

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.'"^{*}

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

¹ After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." ² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." ...

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ...

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And

your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies,¹⁸ and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

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

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 116:10, 15-19

¹⁰I kept my faith, even when I said, “I am greatly afflicted”; ... ¹⁵Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints. ...

¹⁶O LORD, I am thy servant; I am thy servant, the son of thy handmaid. Thou hast loosed my bonds. ¹⁷I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁸I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, ¹⁹in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD!

Second Reading — Romans 8:31-34

³¹What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? ³³Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies; ³⁴who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who 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

²And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, ³and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. ⁵And Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁶For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid. ⁷And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” ⁸And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only.

⁹And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what the 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.”¹

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.”²

¹ Letters to Malcolm, by C.S. Lewis.

² Pope John Paul II.

First Reading — Exodus 20:1-17

¹ And God spoke all these words, saying, ² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

³ “You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

⁸ “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter,

your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; ¹¹ for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

¹² “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

¹³ “You shall not kill. ¹⁴ “You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ “You shall not steal. ¹⁶ “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

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

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 19:7-10 (8-11 NAB)

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.

¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

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

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. ¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; you shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for thy house will consume me.” ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, “What sign have you to show us for doing this?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he spoke of the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.

²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; ²⁴ but Jesus did not trust himself to them, ²⁵ because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man.

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

¹⁴ All the leading priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations; and they polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem.

¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; ¹⁶ but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, till there was no remedy. ...

¹⁹ And they burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. ²⁰ He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia,

²¹ to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

²² Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: ²³ “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, ‘The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.’” What surprises you in these accounts of God’s dealings with his people?

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

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 137:1-6

¹ By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. ² On the willows there we hung up our lyres. ³ For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

⁴ How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! ⁶ Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!

Second Reading — Ephesians 2:4-10

⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not because of works, lest any man should boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk 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

¹⁴ “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

²¹ But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought 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 22, 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

³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will 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 51:1-2, 10-13 (3-4, 12-15 NAB)

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹ Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners will return to thee.

Second Reading — Hebrews 5:7-9

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

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

Gospel Reading — John 12:20-33

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹ So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him.

²⁷ "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify thy name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; ³² and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." ³³ He said this to show by what death he was to 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 the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary. Morning by morning he wakens, he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. ⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward. ⁶ I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting. ⁷ For the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been confounded; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know 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 22:7-8, 16-19, 22-23 (8-9, 17-20, 23-24 in the NAV)

⁷ All who see me mock at me, they make mouths at me, they wag their heads; ⁸ “He committed his cause to the LORD; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”

¹⁶ Yea, dogs are round about me; a company of evildoers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet—

¹⁷ I can count all my bones—they stare and gloat over me. ¹⁸ they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots. ¹⁹ But thou, O LORD, be not far off! O thou my help, hasten to my aid!

²² I will tell of thy name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee: ²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him! all you sons of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you sons of Israel!

Second Reading — Philippians 2:6-11

...⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, 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

^{15:1} And as soon as it was morning the chief priests, with the elders and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate. ² And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.” ³ And the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ And Pilate again asked him, “Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.” ⁵ But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered.

⁶ Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. ⁷ And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. ⁸ And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he was wont to do for them. ⁹ And he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” ¹⁰ For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. ¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. ¹² And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?” ¹³ And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” ¹⁴ And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.” ¹⁵ So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

¹⁶ And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the praetorium); and they called together the whole battalion. ¹⁷ And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. ¹⁸ And they began to salute him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ¹⁹ And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him, and they knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

²¹ And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. ²² And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³ And they offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴ And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. ²⁵ And it was the third hour, when they crucified him. ²⁶ And the inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” ²⁷ And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁸ And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads, and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ²⁹ save yourself, and come down from the cross!” ³⁰ So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³¹ Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

