

Fifth Sunday in Lent

A common theme for the readings for this day might be summarized by St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: “**If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.**” (2 Corinth. 5:17)

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 43: 16-21

Isaiah, as we will recall, was God’s messenger to **Judah**, the **Southern** Kingdom for about 40 years, starting around 740 B.C. His messages called for **repentance**, **punishment** for the **lack** of repentance, and **restoration** for those who repented. In today’s reading, we find God **pleading** with the Children of Israel, pointing out that he is their Savior, loving them **despite** their sins. Then he goes on to say something to the effect, “If you thought that I did miraculous wonders in the past, wait to see what I am going to do **now!**” And then He points out that even **wild animals** will honor Him because He will provide water in the **wilderness** and rivers in the **desert**. Similarly, God points out that He gives water to His **children** so that they may declare His **praise** for the new life they now have in Him.

Epistle Lesson: Philippians 3: 4b-7 (8-14)

In our Epistle Lesson for this day, St. Paul is trying to convince the reader that he has been changed by God from the **old** to something **new** and better (in today’s language, “new and improved”). He starts out by comparing justification under **the Law** to justification under the **Gospel**. Under the **Law**, St. Paul makes a list of those things that most people would consider as qualities that would **justify** St. Paul being granted entrance to heaven: from infant to adulthood, St. Paul’s life has been a **paragon of righteousness** under the Law. But St. Paul states that all of this **human** effort is rubbish, garbage, trash, compared to the righteousness that one gains by **faith** in the redeeming work of Christ Jesus. Does that mean that all one needs is faith? In so many words, St. Paul states that his **faith** now has to be **demonstrated** by what he **does**. Recognizing that he **still** is sinful and makes mistakes, he then says that he **forgets** all that, leaving it behind in the cleansing blood of Christ, and continues to forge on toward heaven by **obeying** his calling in Christ.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 20: 9-20

Today's reading finds Jesus in the temple courtyard, telling the people the **good news**. While he is teaching, the scribes, chief priests, and the elders **confront** Jesus, demanding to know by whose **authority** he is teaching in the temple. After silencing them, Jesus turns back to the people to paint a disturbing picture of the **Jewish leaders**, who believed that God intended for **only** Jewish people to enjoy God's blessings, both temporally and eternally.

In this parable, we have the following cast of characters:

- the **original** tenants are the Jewish people,
- the **vineyard** represents **all** the people of the world—to whom the tenants were supposed to minister,
- the owner's **son**—as well as the stone rejected by the builders—is none other than Jesus himself,
- and the **new** tenants are the Gentiles.

To hear that they, the **elite** Jews, had been **rejected** by God brings about a response of **murderous** intent on the part of the scribes and Pharisees. But because the people **adored** Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees had to come up with a **different** strategy. So they planted **spies** among the people, pretending to be faithful seekers of the truth, but really there to see whether there was some way to **twist** Jesus' words in order to get him in trouble **legally**.

The world has not changed, **has** it?

Palm Sunday

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 32: 36-39

A common theme in the readings for today is **humility**. For example, in our Old Testament lesson, God challenges the **pride** of people who trust in whatever **gods** they have, whether (in **our** case) it be wealth, power, control, material things, our house, our cars, our kitchen, or whatever has drained our finances or our time, by asking how **these** things are going to save **us** when **we** are in dire straights. Then God reminds us that only **he** is in complete control. He **alone** is the one who judges, who kills or makes alive, who wounds or heals, who has compassion, and who can rescue.

Epistle Lesson: Philippians 2: 5-11

St. Peter sets the stage for our epistle lesson when he writes, **Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.— 1 Peter 5:5b - 7**

Thus when St. Paul pens our epistle lesson, he exhorts us to have the **same** humility as Jesus. And, anticipating the events of next Sunday, St. Paul notes that as a **consequence** of Jesus' **profound** humility, which included becoming a **human being** and being absolutely **obedient** to the Father even though it meant **dying** on a cross, God **exalted** him to the highest position possible. As a consequence, **every** knee should bow, whether in heaven or on earth or under the earth, and **every** person confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, thus **glorifying** God the Father.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 22 and 23

It is Maundy Thursday (as we know it today), or, **Passover** at the time of Jesus. **Judas** has **already** made an agreement with the chief priests to **betray** Jesus, so he is looking for the opportunity. Jesus has sent Peter and John into the city to engage a room and **prepare** the Passover feast. At the celebration itself,

Jesus announces that he will **not** be celebrating this feast again until the kingdom of God has come. He then institutes what we know as the **Lord's Supper**, and indicates that one of his **disciples** will betray him. Oddly enough, this prompts the disciples to start **arguing** among themselves as to which one is the **greatest**. Jesus ends the argument by noting that in **God's** Kingdom, the greatest will be the one who is the most **humble** servant. Then he warns **Peter** that Peter is going to betray him. Peter objects, saying that he will **die** rather than betray him. But then Jesus predicts that Peter will deny that he knows Jesus **three times** that night, before the rooster crows.

Jesus then retreats to the **Garden of Gethsemane**, where he **prays** to the Father to find another way, if possible, to redeem mankind. But he remains **obedient** to the Father as he is made aware that there **is** no other way. Even an **angel** had to minister to Jesus in order to **prepare** him for the ordeal. But then **Judas** comes and betrays Jesus, Jesus is **arrested**, and Peter follows the crowd to the **courtyard** of the chief priest's house, where the trial of Jesus begins before the **Jewish leaders**. It is there that Peter **denies** knowing Jesus three times, and immediately has **remorse** for what he has just done. In the meantime, Jesus declares before the Jewish leaders that he really **is** the Messiah, so they **condemn** him to death for **blasphemy** (claiming to be God when he is not—in their mind).

(This introduction continues with the commentary for the alternate #1 Gospel Reading.)

Gospel Lesson—Alternate #1: Luke 23: 1-56

(In this lesson, St. Luke gives us a picture of the **depth** of Christ's **humility**, allowing himself—God **incarnate**—to be lied about, slandered, tortured, mocked, and crucified. To appreciate the **psychological** depth of Christ's **humility and suffering**, remember that the people who are doing this to him are his **chosen** people.)

It is now the morning **after** the Passover, at which celebration Jesus had instituted the Lord's Supper. But since that supper, Judas had **betrayed** Jesus, Jesus had been **arrested** and brought before the Jewish Council overnight and condemned to death for admitting that he was indeed the promised Messiah. **Problem:** the Jews had **no** authority under the Romans to administer the death

penalty. So they had to come up with a scheme by which the Romans would do that **for** them. Therefore the Jews bring Jesus to **Pilate**, the Roman governor, accusing him of being the **King** of the Jews, hoping that that accusation would cause Pilate to think that Jesus was an **insurrectionist** against Caesar. When Pilate does ask Jesus whether he **is** the King of the Jews, he must have been surprised that he answered that yes he **was!** (But elsewhere it is recorded that Jesus clarifies for Pilate that his kingdom was **not** of **this** world. **John 18:36**)

Amazingly, Pilate accepts that answer and **sees through** the Jews' scheme. So now **he** has to devise a way to save Jesus. He first tries sending him to King **Herod Antipas**, who just happened to be in town. Herod, in turn, was expecting Jesus to perform some **miracles** in his presence, but when that doesn't happen, he sends Jesus back to Pilate. Pilate then simply tells the chief priests and the rulers and the people that he finds **no** fault in Jesus, so he is going to release him. The Jewish leaders, however, are already **prepared** for this eventuality, having prompted the crowd to become **boisterous**, and demanding the release of **Barabbas**, a murderer, to the point that Pilate feared that a **riot** might develop, which would cause the Romans to question **his** ability to keep the Jews under control.

Thus Pilate releases Jesus into the crucifixion **process**, which starts out with a brutal whipping, mocking and torture by the Roman soldiers, and crucifixion. As Jesus is led out for the crucifixion itself, women along the streets start **weeping** for him. But Jesus tells them to weep for **themselves**, because if this is being done to a green tree (a **sinless** person), what will happen to a dry tree (a **sinful** person). At the crucifixion site, the soldiers divide up Jesus' clothes, and the Jews triumphantly **mock** Jesus repeatedly. But Jesus asks his Father to **forgive** all those involved, because they really did not know what they were actually doing. Then Jesus becomes involved in a discussion with the two **criminals** crucified with him, one of whom confesses faith in him as the Messiah. Jesus responds by telling him that **today** he will be with him in paradise, truly a death-bed confession.

But after three hours, everything becomes pitch black, and after three more hours of this, Jesus commits his spirit to the Father, and the **curtain** in the temple dividing the Most Holy Place where God dwells from the Holy Place where priests make intercession is torn from top to bottom, indicating that the sin **separating** man from God has been removed. In addition, the centurion in charge of the crucifixion exclaims that Jesus truly **was** the Son of God.

But Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Council who was a **disciple** of Jesus, asks Pilate for the **body** of Jesus. He then places the body in his **own** new tomb and closes it with a large stone. The women who followed Jesus observe the entire process, then go back to the city to prepare Jesus' body with spices after the Sabbath Day ends.

Gospel Lesson—Alternate #2: John 12: 20-43

Jesus has had a very eventful series of weeks, marked by the raising of **Lazarus** from the **dead** with the subsequent decision by the Jewish religious leaders to **kill** Jesus because they feared for their jobs with the Romans; the **anointing** of Jesus by **Mary**, the sister of Lazarus; and the **triumphal** entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It is at this point that our reading for today begins. Some Greeks (in other words, **Gentiles**) who had come for the Passover wanted to see Jesus, causing Jesus to exclaim that, like a **seed** when planted **dies** to become something greater and more fruitful, so **his** dying would result in a fruitful life for **many** others. Similarly, Jesus notes, whoever wants to **serve** him must be willing to lose **his** life, because by losing his life he will receive **greater** life.

When Jesus asks the Father to **glorify** his name, the Father responds by speaking from heaven. Jesus explains that this indicates that the hour is at hand when the current ruler of the world will be **deposed** as Jesus is lifted up on the cross. This prompts the crowd to start **quibbling** with Jesus, saying that the Christ lives **forever**, so how can Jesus say that the Christ must die on a cross? **Frustrated** by their response and their **refusal** to believe him, Jesus warns that he, as the **light** of the world (**John 1: 4-5, 9-13; 8: 12; Ephesian 5: 8-14; 1 John 1: 5-10**), would soon no longer be **with** them, bringing to remembrance the words of the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied that these people would **not** believe what was revealed to them, and that they **could** not believe because they had **hardened** their hearts, like Pharaoh.

Interestingly, John makes a comment about the **hypocrisy** of some of the authorities who, although they believed in Jesus nevertheless would not **admit** to it because they did not want to be **excommunicated** from the synagogue, meaning that the accolades of **men** were **more** important to them than the accolades of **God**.

Alternate readings for Holy (Maundy) Thursday (Thursday before Easter)

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 12: 1-14

The ninth plague, of ***thick darkness***, has ended, and God has warned Egypt of the ***last*** plague to come. But first, he must arrange to save ***His*** people from that plague, the death of the ***first-born*** of both humans and animals. He then proceeds to give Moses instructions on ***how*** this is to be done. First of all, a ***one-year-old lamb or goat*** without blemish must be chosen. The families that eat the animal must be of such size that ***all*** the ***roasted*** meat must be consumed that evening. The ***blood*** from the killing of the animal must be splashed on the ***doorposts and mantle*** of the doorway of the house. The meal must be accompanied by bitter herbs and ***unleavened*** (made without yeast—hence flat) bread. And the entire family must be dressed for ***travel***, ready to move out at a moment's notice. Thus as God and the ***destroying angel*** pass through the houses, any home with the blood on the doorposts will be ***passed over***, thus sparing any first-born there.

Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 11: 23-32

St. Paul is giving the Corinthian Christians instruction on how to conduct their ***worship*** services in a way pleasing to God. In our reading for this evening, he gives instruction regarding the celebration of the ***Lord's supper***, noting that Jesus identified the bread as his ***body*** given for them, and the wine as his ***blood*** shed for them for the ***forgiveness of sins***. And this meal is meant to help Christians ***remember*** Jesus' sacrifice.

But then St. Paul points out that this is not just an ***ordinary*** meal. It requires the participant to ***examine*** him/herself, recognizing and acknowledging his/her ***sins***, and truly ***repenting*** of his/her behavior. In other words, we are to ***judge ourselves*** so that ***God*** does not have to judge us. Then St. Paul points out that a number of the Corinthian Christians are weak, sick, or ***dead*** because they had not discerned the ***significance*** of this covenant meal.

Something for us to think about.

Gospel Lesson: John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

It is Maundy Thursday evening (as we know it). To Jesus and the disciples, it is their **last** Passover celebration together, because Jesus knows that his suffering begins **that night**. Just prior to the meal, Jesus gets a basin of water, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes the disciples feet. What's **this** all about? Well, back in those days, there were no paved **pathways**, and people wore sandals. So whenever people entered a home, it was traditional for the very **lowest** servant to wash the peoples' **feet**. Since this was a **borrowed** facility, and there were no **servants** to wash the disciples feet, Jesus took up the chore. Peter apparently was the **only** one to grasp **some** of the significance of what was happening. If anything, one of the **disciples** should have washed the feet, and Peter recognized that he was **one** of those disciples. Hence he **objected** when Jesus was about to wash his feet. After an exchange of words, Peter **submits**. But then Jesus explains the **significance** of what he did. He held the highest **rank**, so to speak, of those in the room, yet he assumed the duties of the person **lowest** in rank. Thus this was an **example** of how **God** credits things: Those who are willing to be the **lowest** servant will be among the **greatest** in the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, on this earth, **pride** has **no** place in the life of a Christian, only **love and service**.

Later that evening, Jesus announces that now he will be **glorified** by his Father, just as the **Father** will be glorified by the work of the Christ soon to be **completed**. Then he reminds them that, what he told the Jews earlier—that they **would** not go where he was going, so also now the disciples **could** not go where he was going—indicating that the **unbelieving Jews** would **not** go to heaven but the **believing** disciples could **not** follow Jesus to heaven **now** as he completes the **ultimate sacrifice** (see **Hebrews 9** for what happened in heaven). But then Jesus gives his disciples an old but **new commandment**: they are to **love** each other with **godly** love, so much so that **all** people would immediately know that they were his disciples by the **obvious** love that they had for one another.

Easter Day

As recorded by Dr. Luke in our Gospel Lesson for today, we can only **marvel** with St. Peter at all that **God** has wrought in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. And what **has** God wrought?

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 65: 17-25

We begin with our Old Testament Lesson, where Isaiah lists the following **wonders**, all ours because of **faith** in Jesus as the Messiah:

- We will be in a **new** (and better) heaven and earth.
- We will **not** remember all of our former **griefs**.
- Our lot in life will be **joy and gladness**.
- There will be **no** reason to weep, and there will be **no** distress.
- All** the tragedies afflicting the **true** Children of Israel will be gone, including early death, or **not** enjoying the fruit of your labors.
- We will be **blessed** by the Lord.
- Man and animals will live **together** in **peace**.
- God himself will **always** be with us to hear and defend us.

We marvel **indeed!**

Epistle Lesson: 1 Corinthians 15: 19-26

St. Paul continues his discussion of the **marvels** accruing to us through Christ's death and resurrection. He contrasts Adam with Christ: by his sin, **Adam** sold **all** of us into **slavery** to sin. But by his death and resurrection, **Jesus** bought all of us back **out** of slavery into **freedom**. But not just **any** freedom. The glorified Jesus is the **first fruit**, representing the very **first** of the millions who **believe** in him who will have a **new** body just like **his**. **All** believers will be given that body when Christ returns in **victory** after defeating—as he reigns **now!**—**all** those who **oppose** him and after destroying **death** (at least for those who **believe** in him).

Gospel Lesson: Luke 24: 1-12

It is the first day of the week, and a group of **women** who had, on late Friday afternoon, observed **where** Jesus was **laid**, now go to the tomb to apply the traditional **burial spices**. There they encounter **not** the dead Jesus but instead two **angels**, who tell them that he is **arisen**, just as he **said** he would. When the women return to Jerusalem to tell the **other** disciples, they are met with **unbelief**. Except for Peter (and John), who **run** to the tomb to see for themselves. And Dr. Luke records St. Peter returning to Jerusalem, **marveling**.

Second Sunday of Easter

First Lesson: Acts 5: 12-20 (21-32)

Some time has elapsed since the events that we celebrated last Sunday. In this first lesson, we see the apostles in Jerusalem, going about **fulfilling** the Great Commission in the power of the **Holy Spirit**. That is to say, the **same** signs and wonders that Jesus did to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, the **apostles** were now doing to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was now here. Even Peter's **shadow** was bringing about healing of the sick through the **faith** of the recipient. And whether they had an illness or were afflicted by evil spirits, the result was the same: **all** were healed. This, of course, brought about the same response by the **religious establishment** as it did when Jesus walked on the earth. And in response to the apostles being **imprisoned** by these religious leaders, God sends an **angel** to release them from prison. In a subsequent **appearance** before these religious leaders, the apostles make a statement about their behavior that must regulate both them and us: We must obey **God** rather than men!

Epistle Lesson: Revelation 1: 4-18

We now see the **results** of the apostles carrying out the Great Commission. But it is a "good news, bad news" type of situation. We find St. John **imprisoned** on the island of **Patmos**, just off the coast of western modern-day Turkey, for **his** involvement in spreading the gospel. But he is still **at** it! He is in the midst of writing letters to the newly formed seven churches in Asia Minor (the good news!) and with the gospel he includes a warning that Christ will return in judgment. **Why** is he writing these letters? Because in a **vision** of the **glorified** Christ, he is instructed to do so. And the letters begin with a **judgment** of the seven churches of Asia Minor.

The repeated mentioning of "seven" churches, lamp stands, and stars probably indicates that, although the Christian churches in these seven cities are mentioned by name, the letters are intended for **all** churches of **all** time (*i.e.*, the '**complete**' church). Also, the "**two-edged sword**" may represent the two aspects of God's Word: **law and gospel**.

Gospel Lesson: John 20: 19-31

Today's reading is a continuation of last week's story. You may recall that, first Mary and then Peter & John found the tomb **empty** on that first Easter morning, and then **Mary** subsequently saw two angels and then encountered Jesus himself. Today's lesson initially occurs the **evening** of that first day, with the disciples gathered together, but behind **closed and locked** doors because they **feared** for their lives, worrying that they could suffer the **same** fate as Jesus at the hands of the Jews. Suddenly Jesus stands in their **midst**, wishes them **peace**, and then tells them that he is now sending **them** out as witnesses, in the power of the **Holy Spirit**. Furthermore, he is giving his disciples the **authority** to **forgive sins**. But because Thomas was **missing** that night, Jesus returns a week later, **again** suddenly appearing in the **midst** of the disciples despite the doors being closed and locked, to repeat this episode. Jesus concludes his appearance here with the words, "**Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**" That, folks, would be you and me.

St. John concludes this section with the statement that his gospel is written to include just a **sampling** of the signs that Jesus did, so that **we** may believe.