

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

January 2018

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

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

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

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

Sincerely in Christ,

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EPIPHANY OF THE LORD—JANUARY 7, 2018

Introduction: Have you ever experienced an epiphany – a moment of profound insight? This week we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord, not a moment of profound insight for him, but a moment of profound insight about him. Specifically, we are celebrating the manifestation of Christ to the Magi. To enter more fully into the significance of this event we must enter into the heart and mind of the Jewish faithful.

For thousands of years Israel had been set apart as God's special people, unique from all the other nations of the world. God chose to manifest himself in a unique way to Israel through both words and miraculous deeds of deliverance. It was with Israel that God established a special covenant, and to them that God promised a future, glorious Savior-King and an everlasting, glorious reign. What a wonderful heritage, one which left the Israelites with expectancy as they awaited its fulfillment.

And then it happened! The Savior-King is born, not in a regal setting but in humble surroundings. One would think that surely the renowned of Israel would be beckoned to welcome his arrival and pay him homage as Christ and King. But it wasn't so. Instead, the angels announced his arrival to the most lowly of Israel, common shepherds, and to the Magi, non-Jewish kings/wise men from the orient. Was this a mistake on the heralds' part? Obviously not, rather it was an epiphany, a moment of profound insight symbolically provided by a loving Father. When the Father chose to make Jesus, the Messiah-King's arrival known to these two groups, shepherds and kings, he symbolically included all humanity in this saving act, both Jews and Gentiles. That favorite verse many of us have memorized, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son," reminds us that he was a gift for the world's salvation. That Jesus is savior of all mankind and savior for all mankind is the profound insight, the epiphany, brought by the Magi's experience.

With hindsight we can now go back and reread the promises of God and see salted throughout the Old Testament, references to the "nations," the Gentiles. It was always God's intention to reach the nations through the covenant and promises given to Israel. God's intention always was to bring salvation to all mankind, and this profound insight is included in the Epiphany of the Lord. Will it also be an epiphany for you? Will it be a moment of profound insight wherein you realize that Jesus is not exclusively for you, but for all? His intentions remain the same, to bring salvation to all mankind, only now his plan includes us, the Church, as his primary messenger. Will this be a time of insight when you embrace your responsibility to help take the Good News to the nations? Paul grasped this profound insight in the second reading, and because of it says in the very next verse, "Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace." May God enable us to follow Paul's example by grasping this profound insight and making this profound commitment of surrender.

"The great feast of Epiphany celebrates the adoration of Jesus by the wise men (magi) from the East... In the magi, representatives of the neighboring pagan religions, the Gospel sees the first-fruits of the nations, who welcome the good news of salvation through the Incarnation. The magi's coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations. Their coming means that pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Savior of the world only by turning toward the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament."*

* *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (528).

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 - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/010718.cfm>

First Reading — Isaiah 60:1-6

1. Where in this passage do you find "epiphany"; moments of profound insight?

2. How do you see the inclusion of all people in this passage?

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

Second Reading — Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6

3. How would you explain the “mystery” in your own words?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 2:1-12

4. The Magi came to “pay him homage” and when they saw him they “prostrated themselves and did him homage.” What has triggered meaningful worship-filled experiences of Jesus, for you?
5. What is the significance of the gifts they brought?
6. If you were commissioned to be a modern-day Magi, what gift could you and would you bring?
7. What are the implications of recognizing and worshipping Jesus as “king,” as “ruler,” and as one “who will “shepherd?”

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—JANUARY 14, 2018

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 can not 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 doesn’t shout. He doesn’t 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.”*

* Show Me The Way, by Henri J.M. Nouwen in, (page 28).

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, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/011418.cfm>.

First Reading — 1 Samuel 3:3-10, 19

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

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 40: 2, 4, 7-10

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 are you looking for?” what would you answer?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—JANUARY 21, 2018

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 Saint Pope John Paul II declared it to be 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"¹ 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 read 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."² Saint 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."³ 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 was 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 still only in the beginning years of this millennium, this "new springtime of evangelization" of which Saint 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. Only by recalling Jesus' advent and mission can we 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."⁴

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).

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, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/012118.cfm>.

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 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 "come after me?"
6. What would compel a person to follow Jesus as definitively as did these disciples?
7. Explain what it means to "come after" 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?

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—JANUARY 28, 2018

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 was her advice to her son. The moral of the fable is obvious, it is easier to tell than to do, and an example is more authoritative than is 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, Moses and the prophets 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.

* From *The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis*, "The Business of Heaven: Daily Readings."

** From *Evangelization in the Modern World* by Pope Paul VI, 94).

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, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/012818.cfm>.

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 motives 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?