

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

March 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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Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT—March 4, 2018

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, from *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*, by George Weigel.

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/030418.cfm>

First Reading — Exodus 20:1-17

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

Second Reading — 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

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

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

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

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

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT—March 11, 2018

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).

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/031118.cfm>

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

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

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 137:1-6

Second Reading — Ephesians 2:4-10

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

Gospel Reading — John 3:14-21

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 18, 2018

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.

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/031818.cfm>

First Reading — Jeremiah 31:31-34

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

Second Reading — Hebrews 5:7-9

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

Gospel Reading — John 12:20-33

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?

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PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORDS PASSION—March 25, 2018

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.”¹ 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.

1 Romano Guardini in *The Lord*.

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/032518.cfm>

First Reading — Isaiah 50:4-7

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

Second Reading — Philippians 2:6-11

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

4. What is the most *beautiful* thing you could do to express your love for the Lord?

5. What examples of good intentions gone awry do you see in this passage? What were the reasons they were not kept?

6. Who do you most identify with in this Gospel account?

7. How can we bring Christ to people who feel hopeless and abandoned?