

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

September - 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 TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 2, 2018

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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/090218.cfm>

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

1. How should traditional religious observances impact others?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 15:2-5

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

2. What are the true marks of godly religion?

3. What does the phrase “humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you” mean to you?

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

4. How would you define hypocrisy?

5. What kind of non-religious family traditions does your family observe?

6. What religious traditions do you observe that you would like to understand more fully?

7. Give an example of how a tradition, when observed correctly, could positively impact a person’s heart.

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 9, 2018

Introduction: “This is the first thing to get clear in talking about miracles, whatever experiences we may have, we shall not regard them as miraculous if we already hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural. Any event which is claimed as a miracle is, in the last resort, an experience received from the senses; and the senses are not infallible. We can always say we have been the victims of an illusion; if we disbelieve in the supernatural this is what we always shall say.”*

For many of us the miraculous is non-existent in our lives, yet if asked we would profess that we have no doubt that Jesus lives and is at work in the world today. Which is true, that the miraculous is not present in our world, or that it is not recognized in our world? In the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life we read of many miraculous healings as well as other miracles. Not everyone in the crowd personally received a miracle, though all observed them, because not everyone needed a miracle. Though everyone does not need a miracle, everyone does need to know that a miracle-worker exists.

Simultaneously we see in the crowd of observers people who saw the miracles, and discounted their existence because they were preoccupied with other concerns, usually illegitimate concerns. These people did not want to believe that a miracle-worker existed, especially one sent from God. When the evidence that something miraculous had taken place they endeavored to attribute it to other causes, so they would try and fabricate an explanation; this person wasn’t really lame, he does it by the power of the devil, it’s an illusion, etc. Though miracles took place within their midst they did not recognize them. Consequently, the absence of the miraculous from our world may not mean that miracles are non-existent, but simply that they are non-recognizable due to our predisposition toward unbelief.

Like the man in this week’s Gospel reading many of us have a similar malady. Though we may not have a physical impediment of speech and hearing, we are tuned out to the spiritual and miraculous realm which exists around us. Though we can see evidence of God’s handiwork around us we are deaf to the Spirit’s explanation, and possess lips that are silent rather than expressing appreciation and gratitude. Though we pray, and God answers, we are oblivious to the fact that what has transpired comes from him. Subconsciously we attribute the things in our life to our goodness, good science, or to good luck. We have been trained by the world to discount God’s influence in the world. However, the world cannot be given all the credit or all the blame for our spiritual malady, since most often we have under-girded the world’s influence by practicing ingratitude.

Much of our problem with the presence or absence of the miraculous in the world has to do with our concept of God. What do we really believe he is like? We can readily give the text book, or catechism short form answer, but do we believe it? Do we believe God is omnipotent or impotent? Is he all-powerful or powerless? If he is the latter then we are right in not expecting a miracle or his intervention in the affairs of our lives. If he is the former, and he is, then we do ourselves, and all those around us a disservice by discounting his ability.

If we desire to see and experience the miraculous in our lives we need to appeal to Jesus to open our spiritual senses to recognize the Spirit, and spiritual realities in the midst of our world. As he does this, and he surely will if we ask it of him, we need to cooperate with him by reflecting on what is happening around, and to and through us. A good place to begin is to read the book of Acts in the New Testament, or delve into some of the Old Testament books which recount so vividly the awesome power of God. This awareness of the miraculous can also be cultivated through the attitude and practice of thanksgiving. It is in expressing gratitude and thanks to God that we recognize and recall the incidences of our lives where he has been active. It is in expressing gratitude and thanks that we attribute to God, his rightful due. It is in expressing gratitude and thanks that we find the confidence to believe God for even greater miracles in our lives.

* *Miracles*, by C.S. Lewis..

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/090918.cfm>

First Reading — Isaiah 35:4-7

1. How do you respond to Isaiah's prophesy?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 146:7-10

Second Reading — James 2:1-5

2. Define partiality.

3. What is your conviction regarding partiality when you are the one getting the special treatment?

Gospel Reading — Mark 7:31-37

4. How does this passage correspond with Isaiah's prediction in the first reading?

5. How have you or someone you know experienced a unique healing touch from Jesus?

6. What areas of hearing and speaking would you like the Lord to touch and heal in your life?

7. How do you feel about the presence or absence of the miraculous in your life?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 16, 2018

Introduction: On October 19, 1984, the Polish state police stopped the car of Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko beat him to death and then threw his bound body into the Vistula River. His crime? Encouraging people to take the side of “good against evil, truth rather than falsehood, and love rather than hatred,” thus resisting the evil of the Polish Communist regime, (adapted from *Witness to Hope*, by George Weigel).

In this week’s Gospel reading Jesus also challenges the disciples to choose whether they will be on God’s side or not, implying that God’s side would entail the suffering, rejection and death of himself, their leader. Can we blame Peter for his response that Jesus should be spared this ordeal? Though our spirit applauds movies like *Rocky* and *Karate Kid*, when the hero, beaten and bloodied, arises from the canvas in the final round to overcome the villain’s plummeting, we do not desire this kind of victory for ourselves or the ones we love. We, like Peter, would choose for ourselves and others a life free from pain and suffering, believing that our good intentions for them are synonymous with God’s intentions for them.

Jesus on the other hand fully recognized that to fulfill God’s intentions in a world opposed to his rule, would require a life of sacrifice and a willingness not only to suffer but also to die. Consequently, Jesus spelled out precisely, that suffering, rejection and death lay ahead for many of those who would follow him. He knew that people would have to be willing to not put their comfort and well being ahead of God’s mission and will. This was the basis of his call to “come after me.”

Knowing people’s aversion to pain and suffering and our preoccupation with self-preservation, why did Jesus invite them to follow him while introducing this scenario? Equally mystifying is why the disciples said yes to Jesus’ call. This week’s Gospel sheds some light on the reasons. First, as we see in Peter’s answer to Jesus’ question, the disciples had moved from a position of simply viewing Jesus as a great teacher to one of knowing that he was in fact the Christ. When this truth grips a person’s heart and mind, as it did the disciples’ hearts, then it becomes the most important thing in the world. Once Jesus has become to us, and for us, **the Christ**, there is no other alternative, and he is to be followed and pursued regardless of the cost.

Second, the promise of suffering, rejection and death included the promise of rising again. Victory was assured regardless of the intensity of the battle. The only way they could lose out in the long run was to choose self-preservation in the short run. The disciples knew that eternity was at stake and were unwilling to settle for the short-term solution of peace now, in exchange for forfeiting the long term promise of peace for eternity. When our relationship with Christ and a resurrected life with him becomes so important to us that nothing else matters, we will understand and rejoice in Jesus’ statement that, “Where I am, there will be my disciples also.”

Third, the promise that “whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it” also introduces fulfillment and peace in this life. Throughout history those who have followed Jesus wholeheartedly have discovered joy, peace, contentment, and purpose in the midst of service—a quality of life they would never exchange for the riches, comfort, and security others are striving for and finding unfulfilling. Do you really want a *great* life, an *abundant* life? Try following Jesus wholeheartedly. When you look back you will discover that you choose the best.

Christ’s call is a call to martyrdom. For most of us it will be a life of martyrdom rather than a death of martyrdom, but we will need to have the same attitude as did Lorenzo Ruiz. This Philippine layman who was martyred in World War II, said, “Even if this body would have a thousand lives, I would let all of them be killed [before you would] force me to turn by back on Christ.”

* 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/091618.cfm>

First Reading — Isaiah 50:5-9

1. In what way does Isaiah’s prophesy inspire you?

2. How was God's help manifested to Isaiah?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 116:1-6, 8-9

Second Reading — James 2:14-18

3. What is the relationship between faith and works?

Gospel Reading — Mark 8:27-35

4. What is encompassed in the statement, "You are the Christ"?
5. Why did Jesus say that Peter's rebuke represented the side of men rather than the side of God?
6. When has it cost you to follow Christ?
7. How do you respond to Jesus' challenge in verses 34-35?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 23, 2018

Introduction: A young newspaper reporter, discussing his priorities and goals during the first year of his professional writing career, stated, “I want to be known as a great writer.” At first glance his aspiration seemed like a reasonable dream for a young journalist. However, when asked if his goal was to be a great writer, or to be known as a great writer, he was taken aback. For the first time he had to think about the difference between being something, and receiving recognition. Suddenly the issues of inner motive and the pride of life had to be considered and dealt with in his life.

In this week’s Gospel reading we see Jesus pick up on this conflict of motives that surrounds our relationship to others. While, Jesus was preparing these disciples for his imminent arrest, abuse, death, and resurrection, his followers were preoccupied with debating who of them would be the greatest. We shudder to think that there might have been a connection between his talk of crucifixion and their talk of greatness. Surely, they were not anticipating who would replace him, were they?

How we view greatness is a reflection of our acculturation. If our heart and mind have been thoroughly impregnated with the world’s wisdom, we cannot help but view greatness as an issue of superiority. Greatness, in the world’s mind is always defined in terms of hierarchical position of one person over others. He who is at the highest position would be the one esteemed the greatest, and the higher position would be the one to which we should aspire. But Jesus thoroughly debunks this view of greatness, as he does with so many worldly ideas that easily creep into the mindset of his people.

Jesus turned the world’s definition of greatness upside down by personal example and by his words. There was no doubt in the minds of those who observed Jesus that he was unique in his greatness. Even his enemies were aware of this attribute, which is why they so cautiously and consistently tried to tear him down. Yet Jesus’ example was one of lowliness, eating with the despised and sinful, speaking to and elevating the view of women, washing the feet of his followers, etc. Greatness in Jesus mind is a reflection of love and service to others and not one of lording it over others. This reflects also the teaching of Pope John Paul II who saw his crosier with the Crucifix on it not as a symbol of authority per se, but as a “sign of service.”* Greatness is not, not thinking highly of yourself, nor is it even thinking lowly of yourself. Greatness is not thinking of yourself at all, but rather thinking of others and how you can serve them.

This concept of greatness reminds me of what happened immediately upon the death of Pope John Paul II. Immediately, banners and chants broke out from the people proclaiming the Holy Father as being “John Paul the Great.” Was this ground swell of proclamation due to the fact the John Paul was a learned philosopher and theologian? Many of us did appreciate those gifts in him. We were moved and instructed by his many writings, but I believe people were moved to call him great because they recognized Jesus’ greatness in him. His last years of suffering were years of service to Christ and his people. He was not driven by the question of, “What is best for me?” but rather “What is Christ’s will?” and “What is best for the Church?” As he in humility bowed his knee to Christ, people young and old, rich and poor, worldly wise and simple recognized a degree of greatness that was made in the image of Christ.

What is it that stands in the way of our greatness? It is only our ego and desire to be served by others, and to be esteemed by others as superior. Our steps to greatness are hindered by both our desire for greatness and our misunderstanding of its true nature. There is a dearth of greatness in our society, and Jesus is looking for people to be *truly* great. In most instances true greatness will not be recognized by others, and like the greatness Jesus espoused it will not only not be esteemed but it will usually be despised by the world. But Jesus can, and will recognize it in us for it will be the mirror image of him, and he will esteem and reward it.

* *Rise Let Us Be On Our Way*, by Pope John Paul II, (page 48).

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/092318.cfm>

First Reading — Wisdom 2:12, 17-20

1. In what ways, similar to the reading in Wisdom, do you think people test Jesus today?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 54:3-8

Second Reading — James 3:16-4:3

2. What characteristics of wisdom would you most like to see increased in your life?

3. Why are our prayers sometimes not answered as we would like?

Gospel Reading — Mark 9:30-37

4. Why would the disciples be ashamed or afraid to tell Jesus what they were discussing?

5. In light of this passage complete the following statement, “Greatness is ...”

6. What point about greatness is Jesus making with the child?

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 30, 2018

Introduction: In the May 2005 issue of *Christianity Today* magazine was an article about how Pope John Paul II assisted the cooperative evangelization efforts of a Polish Catholic youth ministry named Oasis, and Campus Crusade for Christ which is a Protestant evangelical organization. The article reveals several ways in which the then Cardinal and later Pope extended arms of friendship and grace to several, clearly evangelical, Protestants in a desire to work together to bring Christ to Catholics in Poland and Italy. Two things are interesting about the article. One is the undertone of amazement that a Catholic would assist evangelicals. The other is the skepticism that he could clearly be ranked as an evangelical: “Was Pope John Paul II an evangelical? In the current usage and meaning of the word, many would say of course not. But many American evangelicals saw in Wojtyla a man devoted to a biblical faith in Christ and committed to proclaiming the gospel to an increasingly lost secular world. He shared the core values of American evangelicalism: Christocentrism, Biblicism, evangelism, and anti-secularism.”¹ Dah!, as the kids would say. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck — it’s a duck. I know of no other man who could more honestly be declared evangelical than our beloved Holy Father, Saint Pope John Paul II.

His behavior in advancing the cause of Christ by encouraging Catholics and evangelicals to work together is consistent with Christ, consistent with his life and values, and consistent with the Church’s teachings. “The Council has stated: ‘Catholics must joyfully acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brothers and sisters. It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood. For God is always wonderful in his works and worthy of admiration,’”².

Pope John Paul II, Popes Benedict XVI, and Francis I, along with their predecessors John XXIII, and Paul VI, have brought a new depth of understanding and spirituality to how we should relate to non-Catholic Christians. In this respect they have provided a wonderful service to the cause of Christ, not only within Catholicism but throughout Christendom. They have fully captured the heart of Jesus’ mission and methodology for reaching the world: namely, that Christians’ unity and love for one another should be a light and beacon of hope to a dark and divided world. (John 13:34,35)

We see this attitude reflected in both this week’s First Reading and the Gospel Reading. We wonder how Christendom could have missed and ignored for so long; Jesus’ desire for unity and love among his followers, it is beyond comprehension. That is, it is beyond our comprehension until we reflect on our own feelings of rivalry, competition and party spirit toward other Christian groups, parishes, and denominations. In our human understanding, to be *for* something, necessarily means to be *against* some other thing. This should not be so. In Jesus’ heart and mind, as we see in the Gospel Reading, to be for something means to be for it in whatever various forms it appears. Consequently, Jesus rejects his disciples call for partisanship, and does not forbid others who willingly bear his name, from doing so just because they were not part of his specific band of disciples. Jesus’ concern is not partisanship but the spread of the Good News to a corrupt and hopeless world.

Today the world is increasing in moral decay and hopelessness. To sit around arguing about who is the greatest, and expending our energies to put down those who do not totally agree with us in every detail, while ignoring their unity with us regarding Jesus’ divinity, salvation, and mission, is to lose sight of both reality, and Jesus’ objective. Today more than ever we must unite to know, honor, and glorify the Savior, to bring his saving truth to a lost world. “In the eyes of the world, cooperation among Christians becomes a form of common Christian witness and a means of evangelization which benefits all involved.”³ Only those who choose to remain out of the spiritual battle for the hearts of the world can enjoy the luxury of expending their energies on intra-Christian squabbling.

1 *Christianity Today* article: “The Pope We Never Knew,” by David Scott.

2 *Ut Unum Sint*, by Pope John Paul II, (47).

3 *Ut Unum Sint*, by Pope John Paul II, (40).

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/093018.cfm>

First Reading — Numbers 11:25-29

1. Contrast the attitudes of Joshua and Moses

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 19:8, 10, 12-14

Second Reading — James 5:1-6

2. How should we relate to the spiritual success of other Christians?

3. What is the root cause of jealousy, selfishness and greed?

Gospel Reading — Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

4. Why were the disciples opposed to the man who was casting out demons?

5. Compare the disciples' attitude toward this other person who was casting out demons, with the Pharisees attitude toward Jesus' casting out demons.

6. What does Jesus teach regarding our attitude toward others who serve him?