

# *Reflecting* On Sunday's Readings

March 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,

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# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT—March 1, 2015

**Introduction:** Perhaps you have heard of the man who wanted to test his wife's hearing. He stood some distance behind her and softly said, "Can you hear me?" Having received no answer he moved closer and again whispered, "Can you hear me?" Again having received no answer he moved right up behind her and softly said, "Can you hear me?" Finally he heard his wife reply somewhat exasperatedly, "For the third time, yes!"

In some ways this story could be analogous of our communication with God. Often, we constantly check to see if he is listening in hopes that he will respond to our deep heartfelt needs and desires. In reality, not only is he hearing us, but he has spoken definitively if only we would listen to him.

Twice in the Gospels the Father spoke audibly regarding Jesus. The first time was at Jesus' baptism when the Father said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." What greater statement could God have made about his Son? This was a profound validation that Jesus was sent from God, and was in fact flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone, Emmanuel, God with us. In addition the Father states, before Jesus accomplished anything in his ministry, that unequivocally, the very nature of Jesus pleased him exceedingly well. For Jesus to please the righteousness of God in this exceptional way verifies that Jesus, within himself, fully met the Father's demands for holiness, righteousness, and goodness.

The second time the Father spoke audibly is recorded in this week's Gospel reading, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." This second audible statement from God the Father clarifies what the Father expects from us, what he sees as our primary responsibility. This message is equally profound in its simplicity. It is not obscured by a do list of responsibilities and behavioral expectations, but consist of one, simple command, "Listen to him." Therein is the essence of spirituality: having our heart, mind, and ears spiritually tuned to hear what he is saying?

These days of Lent should be a listening time for each of us. Could we not begin each day with a moment of quietness, praying Samuel's simple prayer, "Speak Lord, thy servant listens." Then as our day progresses, could we not keep our spiritual antenna tuned to his frequency, looking for him and his message in the simple experiences of our day. Would not he speak to us on our bed, in the night, if like Judah we could devoutly say, "My heart yearns for you in the night, my spirit earnestly seeks You." If we simply determined to actively develop the art of listening to Jesus, our lives would radically change, for the better. "A spiritual life requires discipline because we need to learn to listen to God, who constantly speaks but whom we seldom hear. When however, we learn to listen, our lives become obedient lives. The word *obedient* comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means 'listening.'"<sup>8\*</sup>

Sociologists have indicated that it takes approximately fourteen days to break a habit, and approximately another fourteen days to establish a new habit. We have twenty-eight days left in this Lenten Season. If we begin this listening practice today, we can be well on our way to establishing a life giving habit of fulfilling the Father's intention for us, to listen to his Son.

\* *Making All Things New*, by Henri J.M. Nouwen, page 67.

## First Reading — Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

<sup>1</sup> Some time after these events, God put Abraham to the test. He called to him, "Abraham!" "Ready!" he replied.

<sup>2</sup> Then God said: "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you." ...

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Next he tied up his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar. <sup>10</sup> Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. <sup>11</sup> But the LORD'S messenger called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. <sup>12</sup> "Do not lay your hand on the boy," said the messenger. "Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son." <sup>13</sup> As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son. ...

<sup>15</sup> Again the LORD'S messenger called to Abraham from heaven <sup>16</sup> and said: "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, <sup>17</sup> I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your

descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies,<sup>18</sup> and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—all this because you obeyed my command.”

1. What was the issue with which Abraham was being confronted?
2. Explain what it means to have an area of our life “withhold” from God. How should we deal with these areas when we discover them?

### **Responsorial Reading — Psalm 116:10, 15-19**

<sup>10</sup> I kept faith, even when I said, “I am greatly afflicted!” ... <sup>15</sup> Too costly in the eyes of the LORD is the death of his faithful. ...

<sup>16</sup> LORD, I am your servant, your servant, the child of your maidservant; you have loosed my bonds. <sup>17</sup> I will offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.

<sup>18</sup> I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, <sup>19</sup> In the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Hallelujah!

### **Second Reading — Romans 8:31-34**

<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. <sup>34</sup> Who will condemn? It is Christ (Jesus) who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

3. How is Abraham's experience a foreshadowing of the Father's love?

### **Gospel Reading — Mark 9:2-10**

<sup>2</sup> After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup> and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.

<sup>4</sup> Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

<sup>6</sup> He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. <sup>7</sup> Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” <sup>8</sup> Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.

<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

4. How would you have responded if you had been in Peter, James, or John's place?
5. What is the significance of Elijah and Moses' appearance?
6. What is the most memorable experience you've had of hearing the message, “Listen to him”?
7. How do you think the nine disciples who were not invited to the mount with Christ felt?

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT—March 8, 2015

**Introduction:** Signs and wonders capture our attention. “Seeing is believing,” or so the skeptics say. Though miraculous signs and wonders capture our attention seldom do they energize and sustain faith in the disbeliever. C.S. Lewis refers to this phenomenon in his book *Letters to Malcomb*, “I have only known one person in my life who claimed to have seen a ghost. It was a woman; and the interesting thing is that she disbelieved in the immortality of the soul before seeing the ghost, and still disbelieved after having seen it. She thinks it was a hallucination. In other words, seeing is not believing.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus knew of this fickle aspect of humanity; we love to be amazed but hate to be convinced, when it comes to our religious beliefs. “Don’t confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up,” and “You can change my experience, but don’t change my theology,” seem to be common reactions. And so, though Jesus was moved with compassion to perform miracles on behalf of those in need, he chose not to play to the galleries. For believers, signs and wonders are frosting on the cake, so to speak. These miraculous manifestations do not convince us that the things of Christ are true, but rather because we are convinced that the things of Christ are true, miraculous manifestations simply become a validation of our already active faith.

The people of Israel continually sought and asked for a sign, even though Jesus had performed so many of them. And though he was unwilling to pander to their unbelief, he did provide for them one final, convincing sign. A sign which most chose to ignore. Jesus’ crucifixion, burial and resurrection is the most convincing sign imaginable for those who are willing to believe. These people saw him crucified and left hanging until they were convinced that there was no longer life in him. They insured that he was buried and guarded by elite Roman soldiers. The guards knew that he had miraculously arisen, and they must have satisfactorily explained this to the leaders, or else they would have been put to death themselves for dereliction of duty. Instead, they were spared so that they could join in the misinformation campaign. They knew there was no battle at the tomb to steal his body away. If his body had been stolen surely one of the guards would have seen who did it. Yet, none of his disciples were ever pursued for grave robbing, though they walked about openly. Instead, they were only pursued for testifying to his resurrection.

The Israelite leaders saw verification again and again that he was truly alive. In the immediate forty days after Jesus arose, witness after witness came forth in spite of the threatening environment, over five hundred people in fact, to confess that they had seen and talked with the risen Jesus. Do you think that there was a serious doubt in these leaders’ minds? The sign had been seen! But because they were disinclined to believe, the sign became meaningless to them.

In our own life we must be honest and ask the question: Are there areas of my life that I am holding back under the false pretense of needing a sign from God? Surely he has given us all the signs that we need, and today is asking us to live by faith, following him in a spirit of trust and surrender. “Do not be afraid to open your hearts to Christ. Allow Him to come into your lives, into your families, into society. In this way, all things will be made new.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letters to Malcolm, by C.S. Lewis.

<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II.

## First Reading — Exodus 20:1-17

<sup>1</sup> Then God delivered all these commandments: <sup>2</sup> “I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> You shall not have other gods besides me.

<sup>4</sup> You shall not carve idols for yourselves in the shape of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; <sup>5</sup> you shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers’ wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation; <sup>6</sup> but bestowing mercy down to the thousandth generation, on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> “You shall not take the name of the LORD, your God, in vain. For the LORD will not leave unpunished him who takes his name in vain.

<sup>8</sup> “Remember to keep holy the sabbath day. <sup>9</sup> Six days you may labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD, your God. No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter, or

your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you. <sup>11</sup> In six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the LORD has blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup> “Honor your father and your mother, that you may have a long life in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> “You shall not kill. <sup>14</sup> “You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup> “You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup> “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male or female slave, nor his ox or ass, nor anything else that belongs to him.”

1. God brought the Israelites “out of the house of bondage,” how do these commandments set them (and us) free?

### **Responsorial Reading — Psalms 19:8-11**

<sup>8</sup> The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The decree of the LORD is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple. <sup>9</sup> The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart. The command of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eye. <sup>10</sup> The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The statutes of the LORD are true, all of them just;

<sup>11</sup> More desirable than gold, than a hoard of purest gold, sweeter also than honey or drippings from the comb.

### **Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 1:22-25**

<sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

2. How does the crucified Christ meet both the Jew’s demand for a sign and the Greek’s demand for wisdom?

### **Gospel Reading — John 2:13-25**

<sup>13</sup> Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money-changers seated there. <sup>15</sup> He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, <sup>16</sup> and to those who sold doves he said, “Take these out of here, and stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.” <sup>17</sup> His disciples recalled the words of scripture, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” <sup>18</sup> At this the Jews answered and said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered and said to them, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” <sup>20</sup> The Jews said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup> But he was speaking about the temple of his body. <sup>22</sup> Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.

<sup>23</sup> While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, <sup>25</sup> and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.

3. How do you think the temple merchants justified their presence in the temple?

4. What often is the motivation for people asking God for a sign?

5. What should be our attitude regarding the presence or absence of religious signs?

6. What can we learn from the disciples in verse 22?

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT—March 15, 2015

**Introduction:** If God was looking for a chance to condemn the world it is not for want of opportunities that he has not already done so. Beginning with the rebellion of Adam and Eve, continuing throughout the history of Israel's rebellion, and proceeding all the way through to our own, God has had ample opportunity to pull the plug on his disobedient creation. But he hasn't. So, rather than needing an excuse to destroy us, the real enigma is, what excuse does he have for saving us? This week's readings provide answers to this question.

Often because we are conscious of our guilt we feel like we deserve God's wrath, not his love. Frequently, when terrible things happen to us, we subconsciously believe that it is God's punishment that is finally being meted out—which isn't true. Often we also try to offset this sense of condemnation by doing things to warrant God's love—which we can't. God's feelings toward each of us are captured quite effectively by three phrases in this week's Scriptures; "The great love with which he loved us,"—"the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us"—"God so loved the world." These and many more expressions of God's feelings toward us were all present and made before we did anything to merit them. That is what makes the Good News, *Good News*. God freely bestows his love on us who least deserve it.

The whole issue of what we can do to warrant his love and earn his salvation can be illustrated by the following imaginary conversation encountered when a person died and desired to enter heaven. Of course, St. Peter meets this person at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I will give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in." "Okay," the man says. "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart." "That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points." "Three points?" the man says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministries with my tithe and service." "Terrific!" says St. Peter. "That's certainly worth a point." "One point? I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans." "Fantastic, that's good for two more points," St. Peter says. "Two points!" the man cries. "At this rate the only way I get into heaven is by the grace of God." "Bingo, 100 points! Come on in!"

Humorously, the story makes the point, however this statement by Pope John Paul II speaks with much more authority: "... we must first clearly affirm our faith in Christ, the one Savior of humanity, a faith we have received as a gift from on high, not as a result of any merit of our own . . . . They should be ever mindful that they owe their distinguished status not to their own merits but to Christ's special grace..."\* —Bingo! Could it be said more clearly?

Condemnation is the other side of the same coin. If salvation from condemnation is a gift freely given us in Jesus Christ, then condemnation becomes something of our own choosing when we refuse to accept the gift. God is a perfect gentleman; he will not force salvation on us. John's Gospel says, "He who does not believe is condemned already." The presupposition behind this statement is that when a person has heard the story of Jesus' saving mission, and then makes a choice to either disbelieve the story, or believing the story to not entrust their life to him, they expedite their own condemnation. God desires condemnation for no one, which is why he paid such a costly price to deliver us. "He who believes is not condemned." Hallelujah, what good news!!

\* *Mission of the Redeemer*, by Pope John Paul II (10).

## First Reading — 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23

<sup>14</sup> Likewise all the princes of Judah, the priests and the people added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the LORD'S temple which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

<sup>15</sup> Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place. <sup>16</sup> But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy. . . .

<sup>19</sup> They burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. <sup>20</sup> Those who escaped the sword he carried captive to Babylon, where they became his and his sons' servants until the kingdom of the Persians came to power. <sup>21</sup> All this was to fulfill the word of the LORD

spoken by Jeremiah: “Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled.”

<sup>22</sup> In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom, both by word of mouth and in writing: <sup>23</sup> “Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: ‘All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!’”

1. In these passages how do you see God taking the initiative?

### **Responsorial Reading — Psalms 137:1-6**

<sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon we sat mourning and weeping when we remembered Zion. <sup>2</sup> On the poplars of that land we hung up our harps. <sup>3</sup> There our captors asked us for the words of a song; our tormentors, for a joyful song: “Sing for us a song of Zion!”

<sup>4</sup> But how could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land? <sup>5</sup> If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither. <sup>6</sup> May my tongue stick to my palate if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem beyond all my delights.

### **Second Reading — Ephesians 2:4-10**

<sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved), <sup>6</sup> raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> it is not from works, so no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.

2. State your understanding of what this passage teaches about the importance of good works in our lives.

### **Gospel Reading — John 3:14-21**

<sup>14</sup> “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

3. What does this passage communicate about the Father?
4. What synonyms would you provide for the expressions “believe in him,” and “comes to the light”?
5. How does this passage describe the person who refuses the gift of salvation?

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT—March 29, 2015

**Introduction:** During WW II a Franciscan priest, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, while being held a prisoner in the starvation bunker of Auschwitz, was confronted with an extraordinary call to sacrifice. Much of his life had been spent proclaiming and celebrating the sacrifice of Christ, and as a missionary, inviting others to follow Jesus' life and example. Suddenly he was asked to lay it all on the line as he was confronted with a life-giving decision. Would he draw back and seek to save his life as many others did or would he follow Jesus' example and lay down his life for another?

Franciszek Gajowniczek, a fellow prisoner, a husband and father had no choice. His name was randomly called, along with the names of nine other prisoners, to step forward and be executed. But his walk to certain death was suddenly interrupted and his life was given back to him, as Kolbe spoke up asking permission to take his place. In cold indifference, the commandant granted Kolbe his request, Kolbe's life in exchange for Gajowniczek's. By this singular act of courage Saint Maximilian Kolbe brought the light of Christ into the midnight darkness of Auschwitz.

Saint Maximilian Kolbe is only one of a myriad of Christians who chose to follow Jesus' example of sacrificial living. As we read these accounts, and today's Gospel text, we stand in awe and wonder. How can a person who loves life and loves people, so willingly and confidently step forward, and with forethought, choose to sacrificially lay down their life. John's Gospel text mentions three times that Jesus knew that "the hour" had arrived, meaning that the time appointed for his sacrifice and death was here. He fully knew of the suffering that lay ahead of him. The fact that he was both human and divine in no way diminished the impending suffering, but rather magnified it, adding a dimension to his cross that we cannot humanly fathom. Yet he did not falter and went to the cross in obedient submission with committed resolve.

Neither sacrifice nor martyrdom are accidental responses which unexpectedly find a home in our lives. Rather they are the natural, or should we say supernatural, response to a lifetime of seemingly little acts of obedience. Daily as we say "no" to our world and our will, and "yes" to the Kingdom of God and His will, we appropriate the grace of dying to self. These daily acts of self denial are the dress rehearsals that prepare us to step forward and answer that occasional, ultimate, call to follow Christ in a major act of sacrifice or even martyrdom. Suddenly, Lent and our various Lenten sacrifices take on a new dimension. They can and should be a short course in self-denial that not only reminds us of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf, but also encourages us toward a life-style of self-denial, as we bring Christ's light into this darkened world.

"The truth about the drama of the moral life and about freedom is revealed, John Paul concludes, by the example of those prepared to die rather than do what they know is wrong. The witness of martyrs is a powerful counter to the claim that the dignity of freedom lies in doing things my way. The martyr teaches us that freedom is truly personal and truly liberating when it seeks the good and rejects evil, even to the point of death. Not everyone is called to be a martyr. Everyone is called to be a witness to moral truth, and 'witness' is the original meaning of the term 'martyr,'"\*

\*From *Witness to Hope*, by George Weigel.

## First Reading — Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>31</sup> The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the LORD. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.

1. What do these passages teach about our call to obedience?
2. What are the evidences that God's law is written on our hearts?

### **Responsorial Reading — Psalms 51:3-4, 12-15**

<sup>3</sup> Have mercy on me, God, in your goodness; in your abundant compassion blot out my offense. <sup>4</sup> Wash away all my guilt; from my sin cleanse me. . . .

<sup>12</sup> A clean heart create for me, God; renew in me a steadfast spirit. <sup>13</sup> Do not drive me from your presence, nor take from me your holy spirit. <sup>14</sup> Restore my joy in your salvation; sustain in me a willing spirit. <sup>15</sup> I will teach the wicked your ways, that sinners may return to you.

### **Second Reading — Hebrews 5:7-9**

<sup>7</sup> In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. <sup>8</sup> Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; <sup>9</sup> and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him . . .

3. What does Jesus' experience teach us about obedience?

### **Gospel Reading — John 12:20-33**

<sup>20</sup> Now there were some Greeks among those who had come up to worship at the feast. <sup>21</sup> They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." <sup>22</sup> Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup> Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. <sup>25</sup> Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.

<sup>27</sup> "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." <sup>29</sup> The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, "An angel has spoken to him." <sup>30</sup> Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come for my sake but for yours. <sup>31</sup> Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup> And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." <sup>33</sup> He said this indicating the kind of death he would die.

4. How should we respond when people we know express a desire to see and know Jesus?

5. How does this passage clarify what it means to be glorified?

6. What does Jesus teach about the purpose and focus of our lives?

7. Which of the promises mentioned here are most compelling to you?

# Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORDS PASSION—March 29, 2015

**Introduction:** In many respects the period from the Last Supper through the Crucifixion, looking at it from the lives of the disciples, could be called “The Story of Good Intentions.” In this week’s Gospel reading there are several examples of people making an initial step to do the right thing, however, in most cases their good intentions are abandoned.

Two people who should be commended for not abandoning their good intentions are the woman from Bethany who anointed Jesus’ head with costly oil in spite of social pressure, and Joseph of Arimathea who sought and prepared Jesus’ body for burial in the face of persecution and opposition. Their love, courage, and devotion to Jesus impelled them to follow through on their good intentions. The characteristics of these two stand out in contrast to the other examples seen in this passage where good intentions were abandoned either because of the weakness of their flesh or the fear of others’ opinions and reactions. For example, Peter, James, and John fully intended to watch with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane as he prayed and agonized about the coming sacrifice he was to make. But their good intentions went awry as they surrendered to the desires of their flesh for sleep.

We see in these disciples’ lives, images of ourselves. Often our love for Jesus has compelled us to make some commitment of heart, only to discover soon after that our good intentions have been abandoned due to our human weakness, or due to concern about what others think. Fortunately, we also see ourselves occasionally follow through on our good intentions, overcoming weakness and fear with love’s resolve and courage.

Looking at Jesus’ life we can find both a compelling example, and strength to turn more of our good intentions into accomplished deeds. Jesus fully knew what was ahead for him; the betrayal, abandonment, suffering and death, which we know as Christ’s Passion. He had every good intention to follow through and complete the most important act of humanity, and for humanity, the securing of our salvation and release from the chains of sin and death. But it was not without struggle. Humanly speaking, his flesh did not desire what was ahead any more than ours would have. Emotionally, he knew it was his friends and loved ones he would be leaving in death, and that spiritually this would be a battle against Satan and the forces of evil. Not exactly something to anticipate with joy. However, in the face of this struggle he did not abandon his good intention, but in love and courage followed through.

We can learn a valuable lesson from our Savior when we reflect on the agony of Gethsemane. As Jesus prayed he was able to pour out his apprehension and articulate his preference not to have to go through this ordeal. As he did so, Jesus’ willingness, resolve and courage were strengthened, and he was able to arise with perfect calm, set his face like a flint toward the path he was being asked to tread, and follow through on his good intention. That same source of strength is available to us, and we will find it in the same process, going to our knees in prayer to a loving Father for grace and help in time of need. “Gethsemane was the hour in which Jesus’ human heart and mind experienced the ultimate odium of the sin he was to bear as his own before the judging and avenging countenance of God... There Jesus accepted the Father’s will and surrendered his own.”\* Perhaps during this coming Holy Week, when on Good Friday we are asked, “Will you watch with me but one hour?” we will be reminded that it is in union with Christ in prayer that we will find strength to also do the Father’s will, turning our good intentions into reality.

\* Romano Guardini in *The Lord*.

## **First Reading — Isaiah 50:4-7**

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

1. What is the relationship between listening daily to the Lord and living confidently as Christ’s disciple?

### **Responsorial Reading — Psalms 22: 8-9, 17-20, 23-24**

8 All who see me mock me; they curl their lips and jeer; they shake their heads at me: 9 "You relied on the LORD-- let him deliver you; if he loves you, let him rescue you."

17 Many dogs surround me; a pack of evildoers closes in on me. So wasted are my hands and feet 18 that I can count all my bones. They stare at me and gloat; 19 they divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots. 20 But you, LORD, do not stay far off; my strength, come quickly to help me.

23 Then I will proclaim your name to the assembly; in the community I will praise you: 24 "You who fear the LORD, give praise! All descendants of Jacob, give honor; show reverence, all descendants of Israel!"

### **Second Reading — Philippians 2:6-11**

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

2. Which characteristic of Jesus would you most desire to have, or to have strengthened in your life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What does it mean practically, to bow the knee to Jesus; to confess with the tongue that He is Lord?

### **Gospel Reading — Mark 15:1-39**

1 As soon as morning came, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin, held a council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. 2 Pilate questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He said to him in reply, "You say so." 3 The chief priests accused him of many things. 4 Again Pilate questioned him, "Have you no answer? See how many things they accuse you of." 5 Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

6 Now on the occasion of the feast he used to release to them one prisoner whom they requested. 7 A man called Barabbas<sup>4</sup> was then in prison along with the rebels who had committed murder in a rebellion. 8 The crowd came forward and began to ask him to do for them as he was accustomed. 9 Pilate answered, "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" 10 For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Pilate again said to them in reply, "Then what (do you want) me to do with (the man you call) the king of the Jews?" 13 They shouted again, "Crucify him." 14 Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" They only shouted the louder, "Crucify him." 15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified.

16 The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the praetorium, and assembled the whole cohort. 17 They clothed him in purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him. 18 They began to salute him with, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. 20 And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him out to crucify him.

21 They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. 22 They brought him to the place of Golgotha (which is translated Place of the Skull). 23 They gave him wine drugged with myrrh, but he did not take it. 24 Then they crucified him and divided his garments by casting lots for them to see what each should take. 25 It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. 26 The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." 27 With him they crucified two revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left. 28 "And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "And he was counted among the wicked," " 29 Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30 save yourself by coming down from the cross." 31 Likewise the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him among themselves and said, "He saved others; he cannot

