

**Mt 8:18-22; Monday, July 1, 2018**

When Jesus commanded “cross to the other side,” the immediate focus is to go to the other side of the lake, but symbolically he is calling his disciples to go beyond, that is, make a radical break with all that is customary and safe to them. Cut off from the things that normally made them feel secure, they must rely on Jesus’ strength and illumination. He, alone, provides real security, everything else is illusionary. The crowds come to Jesus as the source of their healing and instruction. He is that and more to his disciples. They are called to cling to Jesus’ person with every fiber of their being. Only then will they become like Jesus. Only then can they do his work, speak his words, and communicate his grace. Jesus takes all his disciples on the narrow path that leads to Calvary. Then they can say with St. Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives with me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal 2:20). This is our vocation and our destiny if we will embrace it.

Today’s Gospel gives the example of two men who wish to follow Jesus. The first expresses his willingness to embrace a radical change of life-style. He declared, “I will follow you wherever you go.” His years of studying the word of God has led him to the point where he is willing to surrender his all to the Word who is God. However, Jesus lets him know that his path is not the path of comfort, worldly security and riches. The second man also wants to follow Jesus, but he wants to put his family first. Jesus’ service supersedes even the most sacred human traditions. The lesson in these two examples is that discipleship calls for absolute fidelity and courage. Well, do we love enough to accept this challenge?

**Jn 20: 24-29; Tuesday, July 3, 2018**

The presence of the wounds of the crucifixion on Jesus’ risen body is significant. They indicate that his body resurrected to glory is the same one that died on the cross. Resurrection is not the return of a human being to ordinary mortal life but a total transformation into a glorified mode of existence. As St. Paul wrote, the natural body is transfigured by the Holy Spirit into a glorified, “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44). The wounds on Jesus’ resurrected body reveal that he is eternally fixed in the act of love in which he died. The love and sacrifice that he offered on the cross are forever present before the Father as “expiation for our sins, and ... for those of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2). Jesus’ wounds also signify that the victory of the Resurrection comes only through the cross. Similarly, the Lamb in the book of Revelation bears the wounds of his slaughter by which he accomplished the work of redemption (Rev 5:6, 9). St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of the wounds on Jesus’ resurrected body as the “trophies” of his victory over sin and death.

When my children were small I played the “love game” with them. Placing my hands slightly apart I asked, “Does Daddy love you this much?” They would say, “No.” Then opening my hands more I would ask, “Does Daddy love you this much?” Once again, the answer was a resounding, “No.” Finally, opening my arms wide I would repeat, “Does Daddy love you this much?” Then they would say, “Yes!” and get a big hug. Jesus played the “love game” with us on Calvary as he opened his arms wide so our sins could drive in the nails. Yes, Jesus loves us that much. This is why Catholics place the corpus of Jesus on the cross. It reminds us that Jesus is perpetually saying to us, “I love you with my whole heart,” as he waits to give us a big spiritual hug.

### **Mt 8:28-34; Wednesday, July 4, 2018**

Herding pigs was abhorrent to the Jews. Gadara was a mostly pagan district where God's name was not invoked and his Law not obeyed. Therefore, it was not surprising that Jesus had a gruesome encounter with two possessed men coming from tombs, a place of death and rotting corpses that befits their sorry condition. The demons cry out in effect: "Leave us alone! We have nothing in common." They reveal the nature of evil, which deliberately digs an abyss between itself and the only source of hope - God. The demons also reveal their limited understanding of Jesus' mission, which is to publically judge them, "Have you come to torment us?" They were incapable of seeing that Jesus is all about love and mercy.

Ancient Jews would see the fittingness of a heard of pigs in the vicinity of two savage demoniacs. Therefore, when the Holiness of God approaches surrounded by his disciples, the powerless demons ask to be sent into the heard of pigs. In the whole episode, Jesus only speaks one word, "Go." His mere presence exhibits his power. The instant the demons enter the pigs they are so repulsed that they prefer drowning than the abiding presence of demons. Would that we had a similar loathing for mortal sin! As an aid to remembering this passage, you might recall pun that it is the origin of devilled ham!

Finally, the swineherds flee holiness for the false security of the city. The townspeople fear Jesus' healing power. They are far more concerned for the loss of swine than the freeing of two men from Satan's power. So, they ask Jesus to leave. The townspeople have the opportunity of embracing life in its fullness, but they preferred death. They were more comfortable with the presence of two dangerous demoniac than with the healing power of the gentle Jesus. What do our daily choices reveal about our values and priorities?

### **Mt 9:1-8; Thursday, July 5, 2018**

In today's Gospel Jesus sees the "faith" of the men carrying a paralytic who could not come to Jesus by himself. The word "faith," *pistis* in Greek has a rich meaning beyond the English word "faith," because it encompasses the meanings of *trust*, *surrender*, *adherence to another with one's whole soul*, *allegiance* and *faithfulness*. Notice, Jesus reads the hearts of men with the ease that we might use to pluck a ripe fruit dangling before us. The faith these men have in Jesus is communicated to the paralytic by their concrete act of compassion. This scene touches me deeply. For I have personally experienced a similar kindness when I was carried to Jesus on the litter of prayers when I was the target sinner of a precious group of Catholic charismatics.

Jesus calls the paralytic "child," which combines the comforting voice of the Father with the powerful voice of the Creator. The divine Word *comforts* in the original sense of "making wholly strong." Jesus, of course, is the Father's *comfort* as he says the marvelous words, "Your sins are forgiven." Whether the paralytic is young or old is unknown to us. It is a matter of total indifference. Jesus' words signal his new birth into the new life Jesus is now communicating to him. This is the meaning of saving faith expressed in the Greek word *pistis*.

The grammarians of the Law were scandalized by this supernatural cure by the divine physician. These rigorists with closed minds and hearts devoid of love can only conclude, "This man is blaspheming." They refuse to accept the divine point of view. Jesus will not determine his actions by their criteria. "My thoughts are not your thoughts," says the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, "my ways not your ways" (Isa 55:8). What they need, Jesus will not force upon them. What they demand Jesus will not give them. In their rigid attachment to the letter of God's word, they made themselves incapable of recognizing its spirit. In order to penetrate their self-inflicted blindness, Jesus worked a miracle they can see to prove the miracle they could not see – the forgiveness of sins. In this way Jesus redirects their attention away from their narrow perceptions of the written word to the living Word who is standing before them. The crowd "glorified God" as the sight of the miracle. From the scribes there was only an ominous silence. What of us? How do we respond to Jesus' saving words? It is with "faith," that is with *trust*, *surrender*, *adherence with our whole soul*, *allegiance* and *faithfulness*?

### **Mt 9:9-13; Friday, July 6, 2018**

Jesus is always passing by because God is always active for he is life itself, the dynamic source that sustains all life. But do we see him? Are we open to his love? The Book of Wisdom says, “Wisdom, while remaining within itself, renews all things ... and produces friends of God and prophets” (Wis 7:26). Jesus, the incarnate Wisdom of God, embodies this truth. Who can plumb the mystery of why Jesus’ glance falls on Matthew or, for that matter, on each of us? Salvation begins when we turn toward Jesus’ compassionate eye, as was the case with Matthew. So, whether waddling in sin, or paralyzed on a mat, or sitting at a customs bench, the reception of the divine glance penetrates our misery and everything changes. This is the wonderful way the Savior irrupts into our narrow horizon. Many have experienced this blessed interruption. All of us would experience it if only we would open ourselves to that piercing glance.

Jesus did not confine himself, in selecting his apostles, to the heart of Jewish piety. He looked beyond conventional religious circles. In this way he opens vast new horizons in man’s vision of God. At the margins of Jewish society Jesus is revealed as the true *pontifex maximus*, the “supreme bridge-builder” between the Father and humans. As Matthew shares his vocation call, he gives us his name, reports that Jesus “saw” him, and uttered the unforgettable words, “Follow me.” Anyone who has experienced Jesus’ look and heard his call remembers that moment, even if he has drifted far away. Humanly speaking, there was nothing that attracted Jesus’ attention on Matthew. In his eye was the glint of ambition as he eagerly counted incoming money, making sure of his percentage of the unofficially extorted. He certainly enjoyed no social, political, or religious status among the Jews. He was a shady character who compromised with the evil Roman empire. “Follow me.” Jesus made the call and Matthew followed from a semblance of life to real Life. How are we responding as Jesus says to us, “Follow me?”

### **Mt 9:18-26; Monday, July 9, 2018**

Moses asked, “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him” (Deut 4:7)? The answer is given in today’s Gospel as a man with death and sorrow in his heart approaches Jesus. Like the centurion, he knows that the power and honor Jesus exercises are a reflection of God’s. Unlike the Pharisees he bears his office with humility. Thus, he is identified as “an official” or “a certain leader,” one of an endless number of people in positions of authority. He kneels before the great Healer, which recognizes his sovereign authority – the Master. This was an amazing gesture of faith because Jews meticulously avoided this ritual of obeisance before either human beings or anything constructed as an idol. Only God merits this gesture of submission. “Bow down to the Lord,” commands Psalm 96:9, “in the splendor of holiness, and dance in his honor, all men on earth.” We take the divinity of Jesus for granted. We often fail to understand the seismic crisis Jesus created in Jewish monotheism. Statements like St. Paul’s bold declaration that Jesus was the “image of the invisible God” (Gal 1:15) was earth shattering. So, this passage in today’s Gospel can be considered part of an extended instruction on Jesus’ divinity culminating in the Book of Revelation: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and divinity and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.” Then at the conclusion of this hymn of praise, the twenty-four elders “fell on their faces and adored” (Rev 5:12, 14).

In today’s Gospel narrative we can see ourselves prefigured both in the grieving father and the dead little girl. In the father we see the trust we should have whenever we pray. God always answers our prayers in the way that is in our best interest. The girl was raised from the sleep of death, but she would not live forever. She will die again, for this life is but a passing moment in time. However, she is a reflection of the destiny God wishes for all of us as he raises us up from the death of sin into the life of intimacy with him. Just as she is now the heavenly Father’s child and the bride of Jesus in whose impending death she now enters in the sweet slumber of love, so are we. In the words of St. Paul: “our Lord Jesus Christ has died for us, so that we, awake or asleep, might share one life with him” (1 Tim 5:10). This is our destiny. Let’s embrace it with our whole heart.

**Mt 9:32-38; Tuesday, July 10, 2018**

After narrating the healing of a mute person, St. Matthew gives us an epilogue that focuses on the crowds' misery and Jesus' compassion. Ignoring the Pharisees' sullen accusation, Jesus continues to immerse himself into his mission. No opposition or hostility, big or small, intimidates him. He doesn't settle for symbolic appearances. Matthew informs us that he "went around to all the towns and villages." Jesus' primary activities were teaching, proclaiming and healing. Jesus expounded the Old Testament, particularly those passages that looked to his coming and mission. He boldly taught in the synagogues, the official places of prayer, study, and preaching, precisely where he was most likely to encounter the hostility of the Pharisees. Jesus had no intention of establishing a parallel religion in opposition to Jewish observance, but its fulfillment and perfection.

To the Pharisees' malicious charge that his healing power came from Satan, Jesus responded by going to their synagogues to teach and heal. Perhaps his words and actions under their scrutiny might persuade them that the one who heals illnesses and speaks the words of truth could not possibly be in partnership with the devil. After all, it should be obvious even to these close-minded men that the Good One could have nothing in common with evil, nor could the principle of goodness in any sense be subordinated to the principle of destruction.

Jesus taught to reshape minds and hearts in the values of the Father. He proclaimed that "the good tidings of the kingdom" was upon them. It should gladden their hearts. Finally, Jesus healed "every sickness and every affliction" to show that he came to cure the greater evils of sin and death. Jesus' intention was to plumb the bottom of human misery and transform the life of all humans. Is it any wonder that the tender heart of Jesus was "moved with pity?" Some surrendered to his love; many did not. Where does our behavior place us?

**Mt 10:1-7; Wednesday, July 11, 2018**

In the Book of Numbers Moses prayed that "the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint" men to go out to God's people so they would "not be as sheep which have no shepherd" (16, 17). In Jeremiah we read God's direct promise: "I will myself gather the remnant of my sheep from all the lands to which I have dispersed them. I will bring them back to their homes, and they shall never again know fear or dismay or punishment. This is the very word of the Lord" (Jer 23:3f). Moses' prayer was provisionally fulfilled in the wilderness, but we learn that God's promise was definitively filled in today's Gospel when Jesus appointed the twelve apostles.

In spite of the Pharisees' intransigent clinging to the legal dispensation, it was impossible that salvation could come from animal sacrifices and ritual observances. Their sin was not their adherence to tradition, but the way they closed themselves off from the goodness of God incarnate, when he came to perfect the law by his abiding presence. Similarly, today, it is impossible that salvation will come to those who do not keep the commandments. Jesus' Jewish brethren were hopelessly scattered and utterly helplessly under the domination of pagan Rome. Today, Christians are hopelessly theologically scattered and helpless under the domination of the prevailing secular culture. What is the Savior to do?

Jesus called forth twelve flawed men, because he intended, not to abolish, but to universalize the vocation of Israel. Jesus said, "Salvation is from the Jews" (Jn 4:22). No one is called or saved outside of Israel, but Israel must be expanded to all mankind. Jesus will use these twelve men and their successors to unite the utterly new with the utterly ancient. This event down through the ages will be accompanied by rejections, convulsions, death, and Resurrection. In choosing the twelve, Jesus was forming the clay of the new Israel. The apostles were called to be teachers and the taught, the healers and the healed as they are sent, not to go down to Egypt, but to go forth from Palestine to the ends of the earth. We are the prostrate, wounded sheep to whom they bring eternal life. Collectively, we for the Body of Christ (Rom 12:4,5), "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15). Wow!

### **Mt 10:7-15; Thursday, July 12, 2018**

Today's Gospel is a continuation of the selection of the apostles. In the world of sin, discouragement, failure, death, decay and utter ruin is easily viewed as normal. Jesus expresses God's impatience with this negativeness as he proclaims the proximity of the Kingdom: "Heal the sick," he commands, "raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." When God's kingdom comes near, the twisted things in humans return to their natural state. St. Athanasius taught that the Church's task is to revive God's lost image in man by restoring it to its pristine beauty and wholeness. Isn't this exactly what attracts us like a magnet to saints like John Paul the Great and Mother Therese of Calcutta. They are like us, but with a wonderful difference we should all have.

This transformative process requires our cooperation. We are not an inert bit of clay where God does all the work and we do nothing. The whole development consists in movements of collaboration between God and man. He does the heavy lifting, but we must do our little part. The minimal first step requires keeping the commandments. After this baby step, we must live the beatitudes, which are the perfection of the commandments. Jesus summed it all up during the Last Supper when he gave us this final legacy: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35).

As we become the Master's faithful followers, we become more and more like the Original. This is exactly what attracts us to the saints. This leads us to a better understanding of what it means to be redeemed by Jesus. Setting aside the theological terminology, the root meaning is this. To be redeemed in Jesus means to participate in the life of Jesus and, therefore, the activity of Jesus. But are we willing to embrace it and be all in?

### **Mt 10:16-23; Friday, July 13, 2018**

St. John Chrysostom said this about today's Gospel: "So long as we continue to behave as sheep, we are victorious. But the moment we become wolves, we are conquered, for we lose the help of the shepherd. He is the shepherd of sheep, not of wolves. If he leaves you and goes away, it is because you did not allow him to show his power." Jesus, begins today's Gospel with the word "behold." He wants to make certain his followers understand the risks of discipleship. These difficulties are a part of his plans and intentions. Steel is forged in fire, and we are formed in the flames of our trials. Defenselessness always looks stupid to the world. It judges that if a person were smarter he would not have wandered into difficult situations. Who, then, would actually send the ones he loves like helpless sheep in pursuit of wolves? Clearly, it is the Son of God, incarnate Wisdom.

Notice the vulnerability of the apostles. In addition to their human limitations, it begins with the fact that they are stripped of all worldly weapons and even the simplest means of survival. Vulnerable yes, but not helpless for they will be armed with divine power and the authority of their mission. Theirs are the arms of instruction, enlightening, healing, and saving, but they are never the instruments of destruction. Regarding their mission to the people of Israel who are being devoured by the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of their supposed leaders and teachers, they must enter into the field of slaughter to save while they themselves remain physically at risk. Jesus does not make them supermen. So, while remaining weak they are the bearers of a great power that will bear fruit despite opposition, even their martyrdom. This violence will only make the power of love flow more freely. St. Paul wrote: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10) because he relies on Jesus and not on Paul. At the time of his conversion, Jesus sent Ananias to baptize Paul. The Lord explained to Ananias that Paul was a "chosen Instrument of mine" (Acts 9:15). Well, every Christian is a "chosen instrument." But we must also recall that Jesus also said of Paul, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16). Anyone who thinks that authentic Christianity is for the weak and cowardly has never given it a serious try. The wimps are the ones being devoured by the wolves. So, how courageous are we?

### **Mt 10:34-11:1; Monday, July 16, 2018**

In today's Gospel the Prince of Peace shocks us out of our complacency with the apparently contradictory statement that he brings a sword not peace. Jesus is, of course, not the cause of the wars, murders and the numerous acts of violence so common in our society. So, what is his meaning? First, Jesus' message of total self-sacrifice to God and for others is often met with persecution beginning with his own martyrdom. Secondly, there is the discovery that in me there is much that needs to be transformed, purified, put to death, and brought to life again. This great battle leads to a fierce inner struggle that St. Paul succinctly captures: "I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death" (Rom 7:21-024)? The answer is the Prince of Peace, also called the Savior. For what is impossible for us, he makes possible, but not easy. That's why this grueling growth process is referred to as the cross. The amazing discovery is that the inner peace we crave only reigns supreme on the other side of the cross in whatever stage we are being put to death.

But what a magnificent conflict! It is the only one worth waging. Thus, St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). In describing the awesome inner peace this struggle brings, this great apostle wrote to the Philippians: "The peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding, will keep guard over your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7). So, what is our problem? Why don't we experience this peace? Why does our life seem dry and empty? We have our toes in the water, but we are afraid to jump in. Jesus, I am inspired by your fiery words, but I am afraid to change, give up my attachments and cling only to you. Give me the push I desperately need to be "all in".

### **Mt 11:20-24; Tuesday, July 17, 2018**

After marveling at the unbelief of most of his contemporaries, Jesus reproached the towns close to his native Nazareth, cities that were the object of his predilection: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capharnaum. The word "woe" is not used commonly today, so to better grasp Jesus' meaning we need to understand the following ideas that are imbedded into this three-letter word: *misery, sorrow, distress, wretchedness, regret, gloom, sadness, and heartbreak*. Jesus grieved for them because their obstinacy would not yield to the evidence of the miracles he worked among them. He provided a great show that titillated their fantasy and brought some excitement into their daily routine, but they quickly returned to the activities that do not matter with closed, unrepentant hearts. Some bought into the self-evident lie that Jesus worked miracles by the power of Satan. But most simply gawked at Jesus's miracles as entertainment that created some immediate excitement, but never penetrated their hearts.

It is no different today. Many Christians go to church for its entertainment and fellowship value, but not to encounter the power and wisdom of God that would make us change our lives. The Mass brings Catholics to Calvary where we are invited to enter into Jesus total self-sacrifice. His words, "This is my body," asks us to offer with Jesus out total self – our hopes, our dreams, our aspirations, our all – to the Father. His words, "This is my blood that is poured out for you," is an invitation to unite our suffering and even our death with Jesus' gift of himself. How, then, can we say, "I get nothing out of Mass?" What of us have we put into it? Like the unrepentant towns we put little or nothing of ourselves into the Mass. Sadly, we remain closed off to the ocean of grace that is available to us. Therefore, we leave, sometimes early, because after all getting out of the parking lot first is important. So, we just skip or pay little attention to Jesus' blessing that recommissions us to convert the world for him. Cripple Christians bring about crippled, unrepentant cities and civilizations. Only saints are the difference makers. Are we willing to engage in the only human activity that gives an eternal meaning and destiny to our lives? Miracles are all around us, if only we would open the eyes of faith to see them. Perhaps, the most relevant miracle is the one Jesus wants to work in us.

### **Mt 11:25-27; Wednesday, July 18, 2018**

In today's Gospel, Jesus turns from the chastisement of the unfaithful cities to the depths of the divine life. He shifts his attention away from those who have turned away from him and turns, instead, to the heavenly Father where love meets love. The Father is the source of Jesus' mission, his strength, and his joy. However, the meaning of the passage is not that Jesus is now turning to his Father, as his last refuge and consolation after experiencing a keen human disappointment. Rather, we are privileged to glimpse the divine dialogue of love that continually flows between the Father and the Son. Here we get a glimpse of the interior life of God.

The atmosphere of intense joy, peace, and thanksgiving that pervades Jesus prayer stands in stark contrast to the shrillness, animosity, and hardheartedness of the lake city's response to Jesus. We are brought from the exterior geography of hostility and rejection, into the inner geography of unbroken, gladness, harmony and love between the Father and the Son. But there is more. The exchange of love that Jesus hoped to establish with the people of the towns, and with each of us, is here revealed in the prayer of an unceasing exchange of intentions, of thoughts, and of *being itself* between Father and Son. Here is the amazing reality. Their love for every human and their plan for the world's salvation are the external expression, at the level of creation, of the absolute exclusivity of love that exists between them from all eternity. Human love, even when perfect, the total gift of self and absolute commitment, is a reflection of what we do. In God love is who he is. His actions radiate from that dynamic source. In contrast, the world of sin that abounds all around us is marked by the failure of men to turn their hearts to one another and to God.

In today's Gospel Jesus is not seeking consolation from man's hostility and rejection by going to his Father. Instead, he is revealing to hostile men that the source of his loving power is his eternal relationship with the Father. Here we discover the essential foundation to understand all of Jesus' deeds and words in the Gospels. Jesus' motive in redeeming us is to extend to us his exclusive sonship into our own hearts and lives. In this way he longs to bring us into the eternal love sharing within the community of divine Persons. No one loves like God loves! If only we would surrender to it.

### **Mt 11:28-30; Thursday, July 19, 2018**

Today's Gospel is a refresher course on a fundamental truth, namely, God wants nothing from us. Rather, God yearns, with all the passion of a lover, to give himself to us, to take us forever into his intimate loving embrace. "Love, then," St. John instructs us, "is this: not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as a sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10). God wants *no thing* from us, except our heart. Jesus arrived on the scene like an oasis in a desert. St. Paul lists the characteristics of this spiritual desert that he dubs "works of the flesh": "immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like" (Gal 5:19-21). There is an ominous ring to the list because it reminds us of our society.

Jesus woos us with the words, "Come to me." It is the call of the heavenly husband for his bride with the object of bringing us into the eternal marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9). He speaks with the tenderness of a lover inviting us into the eternal bridal chamber. In exchange for our weakness, arrogance, and sinfulness, he longs to give us himself. He accepts our pitiful dowry, which consists of our impotence, incapacity, unhappiness, self-deception, and numerous failures. Jesus is the divine lover. Therefore, he has the will and power to relieve, to deliver, and to embrace. When he says, "I will give you rest," he reveals that he is the good shepherd foreseen in Psalm 23: "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me to paths of righteousness" (vs. 1-3). We have a decision to make. Is Jesus engaging in an unpardonable show of sentimentality? Is he inviting his followers to wallow in shallow comfort? Or is he making available to us the transformative friendship and intimacy of the Heart of God? If the latter is true, and it is, then we need to get serious about our relationship and plead: "Come Lord Jesus!"

### **Mt 12:1-8; Friday, July 20, 2018**

In this passage Jesus gives a lesson of the light burden of his Gospel as opposed to the heavy burden of the Pharisees. In so doing his teaching deepens our understanding of our new life in him. In attempting to enforce the Sabbath, the Pharisees betrayed their ignorance of the deepest intentions of the divine lawgiver. They were so spiritually blind that they could not see that their heavenly Father cannot be pleased by the hunger of his children. The Pharisees had forgotten that the Sabbath refers primarily to *rest in God*.

Man was created in order that he might rest with God in glory and happiness, and not primarily for activities that have their end in this world. God, himself, set the example. He created, yet he does not exist for his creation. So too man, although created by God and therefore not by nature divine, was nevertheless created in God's "image and likeness." Therefore, we were made for God and not for created goods. This truth is the underlining principle of our true destiny and our guidebook for using created things.

Only Jesus, who inaugurates the new priesthood by his sacrifice of himself, can dispose of the Sabbath as David disposed of the sacred loaves of the Bread of the Presence. Jesus is the "bread of life" that "has come down from heaven." Therefore, he could declare that, "whoever comes to him will never hunger" (Jn 6:33, 35). Furthermore, Jesus, the compassionate high priest, aptly declared that he is greater than the Temple. He is the "sacred place" par excellence. As Lord of the Sabbath he can declare his disciples "innocent" when they materially broke the Law, and the Pharisees "guilty" in their condemnation, because they materially uphold the Law in a way that was opposed to the mind of God. The Sabbath obligation, now shifted to Sunday, is a time for resting from earthly concerns and an earthly mentality, in order to be free for union with God. Where on earth can this union be more closely achieved than in the sacrifice of the Mass and the worthy reception of the Blessed Eucharist?

### **Mt 12:38-42; Monday, July 23, 2018**

The covenant is the great theme that runs through the entire Bible like a musical theme weaving in and out of a great symphony. The word "covenant" normally does not capture our attention until we learn that it encompasses the ideas of "family bond" and "marriage." The marriage motif is particularly captivating because God in the Old Testament is depicted as the heavenly Bridegroom. Thus, in Hosea the Lord says, "you will call me, 'My Husband' ... and I will espouse you for ever" (Hos 2:16, 19). When describing his relationship with Jesus the Messiah, John the Baptist declared: "He [namely Jesus] who has the bride is the bridegroom, the friend of the bridegroom [John himself], who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore, this joy of mine is now full" (Jn 3:29). It's this spiritual nuptial relationship with Christ that provides the backdrop for the expression "an evil and unfaithful (literally *adulterous*) generation." Sin, then, does not merely break a commandment; it violates and destroys our wedded relationship with God. It breaks Jesus' heart.

In the Old Testament God spoke lovingly to his people "in many and various ways" (Heb 1:1). All of this has now yielded to the divine Son who is the perfect embodiment of the Father's Heart. Therefore, all other signs, even his miracles, fade into insignificance in Jesus' incomparable presence. The Pharisees demanded a sign when the reality to which all divine signs point stood before them. They were like someone choosing to focus on the musical notes on a page, but who rejects listening to the music played from live instruments. So, too, it is today. There are those who prefer the multiplicity of words and signs to the divine Person whose presence cannot be subordinated or manipulated. Then they would be constrained to see the fallacy of the rationalizations that justify their false loves and would be forced to make a tough choice. Where do we stand?



### **Mt 12:46-50; Tuesday, July 24, 2018**

The reference to Jesus' "brothers" (*adelphoi* in Greek), which occurs 145 times in the New Testament, is falsely used by some Christians to deny Mary's perpetual virginity. Yet, this truth was always unanimously believed by the Catholic and Orthodox churches. It surprises many to learn that all of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, including Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, likewise affirmed Mary's perpetual virginity as the seal of the uniqueness of her divine Son's Incarnation. It is only in modern times that an anti-Catholic spirit has sought to lower the special status clearly accorded to Mary by God's providence. This attempt to reduce Mary in every point to the common experience of the rest of humanity can hardly be pleasing to God. It may also be a sad reflection of the sexual promiscuity of our times which makes people incredulous that anyone could be continent in marriage. Therefore, they conclude without any foundation that she *must* have had other children.

But, you may ask, what about the "brothers". The truth is that the Old Testament used the word "brother" and "brothers" for a variety of identifications including: uncles, cousins, friends, allies, and even actual siblings. The New Testament also uses the words "brother" and "brothers" in a wide variety of meanings including fellow Christians. If one maintains that the word *adelphoi* must mean biological brothers, this leads to some silly conclusions. For example, St. Paul informed the Corinthians that "five hundred brothers" saw the risen Jesus at one time (1 Cor 15:6). Is he revealing the world's record of biological siblings? Furthermore, when one takes the time to investigate the named "brothers" of the Lord, it is discovered that they are the sons of someone other than the blessed Virgin. Jesus would not have violated the Law by giving his mother to the care of John if Mary had other biological children. Mary is ever-Virgin to become the spiritual mother of the members of her son's Mystical Body (Rev 12:17).

### **Mt 20:20-28; Wednesday, July 25, 2018**

St. Matthew has a dramatic sense of humor in the way he highlights contrary attitudes to challenge our comfortable ideas. In today's Gospel he contrasts Jesus' alarming prediction of his Passion with the frivolity of the mother of James and John bounding into the scene to promote her sons. She even has the audacity to command Jesus in the imperative mood, "say." The implication is that James and John prompted their mother to plead for them, for Jesus will address the three of them together. Isn't it often the case that *ambition, vainglory* and *social climbing* is alive and well in us – yes, even in religious matters?

This incident presents us with an example of the self-interested prayer that St. Catherine of Siena called the "mercenary love" of spiritual beginners. Nevertheless, the patient Jesus always listens attentively, then he answers these prayers by purifying our intentions and leading us to love unselfishly. The cross is only stairway to glory. James and John will learn this lesson on Good Friday, which will be cemented in their hearts forever on Pentecost.

There is a remarkable parallel between this passage and Bathsheba's request in the First Book of Kings to the aged King David, when she wanted to secure the succession of the kingdom for her son Solomon. Jesus, the Son of David according to the flesh and the rightful heir to the kingdom of Israel, is in the process of massively transforming the traditional Jewish and human conception of the "Kingdom." It's all about *self-sacrificing love*, not about jockeying around for choice positions and promotions – especially in the Church. Those of us who are called to ministries in the Church, the head of our family, and leadership positions in the world are called to serve, just like the Lord who said of himself, "the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for the ransom of many" (Mt 20:28).

### **Mt 13:10-17; Thursday, July 26, 2018**

Parables are stories or examples that illustrate by analogy a deep spiritual point or a divine mystery by using everyday symbols and familiar things from every day life. Jesus used parables to reveal truths to us that are sublime, divine, eternal, and profound. Parables, then, give us a wonderful way of “seeing God” and discovering his heart. However, there are conditions we must meet to look beyond the surface and discover the rich inner meanings. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that the “pure of heart” shall see God (Mt 5:8). The “knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,” which is promised to the disciples in today’s Gospel, is identical to the things Jesus says the Father reveals to the “little ones” (Mt 11:25). The vital conditions, then, are “purity of heart” and “spiritual littleness.” Notice, however, that these conditions have nothing to do with our intellectual understanding, education or high IQ.

Parables not only bring the sublime close to us clothed in our ordinary experiences; paradoxically, they reveal by concealing, so that they test both our willingness to ponder the Word of God more deeply as well as our attitude, either open or closed, to the Word’s deepest meanings. Here the principle “like calls out unto like” applies. Only when our hearts are God-like can we begin to understand God’s thoughts. At the core of our being we were made God-like, but because of the deplorable state of our woundedness and half-alive spirituality, we desperately need Jesus to go about re-creating us in the image of God. The needed cure is not intellectually, but the transformation of our entire being. As God’s image in us comes back to health we are surprised with wonderful “ah ha” experiences into God’s way of seeing things. Jesus uses the parables to train our ears, eyes, and hearts so we can perceive the deepest divine mysteries. That’s all very lofty, but are we willing to submit to his guidance?

### **Mt 13:18-23; Friday, July 27, 2018**

Today’s Gospel opens with Jesus commanding literally, “You, then: *hear* the parable.” This blunt insistence on hearing recalls the fundamental command in the great *Shema*: “*Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord*” (Deut 6:4). The emphasis is not only on the truth being taught that must be believed, but, especially, on the supple readiness and willingness to receive it. This confronts us with our inner paradox. As fallen humans wounded by sin we do indeed have ears, but we often do not hear. Spiritual hearing requires our openness to receiving God’s word and our effort to understand it as he intends it to be understood. If our hearing is crowded with the values of this world, God’s words are just unintelligible noises.

The danger is we can deceive ourselves that we are listening to God’s Word when in fact we are tuned in only to our own interior noises and vain thoughts or those of the world. Our spiritual faculty of hearing needs to be purified in three ways. First, we must leave the crowd and be alone with Jesus. Second, we must willingly enter into Jesus’ intimacy in solitude. Finally, we must hear his command to shut down interiorly so he can defuse silence into our whole being. Fr. Abram Ryan captured this silence in his insightful poem “Song of the Mystic:”  
“I walk down the Valley of Silence -- down the dim, voiceless valley -- alone! And I hear not the fall of a footstep around me, save God's and my own. .. I walked in the world with the worldly; I craved what the world never gave. .. And still did I pine for the Perfect. And still found the False with the True. .. Do you ask what I found in the Valley? 'Tis my Trysting Place with the Divine. And I fell at the feet of the Holy, and above me a voice said: "Be mine." And there arose from the depths of my spirit an echo -- "My heart shall be Thine.”

### **Mt 13:31-35; Monday, July 30, 2018**

In the midst of a series of seven parables, Jesus makes a general statement about his teaching in parables. The quotation from Psalm 78 makes it abundantly clear that Jesus uses parables in order to reveal and not to conceal. In an earlier parable a woman was hiding leaven deep within a lump of dough. Now Jesus utters “things hidden since the foundation of the world.” The mysteries that Jesus’ parables reveal centers on God’s plan of salvation and the divine life itself. As such they are directly accessible to God alone. Therefore, it is effective to reveal them to his creatures indirectly in parables. Only Jesus can adequately and fully communicate to us the mysteries of the Kingdom, for the Kingdom is as mysterious as is God himself. St. Paul reminds us that Jesus is the One “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3); for he is the Wisdom of God in Person (cf. 1 Cor 1:24). In addition, Jesus loves all of us who he addresses in parables with the same eternal, all-powerful, and ever-faithful love with which the Father has loved him (cf. Jn 15:9). This is why the word of God, the Bible, is so powerful. In the Holy Spirit’s revelation, we encounter the Word who is God who brings us into the intimacy of the Blessed Trinity.

There is another amazing connection between the parables and Jesus himself. In this process, God uses humanities’ imperfect language of the flesh as a vehicle to God’s heart. Similarly, God uses imperfect human nature united with the perfect divine nature in the Person of Jesus to bring about our salvation so he can elevate our flawed nature to become the adopted sons and daughters of the heavenly Father. Thus, we discover that the parables and the Incarnation go hand in hand for in both cases it is Love that impels God to empty himself out, to communicate his divine being in flesh and words.

### **Mt 13:36-43; Tuesday, July 31, 2018**

Parables are not riddles to be solved by human cleverness. No, they are gradual revelations of truths to which only the divine Word has the key. Therefore, Jesus withdraws to a “house,” which serves as a microcosm of the Kingdom of Heaven, to interpret the parable of the weeds for his disciples. This parable, which is unique to Matthew’s Gospel, shows the presence of an evil growth alongside the good that God has planted. The focus is not on worldly values nor the lack of faith, but the activity of the arch-enemy of both God and man, the Devil. The eternal Word humbles himself by becoming a man so he can dirty his hands to sow the field of our lives with his good seed. He boldly takes the great risk that his work of planting good seed will be spoiled by the Adversary. But isn’t that always the risk of love? We may not be loved in return. St. James pronounces that we are the beneficiaries of that love: “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him” (Jas 2:5)?

In an alarming passage in John’s Gospel, Jesus traces all unbelief to the spiritual paternity of the Devil – the seed of the serpent (Gen 3:15). “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. Her was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ... He who is of God hears the words of God, the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God” (Jn 8:43-45, 47). This parable illustrates the repetition of the perverse choice, namely, the denial and rejection of God instigated by Satan at the dawn of human history. In the words of Peter: “You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you and killed the Author of life” (Acts 3:12-15). This is the ugly reality of sin.

