausjourney.org

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 2, 2015

Introduction: If you have ever tried feeding a toddler who doesn't know what they want to eat you know how difficult it is to satisfy an unidentified desire. Though they are offered numerous and diverse lunch choices they push them away with dissatisfaction. Usually the issue is not one of hunger for food but of a general attitude of dissatisfaction and hunger of spirit.

The crowds who followed Jesus evidenced a similar hunger of spirit. Like a child's question, "Mom, what is there to eat?" those who followed Jesus were also asking legitimate questions due to their spiritual hunger. But in a similar way to a child's boredom and rejection of the choices, these seekers of Jesus rejected and were unwilling to receive the Bread of Life which the Father put before them to satisfy their hunger. Though in this week's Gospel reading they responded, "Lord give us this bread always," by the end of the day they abandoned Jesus and the Bread of Life which the Father sent from heaven.

Dissatisfaction of spirit is often manifest in many different ways. Some people have an uneasy restlessness that seeks satisfaction for spiritual hunger in the pursuit of one thing after another. This spiritual hunger often drives people to pursue the latest toy, the latest philosophy, or the latest experience. Like a universal remote control they are haphazardly flipping through the options of life but never able to settle on anything that fully satisfies their inner hunger. We would do well to heed Jesus' advice to them to reevaluate their lives and to not continue to expend their energies on things which do not satisfy.

Even as we cannot live without food, so the spirit of man cannot survive and thrive without the spiritual nourishment which is Jesus himself. In the subsequent three weeks the Gospel readings will explore John 6 and Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life. We will read of the promise that by partaking of him we will receive real life. St. Thomas à Kempis said, "This most high and venerable Sacrament is the health of soul and body, the cure of every spiritual malady. By it our vices are cured, our passions restrained, temptations are lessened, grace is given in fuller measure, and virtue once established is fostered; faith is confirmed, hope is strengthened, and love kindled and deepened." Jesus is the source of life and when he comes to us in the Eucharist he comes to make a difference in us.

One difference we can expect to see in our life is that our hunger of spirit will be satisfied. However, we would be remiss if we over-looked the corresponding truth of this week's second reading. Jesus fully intends to reveal himself to us through Sacred Scripture also. It is through the Scriptures that he brings about renewal of our mind, and enables us to know him; his values, his character, his nature, his truths in an intimate way, and so "learn Christ." It is this relationship of knowing him that removes the hunger of spirit.

In the coming weeks we will also hear afresh the invitation to believe and to receive him into our heart and life through the sacred Scriptures and in the Eucharist. We are invited to receive his Body and Blood as confirmation of our faith and commitment to follow him. St. Thomas à Kempis went on to say, "Blessed is the man who, whenever he celebrates the Eucharist or receives Communion, offers himself to Our Lord as a living sacrifice."

In the coming weeks we will learn both the right and the wrong way to respond to Jesus and the truth that he is the Bread of Life sent from the Father. How, in the future, will we respond to this invitation? May God help us to do so with an *active* faith which enables us to continually offer ourselves to him as a living sacrifice.

First Reading — Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15

² And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness,

³ and said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not. ...

¹² "I have heard the murmurings of the people of Israel; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'"

¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning dew lay round about the camp.

¹⁴ And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat."

1. How can we “gather a portion every day” of the nourishment God has provided for us?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 78:3-4, 23-25, 54

...³ things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.

⁴ We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders which he has wrought. ...

²³ Yet he commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven; ²⁴ and he rained down upon them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven.

²⁵ Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance. ... ⁵⁴ And he brought them to his holy land, to the mountain which his right hand had won.

Second Reading — Ephesians 4:17, 20-24

¹⁷ Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; ... ²⁰ You did not so learn Christ! — ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus. ²² Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, ²³ and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

2. What analogies would you use to describe the process of “Put off..., be renewed..., and put on...?”
3. Where are you in this process?

Gospel Reading — John 6:24-35

²⁴ So when the people saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?”

²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform?” ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ They said to him, “Lord, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. How would you evaluate the questions asked of Jesus?”

4. Describe what Jesus meant by “the food which perishes”?
5. Jesus uses the words “labor for” and “work of God.” How much effort do you think we need to invest to cultivate our faith in God?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 9, 2015

Introduction: “It’s scandalous!” You can almost hear the whispered incredulity spread throughout the crowd. Looks of dismay and shock are interspersed by the flashing angry eyes of indignation. In their murmuring you can almost hear them asking, “How could one seemingly so good, doing such miracles and works of mercy, expound such blasphemous remarks?” Their murmuring was not unlike that of their Israelite ancestors in the wilderness when they too expressed their ingratitude by judging the ways of God’s salvation.

The responses of the Jews, and of the multitude of disciples who turned away from Jesus to no longer follow him, provide a commentary on the meaning of Jesus’ remarks in John 6. The scandal, in their minds, was that Jesus claimed to have previously been with God the Father in heaven. Since no man has seen God at any time, or could survive being in the Father’s presence, Jesus’ claim to have been with the Father, and to have spoken directly to him, put Jesus on a par with the great I AM of the Old Testament. Jesus further scandalized these Jewish minds by claiming that, “I am the living bread,” and suggesting that they must eat his flesh, the Bread of Life. We should make no mistake, in their minds Jesus was not speaking figuratively. It was the literalness of Jesus’ remarks that scandalized them. And it would be scandal, if it were not true, but it is true.

Instead of being scandalous, Jesus’ words were life-giving. People are wandering aimlessly in their sins in a way not dissimilar to the Jews wandering in the wilderness, starving for want of spiritual food and a living relationship with the Father. Even as the heavenly manna was sent to nourish the physical bodies of the Israelites, so the Father sent us his Son, the true heavenly food, to nourish our souls. Jesus is the Living Water, the Bread of Life, all that we need to sustain our spiritual life. He was sent from the Father to be freely received by those who believe. However, it requires of us, as it did for the Jews who were scandalized by Jesus’ claims, an abandonment of a salvation and a savior made in our image, one we can understand, and which comfortably meets our preconceived ideas. It also equally requires abandoning ourselves through faith to the mysteries of salvation, a salvation made in God’s image and likeness. And so we see sandwiched between Jesus’ statement that he came from the Father, and his statement that he is the Bread of Life, the requirement to believe, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”

It is purported that when Elizabeth I was a girl of sixteen, and England was going through the upheaval of religious conflict, she was asked about her belief in the Eucharist. Her reply was, “His was the Word who spoke it, He took the bread and broke it, and what that Word doth make it, I do believe and take it.” We too are confronted with Jesus’ Word, dare we not believe it.

“Let us submit to God in all things and not contradict Him, even if what He says seems contrary to our reason and intellect; rather let His words prevail over our reason and intellect. Let us act in this way with regard to the (eucharistic) mysteries, looking not only at what falls under our senses but holding on to His words. For His word cannot lead us astray,”*

* *Mystery of Faith*, by Pope Paul VI, (page 9).

First Reading — 1 Kings 19:4-8

⁴ But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers.” ⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.” ⁶ And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷ And the angel of the LORD came again a second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you.” ⁸ And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

1. How does this passage contribute to our understanding of the Eucharist?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 34:1-8 (34:2-9 NAB)

¹ I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. ² My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and be glad. ³ O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!

⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

⁵ Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. ⁶ This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.

⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. ⁸ O taste and see that the LORD is good! Happy is the man who takes refuge in him!

Second Reading — Ephesians 4:30-5:2

³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

^{5:1} Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

2. What does it mean to “grieve” the Holy Spirit? How can we minimize grieving the Holy Spirit?

3. What are the characteristics of God that we are to imitate?

Gospel Reading — John 6:41-51

⁴¹ The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not murmur among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that any one has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

4. What is necessary for a person to embrace Jesus as the Bread sent from heaven?

5. How many statements can you find in this passage to substantiate Jesus’ deity?

6. God’s provision of manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16) was a foreshadowing of the Father’s provision of Jesus as the Living Bread sent from heaven. How many parallels can you discover that point to Jesus as the bread of life?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 16, 2015

Introduction: This week's Gospel reading continues the passage which was introduced in last week's Gospel reading, in which we saw the Jews' incredulity directly linked to Jesus' statement about eating his flesh. It is interesting to note that their question isn't, "Can this be?" but rather "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Throughout the history of Christianity the debate has more often taken place about the "how" of the Eucharist than about the reality of Jesus' promise. It is also instructive to note that Jesus does not answer their question as to how it can be, but rather he simply reiterates that it must be. Jesus knew and emphasized previously in this discourse that belief is the issue. Besides if he were to explain it to them they could not have comprehended it, for after all, they were mere men. How could they begin to comprehend the mysteries of God?

My ability to accept this mystery was enhanced by another equally astonishing mystery. One December as I was doing my daily Scripture reading and contemplating the Incarnation, when the Holy Spirit impressed on my heart and mind the awesomeness of Jesus' birth. The Spirit showed me that when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and she became pregnant with the child Jesus, that within the infinitesimally small seed implanted within Mary's womb there was contained all the fullness of God, a seemingly impossible but true reality. Simultaneously, He enabled me to grasp the concept that if God could be contained within the small, implanted seed within Mary, why is it so outlandish to think that he also could be fully present in the host? The same loving Father is the author of both miracles.

We also see Jesus mentioning in this passage the words "live," "life," "living," and "abide," ten times. Jesus emphasizes that life, real life, eternal life comes through him, through his body and blood. There is real substantial benefit in believing and partaking of him. Jesus truly meant the statements he made elsewhere in John 6 that the person who doesn't eat his flesh has "no life," and that the person who eats will "live because of me." The Jews, had no doubt as to what Jesus meant, even though they had no heart to believe him. We too, like these Jews, can ask in unbelief, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" or we can in faith believe and accept this sacrament which is a mystery that we cannot explain—because of the One who said it to us.

Irenaeus explains, "Our opinion is in accordance with the Eucharist, and, in turn, the Eucharist establishes our opinion. For we offer to Him His own, announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and spirit. For the bread which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly... ."⁵

Peter and the disciples response to this seemingly scandalous message was, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68) The disciples had been with Jesus long enough to observe his life, and to hear and meditate on his words. They knew he was Truth, and spoke the truth. They knew that if they walked away in disbelief, or in apprehension about accepting a mystery they could not understand that they would be walking away from some unbelievably strong promises and more importantly from a lifelong relationship with Jesus. Just listen to the promises of this week's recorded words of Jesus; "if any one eats of this bread he will live for ever,"—"has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day,"—"abides in me, and I in him,"—"will live because of me," and "he who eats this bread will live for ever." As we spend time with Jesus meditating on his words and listening to him we too will experience the growing conviction that Jesus is the Holy One of God and embrace the truth of his presence in the Eucharist.

** Adversus Haereses, by St. Irenaeus of Lyons.*

First Reading — Proverbs 9:1-6

¹ Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars. ² She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. ³ She has sent out her maids to call from the highest places in the town, ⁴ "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who is without sense she says, ⁵ "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. ⁶ Leave simpleness, and live, and walk in the way of insight"

1. How would you feel to be known as "simple" in your faith?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 34:1-6 (34:2-7 NAB)

¹ I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. ² My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and be glad.

³ O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together! ⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. ⁵ Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.

⁶ This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.

Second Reading — Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, ²⁰ always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

2. What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge?

3. What are the characteristics of wisdom according to the first and second reading?

Gospel Reading — John 6:51-58

⁵¹ I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

⁵³ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; ⁵⁴ he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. ⁵⁶ He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever..”

4. What impresses you most from this passage?

5. What has been your journey of understanding the Eucharist?

6. Jesus’ intention is that the reality of his presence would enable us to abide in him and enable him to abide in us. How should this relationship of abiding be seen in our lives?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 23, 2015

Introduction: Decision making is difficult, so difficult that bookstore shelves are bursting with management books offering tools on how to make necessary decisions in a timely manner. Some have built an entire career on helping others move through the decision making process. Yet with all this help, when it comes to making spiritual decisions that have life shaping magnitude there is really very little available, except spiritually reworked secular tools. Perhaps this is so because these life-changing decisions are more a decision of the heart than of the head. After all, how reasonable is it, humanly speaking, to decide to follow Jesus if it is going to require your life? And whether we are called to be actual martyrs or not, Jesus asks nothing less than our life.

On July 17, 1794, sixteen innocent Carmelite nuns were asked to make just such a decision. Instructed by the terrorists of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, to abandon their religious habits and religious calling they decided, not to do so, but to follow their Lord. This unwillingness to abandon their faith and deny their Lord resulted in these nuns being declared enemies of society, arrested, tried, and led to the guillotine to be sacrificed on the altar of political correctness. It is reported that they went to their deaths singing Psalm 117, "Extol Him all you people! For great is His steadfast love toward us and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!" Theirs was not a spur of the moment decision but the natural, or rather supernatural, outworking of an earlier decision in their lives to give themselves to Jesus, heart and soul.

The disciples are faced with a similar decision in this week's Gospel reading. As we have seen in the last two weeks, Jesus confronted those who were following him with just two alternatives; either he is God living among them, Emmanuel, or he isn't; either he is the only means of salvation, or he isn't; either they believe and receive him, as demonstrated by their receiving his flesh and blood, or they totally reject him. Jesus offered no third choice, it was either/or. Do not be deceived, the people knew that acceptance of Jesus in this way meant a total break from the religious norm and that for many it would result in ostracism, persecution, and martyrdom. Though at this time we live in a country where the results of choosing to be Jesus' follower are less severe for most of us, the decision is no less demanding. We don't have a third choice of simply choosing to be a morally good religious person. The decision Jesus calls for is still total identification with him and abandonment to him as our only God, our only means of salvation, and our only source of life. This is a decision which does not simply deal with ideas, but with the outworking of these truths in sacrificial living.

Some foolishly put off making this decision, planning to make this necessary decision later in life. In the meantime they plan on being their own god, calling the shots in their life, and living as they please. Bishop Sheen tells of just such a man who lived as he wanted, claiming that on his death bed he could cry three magic words, "Lord have mercy!" and be saved in the end. Well, he did get his three last words, but they were different than he supposed, for as his horse threw him over a cliff to his death he was heard to proclaim, "I'll be damned!"¹ This is the hour of decision, as Joshua said, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

"From the outset, conversion is expressed in faith which is total and radical, and which neither limits not hinders God's gift. At the same time, it gives rise to a dynamic and lifelong process which demands a continual turning away from the 'life according to the flesh' to 'life according to the Spirit,' (cf Rom. 8:3-13). Conversion means accepting by a personal decision the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple."²

¹ *On Being Human*, by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, (page 234).

² *Mission of the Redeemer*, by Pope John Paul II, (46).

First Reading — Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18

¹ Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. ...

¹⁵ And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

¹⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods; ¹⁷for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land; therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

1. How do you feel about Joshua’s challenge?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 34: 1-2, 15-22 (2-3, 16-23 NAB)

¹I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. ²My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and be glad. . . .

¹⁵The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous, and his ears toward their cry. ¹⁶The face of the LORD is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. ¹⁷When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. ¹⁸The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. ¹⁹Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the LORD delivers him out of them all. ²⁰He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.

²¹Evil shall slay the wicked; and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. ²²The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Second Reading — Ephesians 5:21-32

²¹Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²²Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord.

²³For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

²⁴As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

³²This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church.

2. What does this passage about husbands and wives teach us about relating to Christ?

Gospel Reading — John 6:60-69

⁶⁰Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” ⁶¹But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? ⁶²Then what if you were to see the Son of man ascending where he was before? ⁶³It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But there are some of you that do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. ⁶⁵And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

⁶⁶After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” ⁶⁸Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; ⁶⁹and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God”

3. What does “a hard saying” refer to?
4. What reasons do you know which would cause a person to draw back from following Jesus?
5. How would you describe this struggle?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—August 30, 2015

Introduction: Watching her mother struggle, a single girl asked why it was necessary to cut the bone off the piece of meat before putting it in the pot to roast. The mother replied, “That’s the way my mother did it.” Later the girl asked her grandmother the same question, only to be given the same answer, “That’s the way my mother did it.” Somewhat intrigued to know the real reason, she placed a long distance call to her great-grandmother asking the same question. This time she got a different answer, “Because it was too big for the pot I had.” We chuckle at how this practical solution inadvertently became established as a meaningless tradition from one generation to the next.

The following statement succinctly captures Jesus’ teaching in this week’s Gospel reading by explaining, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”¹ Jesus is speaking in this week’s Gospel passage about the dangers of traditionalism. He rebukes the Pharisees, not for the proper adherence to tradition, but for their traditionalism. As Catholics our lives and worship are marked by tradition, and unfortunately for some it has become traditionalism. Tradition is and should be a good and healthy aspect of our lives, leading us to Jesus and amplifying his teaching. The value of tradition is emphasized by Jesus’ example as he observed the religious traditions of Judaism. The last supper Jesus had with his disciples took place amidst his observing of the Passover tradition. It was during this observance that Jesus instituted the sacrament and tradition of the Eucharistic meal. So we know from his life that Jesus was not opposed to valuable traditions, but rather to the hypocrisy of traditionalism.

The point of Jesus’ rebuke was the Pharisees’ hypocritical concern about minute, man-made details of religious observances, while simultaneously harboring hearts overflowing with deceit and sin. Sacred Scripture tells us that God does not look on the outward appearances, but rather looks on the heart. So God is not fooled by outward shows of religiosity, though people sometimes are.

Romano Guardini, in his book *The Lord*, discusses the dangers of traditionalism by explaining, “A special caste, that of the scribes, the protectors of the Law, grew up around it. They probed its meaning, interpreted and applied it. They surrounded every paragraph with explanations and observations, which in turn gradually assumed the character of new laws, so that in the course of time a fine strong net held the whole of life in its meshes.

“... To this was added that which Jesus mentions with such heaviness of heart; hypocrisy and cant. On the outside, greatest delicacy of conscience; on the inside, hardness of heart. Outer loyalty to the Law; inner sin—and sin without admission of sin, with neither contrition nor the desire for salvation (Matt. 15:7; 22:19; 23:13-35). Such then the attitude with which Jesus was confronted.”²

Legitimate traditions, which are primarily manifest through outward expressions, are not to be abandoned, but rather to be understood as a means of transforming our heart and life. Tradition when practiced wisely, and wholeheartedly helps us examine and prepare our heart, reflect on the condition of our heart, and can lead our heart to Jesus and his teachings. Tradition should be a means of growth and grace and not simply used to validate a life with God which either doesn’t exist or which exists in a sorry state of disrepair. To avoid traditionalism, we need not know where every tradition originated but like the young girl in the illustration, we must seek to know why we practice a tradition, and then practice it from the heart.

¹ *The Vindication of Tradition*, by Jaroslav Pelikan.

² *The Lord*, by Romano Guardini, (pages 195, 198).

First Reading — Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

¹ “And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, gives you. ² You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. ... ⁶ Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?

1. How should traditional religious observances impact others?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 15:2-5

² He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right, and speaks truth from his heart; ³ who does not slander with his tongue, and does no evil to his friend, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;

⁴ in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change; ⁵ who does not put out his money at interest, and does not take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.

Second Reading — James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27

¹⁷ Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. ...

²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. ²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ...

²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

2. What are the true marks of godly religion?
3. What does the phrase “receive with meekness the implanted word” mean to you?

Gospel Reading — Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

¹ Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem,

² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴ and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.) ⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?”

⁶ And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’”

⁸ You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men.” ...

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again, and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him.” ... ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

4. How would you define hypocrisy?
5. What kind of non-religious family traditions does your family observe?
6. What religious traditions do you observe that you would like to understand more fully?
7. Give an example of how a tradition, when observed correctly, could positively impact a person’s heart.