

DEACON JACK RHINE HOMILIES – 2004 – 2009

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Homily 20040110 (1-10-2004)

1. BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Today we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. The obvious question is why did Jesus need to be baptized if he is both human and divine? The answer lies in Jewish tradition. Ceremonial baths, or the mikvah, were frequently used to mark important events in the lives of people. To this day, converts to Judaism visit the mikvah prior to conversion. Brides and grooms visit the mikvah prior to their weddings in observant families. Historically, there were mikvahs at the entrance to the temple and to synagogues for use before worship. Almost any religious deed, such as writing a new Torah scroll was preceded by the mikvah.

Jesus' baptism began his entrance to public ministry; a very fitting act for an observant Jew starting his mission. Jesus' The appearance of God as a dove and the voice booming from the sky, "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased," reinforces Jesus commitment to begin his mission, his public ministry.

What of our own baptisms? What do they mean? Our baptism was not our admission to the Body of Christ. Our birth as creations of God admitted us to the Body of Christ. Our baptisms do much more. Baptism commits us to our missions to minister to the Body of Christ just as Jesus did. Admittedly, the helpless babies that we baptize are in no way capable of embarking on a mission of any type. However, in order for infant baptism to be more than one of many graduation rites that we experience in our lives, a major responsibility of the adult baptized is to teach our children and set an example for our children to live out their baptismal mission when they are mature enough.

Unlike Jesus' baptism, our own Baptism washes away original sin. The responsibility we gain from the ritual, however, is to bring the love of Christ to others through everything we do, and in some cases what we don't do. Unfortunately, the decision to baptize children is frequently based on superstition. An innocent baby or young child who died prematurely could have never been sent to limbo, a place invented by theologians with too much time on their hands, by a loving and merciful God. Baptism does make us part of a community, the community of those committed to living their lives according to the example of Jesus Christ, a community of those with a mission.

I would like to tell you a modern day Gospel story. It is a true story of a public figure being like Christ. Some of you have heard it before. But, I know that each time I tell or hear this story, it is very moving.

Fiorello La Guardia was Mayor of New York City during the worst part of the great depression and during World War II. He was a colorful character and hands-on mayor who used to ride on the fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police, and take whole orphanages to baseball games. When the newspapers were on strike, LaGuardia read comics on the radio to the kids.

One very cold night in 1935, the mayor turned up at the night court that served the poorest part of the city. He dismissed the judge and took over the bench himself. Within a few moments, an elderly lady with tattered clothing was brought before him for stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter was sick and had been deserted by her husband and that her grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper from whom the bread was stolen refused to drop charges. He told the mayor “It’s a bad neighborhood and she has to be punished to teach other people a lesson.”

LaGuardia sighed, turned to the woman and said “I have to punish you ... the law makes no exceptions – ten dollars or ten days in jail. As he was pronouncing sentence, he reached into his pocket, extracted a ten dollar bill to pay the woman’s fine and fined everyone in the courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a grandmother had to steal bread in order to feed her grandchildren. He then ordered the bailiff to collect the fines, amounting to forty-seven dollars and fifty cents and turn them over to the bewildered woman. Fifty cents of that amount was contributed by the red faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen who just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

If I were to ask the question, “Which person in the story would you like to be like, the mayor, the shopkeeper, the starving grandmother, or the bystander?” the answer would obviously be the mayor. Although, it would not be bad to have courage, like the grandmother, to take risk in unjust situations or to, like the bystanders, cheer those on who are trying to do the just thing.

The real question is, “Which character can we be most like?” I suspect that there are times when we are Christ as was LaGuardia, there are times when each of us shows a lack of compassion and selfishness like the shop keeper, there are times when we refuse to take a risk like the grandmother and there are times when we are bystanders who are indifferent to what is going on around us until someone else handles a situation.

Jesus chose to love the thief, the self righteous, the average person in the crowd. He also did his best to teach them and witness with his own life no matter the risk. LaGuardia did that by respecting and enforcing the law, but also by helping the grandmother and by instilling in the entire courtroom the need to care about and actively support the disadvantaged. He made it clear that it was everyone’s responsibility to create a community where no one has to suffer.

Jesus was baptized so that we might also be baptized into his mission, the building of the Kingdom of God. I pray that we can all look forward to the day when God will say to each of us “you are my beloved children and with you I am well pleased.”

Homily 20040208 (2-8-2004)

2. HEARING THE CALL OF GOD

In 1976, at the close of the Vietnam War, Clint Eastwood directed and starred in the movie, *The Outlaw Josie Wales*. Critics proclaimed this movie Eastwood's best work. Eastwood introduces the movie as a study of the absurdity of war. However, it is much more and it ties very deeply into all three of the readings for this weekend.

The movie starts just before the end of the Civil War. Josey Wales is a Missouri farmer who is working his fields when a rogue union army unit burns down his house killing his wife and son. Josey Wales buries them accepting the tragedy as God's will. But, soon he grows angry and the need for revenge grows in his heart.

He joins a group of Confederate soldiers to track down the killers. At the end of the war, the southern soldiers are encouraged to turn themselves in and take an oath of allegiance to the United States. Josey's suspicions are confirmed when the Confederates take the oath and are then mowed down by machine gun fire. Josey Wales, who did not turn himself in, retaliated by killing a large number of Union soldiers and escaping to become a hunted fugitive. His prior commanding officer was given the duty of hunting Josey down and killing him.

While trying to flee to Mexico, Josey attracts a number of people who are wandering and lost who attach themselves to him. Among Josey's followers are an old Indian chief, a Navajo squaw and a mentally unstable young woman and her grandmother. The woman and grandmother are from Kansas, a northern state and home of the soldiers who killed his family, therefore natural enemies of Josey from Missouri.

The two women are heading for a supposed paradise, a ranch left by the grandmother's son at a place called Santo Rio, or Holy River. During the entire journey, Josey Wales kills Union soldiers and bounty hunters who are in the way of his freedom.

When they finally reach Santo Rio, and the broken down ranch house belonging to the women, they encounter Comanche Indians. Josey makes peace with them. His rag tag group of followers band together under his leadership and defend the homestead against Union soldiers. In the end, with the support of the people in the town of Santo Rio, Josey and his former commander agree to peace. The Outlaw Josey Wales has come full circle and has become a man of peace. He has, in fact, heard and answered a call from God, whether he knew it or not.

All three readings today are about hearing the call of God. The first reading is about the call of the prophet Isaiah. While a statesman of great reputation, he is humbled in the awesome presence of God in the Temple. He discovers a profound sense of his own sinfulness. The overwhelming experience leads him to

understand and willingly that accept he is to be the instrument and messenger of God.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about how God's call for messengers is extended to everyone because it is God's grace that makes us who we are, even if we had a sinful past like Paul did.

The Gospel offers another example of how God chooses messengers and apostles. Four fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, with no credentials except their skills at their trade, are called by Jesus to follow him. They are destined to be the core of the group that will preach the Kingdom of God. Peter, like Isaiah in the Temple, and St. Paul, has an overpowering sense of his own sin. Paul calls himself the least of the disciples and testifies to God's grace.

While the movie does not make it clear that Josey Wales is aware of a call from God in the same concrete way as Isaiah, Paul or Peter, he experiences the beginning of the call in his suffering as he prays while he buries his wife and son. His journey to salvation starts with anger, revenge and his escape and these things motivate him on his way.

But during his quest for salvation, he becomes a leader, he puts his life on the line for his group, begins to find love in his heart again and starts living the call of God, the call to peace, the call to community and the call to love.

Just as Isaiah, Peter, Paul and Josey Wales were called by God, we too are called. We are called with God's certain knowledge that we are sinners, that we carry anger, jealousy, other unkind thoughts and possibly the need for revenge in our hearts. Yet, because of God's grace and God's love for us, we too will make the journey to our Santo Rio, our salvation, the Kingdom of God.

Most of us have not suffered the tragedy suffered by Josey Wales. But, each one of us is called to be a leader and a messenger of God. Each of us, as Isaiah, should be ready to answer God's call with "Here I am Lord, send me." Each one of us, like Paul, should be willing to say, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." And finally, like Peter, each one of us should be able to say "Lord, at your command I will lower the nets."

Homily 20040216

3. **"Lent: A Season for Fasting, A Season for Feasting."**

This evening's Gospel speaks of signs; signs that God gives to make known his presence to us. We all expect signs from God and they are indeed present to us in the beauty of nature, in the love of people around us and in the silence of our hearts. God is all around us and within us. But, what signs do we give that we are present to God?

The upcoming Lenten season is the opportune time to give God signs of our love, of our appreciation for all of the gifts that we have been given. It is a time to look at how we live, what we value and the quality of our love for God and neighbor. It is a good time to make needed changes in our lives.

We are called to discern how we might apply the Lenten actions of prayer, alms giving and fasting to make our love known to God and to our neighbor. It is a time to repair relationships and renew ourselves spiritually

We should look more closely at what we pray for during Lent. It is routine to pray for the people and the needs that are close to home and close to our hearts. Why don't we make an effort this year to read the newspaper or watch the news and learn where suffering and injustices are occurring? We could pick several stories each day that strike us as tragic, really try to put ourselves in the shoes of the victims to feel their pain and pray for them.

Alms giving is not necessarily limited to money. Alms giving includes sharing our time and energy. When we give from an excess of money, time or energy, what we give or do might be useful, but when we do without in order to give to someone else, we are giving from our substance. Our giving becomes a gift of ourselves in the truest sense of the word.

Finally, there is another way to look at fasting. Yes, the church calls us to fasting and abstinence. But, to give up meat, I can easily eat lobster instead of steak each Friday. I can give up some excess food on fast days without a great deal of sacrifice. Do you think God really cares if I give up chocolate? Maybe if I contribute what I would have spent on chocolate to help others.

But we might also consider looking at fasting and feasting in conjunction with our attitudes and behavior.

An unknown author wrote "Lent: A Season for Fasting, A Season for Feasting." I am going to read this series of statements. I am sure that we can all find some that apply to us.

- FAST from judging others; FEAST on Christ living within them.
- FAST from harsh words; FEAST on words that build others up.

- **FAST from discontent; FEAST on gratitude.**
- **FAST from anger; FEAST on patience.**
- **FAST from pessimism; FEAST on optimism.**
- **FAST from worry; FEAST on God's care.**
- **FAST from complaining; FEAST on appreciation.**
- **FAST from bitterness; FEAST on forgiveness**
- **FAST from self-concern; FEAST on compassion for others.**
- **FAST from discouragement; FEAST on hope.**
- **FAST from depressing facts; FEAST on uplifting facts.**
- **FAST from suspicion; FEAST on truth.**
- **FAST from weakening thoughts; FEAST on inspiring promises.**
- **FAST from idle gossip; FEAST on purposeful silence.**

If we use Lent well this year, perhaps we can help to change the face of our troubled world by making sacrifices that allow others to experience God's love. We can be the sign of God's love to others.

Homily 20040301 (3-1-2004)

PARABLE ON GENEROSITY

Today's Gospel is one of the most vivid parables Jesus ever spoke, and the lesson is crystal clear--that God will judge us in by our reaction to human need. His judgment does not depend on the knowledge we have amassed, or the fame that we have acquired, or the fortune that we have gained, but on the help that we have given. There are certain things that this parable teaches us about the help that Jesus calls us to give.

The help is in simple things. The things that Jesus identifies--giving a hungry person a meal, or a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger, cheering the sick, visiting the prisoner. These are things that you and I can do. It is not a question of giving away thousands of dollars, or becoming famous philanthropists; it is a case of giving simple help to the people we meet every day. There never was a parable that so opened the way to glory to the average people.

It must be help that has no strings attached or other gain on the part of the giver. Those who helped did not think that they were helping Christ and piling up eternal merit; they helped because they could not stop themselves. It was the natural, instinctive, reaction of the loving heart. However, the attitude of those who failed to help was; "If we had known it was you we would gladly have helped; but we thought it was only some common person who was not worth helping." It is true that there are those who will help if they are given praise and thanks and publicity; but to help like that is not to help, it is to build our own self-esteem. Such help is not generosity; it is disguised selfishness. The help that wins the approval of God is that which is given for nothing but the sake of helping.

Jesus tells us the wonderful truth that all such help given is given to himself, and all such help withheld is withheld from himself. How can that be? If we really wish to delight a parent's heart, if we really wish to move him to gratitude the best way to do it is to help his child. God is the great Father; and the way to delight the heart of God is to help his children, our fellow humans.

There were two men who found this parable true. The one was Francis of Assisi; he was wealthy and high-born and high-spirited. But he was not happy. He felt that life was incomplete. Then one day he was out riding and met a leper, loathsome and repulsive in the ugliness of his disease. Something moved Francis to dismount and fling his arms around this wretched sufferer; and in his arms the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ.

The other was Martin of Tours. He was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for alms. Martin had no money; but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, and Martin gave what he had. He took off his worn and frayed soldier's coat, he cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar. That night he had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus in the midst of them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels said to him, "Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?" And Jesus answered softly, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

When we learn the generosity which without expectation helps people in the simplest things, we too will know the joy of helping Jesus Christ himself.

Homily 20040516 (5-16-2004)

5. JESUS' GIFT OF PEACE

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give.” We all want this gift of peace that Jesus gave us. A sense of peace, peace of mind, sounds pretty good to me. In today’s world, if we could find a good way to market and sell inner peace, we could be very wealthy. The self-help industry thrives on making promises of peace of one kind or another. But, Jesus did not get rich with the peace he promised before his death.

How would we describe the peace we want? The peace we mostly contemplate is the absence of stress. “If things were better at work, I would be OK.” Or, “if I made ten thousand more a year, life would be comfortable.” Or, “if my children would just get their act together, I could relax.” This peace is the peace of no problems.

Sometimes people try to find peace by using drugs, but a drug induced stupor is hardly peace. Others, try to find peace through affluence, but having more tends to create stress, not reduce it. Many people turn to religion to find peace. Churches promote Jesus as the way to find relief from tension, anxiety and freedom from struggle. The disciples might have thought that Jesus was referring to this kind of peace. Do we really understand what kind of peace that Jesus was offering?

What the world calls peace is not the peace that Jesus meant. We typically see peace as a vacuum where tension does not exist. The worldly notion of peace coerces the opposition into silence and destroys dissenting voices and calls it peace.

The peace that Jesus offers is the peace of Shalom. The Hebrew word for peace means much more than the absence of conflict. If we describe peace as absence of conflict, the only truly peaceful place is the cemetery. The peace that Shalom conveys is a peace of having everything right. It is positive well being. It is harmony and wholeness. It is being at one with God, with others and with ourselves.

Jesus had no peace in the way we usually think about peace. He did not have any absence of conflict. He was misunderstood, rejected, abused, humiliated, reviled, betrayed and killed. Jesus did have the peace of knowing that he was doing what the Father called him to do.

He had the peace of giving himself to other people rather than exploiting them for his own benefit. He had the peace of knowing whatever happened; he was in God’s care.

When Jesus calls us to follow him, it is not an easy way. He told his disciples that In this world we face problems and hardships and that if we were to follow him, we would have to pick up our own crosses and deny ourselves.

When we really think about it, the peace that we want does not involve a cross. But, the peace of Jesus is the peace that comes from the cross. The peace

that we envision is a shallow, easy peace. The peace of Jesus is costly . The life of Christ demonstrates that struggle is a pre-requisite to experiencing his peace. "Peace I leave with you," he said. "My peace I give to you. I do not give you what the world gives." The peace of Jesus is the peace with God, in spite of the difficulty of life. If we know that in Christ we are reconciled with God, and if we are growing in reconciliation with other people, we are becoming reconciled with ourselves. This is true peace, the peace that the world cannot give or take away.

If we think about the nature of peace that Jesus gives, then we consider Jesus' last hours in the Garden of Gethsemane; weeping in the garden, watching his disciples sleep, knowing that they would desert him. Knowing what God wanted him to face, the only kind of peace that Jesus could have possibly felt is knowing that he was doing the will of God. Our peace too comes from obedience to the will of God. and can be found in no other way. It is a concept that is difficult to understand.

In Brian Moore's novel, *No Other Life*, the narrator is a priest named Paul Michel, a Canadian missionary serving on an extremely poor Caribbean Island.

He is a teaching priest, not a parish priest and has learned to isolate himself and play it safe. He remembers a time when he was intensely involved in the needs of the people. He says, "I look back now on those days as a time when I achieved a state of happiness that can only be entered into by a total forgetting of oneself. I forgot my failures, my inadequacies and my guilt."

It is a paradox that those who most seek peace in worldly ways are least likely to find true peace. Those who lose themselves in service to others, that forget their own desire for peace, are the ones who have it. This is the nature of Jesus' gift of peace. He offers it to us.

Homily 20040523 (5-23-2004)

6. GIFTS OF EUCHARIST & HOLY SPIRIT

How many of you have had a close relative who died without a will? That can be a real disaster, especially in families where there is a lot to divide and people are worried about getting their fair share. Widespread creation of wills is a fairly recent phenomenon. In Jesus' time, and probably well into the nineteenth century, many people couldn't afford lawyers and when a person was on his or her deathbed, they called the family together. Besides describing how their property would be distributed, they also gave their advice and words of wisdom to their heirs.

Jesus was no different. When he knew he was on his way to death on the cross, he spent a good deal of time trying to transfer his wisdom to his disciples. He also left them and us two great gifts, the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit.

This morning, _____ will be receiving the Eucharist for the first time. We pray that they will be aware that, through the Eucharist, they will recognize that Jesus lives within them and will give them strength and courage to do Jesus' work in their lives.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he could only be in one place at a time. But, because he gave us the gifts of the Holy Spirit and Eucharist, Jesus can be every where all of the time. He promised us he would be with us until the end of the age. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit is called the Comforter and it is comforting for us to know that God is always with us.

But, the word Comforter comes from the Latin word, fortes, and it means brave. It is the Holy Spirit that fills people with strength and courage to continue the work of Christ; building the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. When Jesus gave us the words of the Our Father, he intended that saying this prayer would commit us to doing his work in our lives.

It is Christ's gifts, the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit that empower us to do Jesus' work. Paul describes this well in the portion of his letter to the Ephesians that we just heard. What Paul said in the First Century was true then and it is just as true in our lives today. Paul prayed that we would fully know Christ and fully believe in him. But that belief also entails more than we are often willing to give.

It is one thing to be an admirer of Christ; even non-Christians who acknowledge a historical Christ admire him. But we can only truly believe in Christ when we follow him. That takes a great deal more commitment than being an admirer. Most of his early disciples gave everything they had to follow Christ, even their lives.

Being a follower begins with love, love for the people of God, the Body of Christ. A true follower of Christ cannot show love for Christ without loving his or her fellow human beings. No Church, no matter how orthodox it is, no matter how pure its theology, no matter how beautiful and majestic its liturgy, is not a true church in the real sense of the word if the community is not filled with people who love each other.

A book by Robert Buchanan, called *The Shadow of the Sword*, describes the Chapel of Hate. He describes it as a decaying, crumbling structure in a bleak countryside, overgrown with high thorny weeds. It still possessed a faded sign dedicating the terrible place to Our Lady of Hate. Angry men and women came here to pray for curses on their enemies and other that they hated.

A chapel of hate is grim indeed, and we would think that we would never want to go there. But, do we? We hate the liberals or the conservatives, the radicals or the fundamentalists, the person whose ethnic background, religion or culture is different from ours.

Condemnation, an act that is so much a part of the dark side of human nature, is so far from the love the Christ calls us to. We need to keep reminding ourselves that our love for Christ cannot exist without love for our fellow human beings. Jonathan Swift once said, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

Jesus commanded us "Love one another as I have loved you." This does not mean to love the people that are easy to love, or to love the people that we believe we have to love. Jesus also made that radical statement that we should love our enemies. Only a truly loving humanity can make peace in our troubled world and unite all people.

Homily 20040606 (6-6-2004)

7. TRINITY SUNDAY

Today, the Church celebrates Trinity Sunday, which reminds me of a story about little Johnny. Don't worry, this is not one of the stories about troublesome little Johnny that float around the internet! Johnny came home from his first-grade religious education class and his mother asked him what he learned. Johnny said that he learned about the Holy Trinity. His mother said, "What did you learn?" Johnny said, "Well, there's the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Amen, but the amen "ain't nobody."

This is hardly an adequate description of the Holy Trinity and you can be sure that this story didn't come from a religious education class at Our Lady of Grace.

The Trinity, three distinct persons that at the same time are one, is one of the great mysteries of the Church and it is not something that is completely explainable given our earthly life experience.

The image of God as an elderly Father figure is easy to imagine. There have been many paintings through history that depict God this way. Jesus the Son is also an easy image to envision; again because of art, movies and statues and the knowledge that he became human. But what does the Holy Spirit look like? We heard in the second reading that "the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Although the Spirit has been depicted by the Church as a dove or flames, it is difficult for us to put a face on the Holy Trinity and it is even more difficult to envision the three persons in One.

One possible way to more easily envision the Trinity is explained in a child's book, "Three in One: a picture of God" by Joanne Marxhausen. In the book she explains the Trinity using an apple, so we can, perhaps; also envision the Trinity by using an apple, something that is a part of the human experience.

We all know what an apple is; a tasty fruit that is easily recognized. An apple is made up of 3 parts: the skin, the meaty fruit and the core. It takes all three parts to make up an apple, yet each part alone is apple.

If someone was to peel an apple, and you saw the peelings on the counter you would know it was apple, not something else. If you tasted the delicious meat of the apple you would know that is apple and not something else. And if you saw an apple core lying on the ground, you would know that it is an apple core and not something else. All three parts are uniquely apple all on their own; yet all three make up one apple. So it is with the Trinity: God is one, yet three unique persons, who individually are all God.

The skin of the apple can be compared to God the Father. An apple can never outgrow its skin: when the apple starts out small the skin is small, but it continues to grow and stretch, as the apple gets bigger.

So it is with the love that God the Father has for us. The Father's love for us stretches, much like the skin of an apple, to totally envelop us. We can never outgrow the Father's love for us; His love is like a protective skin that we wear every day.

The sweet meaty fruit of the apple can be compared with God the Son, Jesus. Just as the tasty apple is good for our livelihood and nourishment, so was the Son of God sent to us. He came to show us how to live so that we will obtain eternal salvation. And we have the opportunity to be nourished with his body and blood every day in the Eucharist. Just as an apple a day will keep our body healthy, the Eucharist will keep us spiritually healthy as well.

The core of the apple can be compared to God the Holy Spirit. The apple gets its livelihood and strength from the core that constantly feeds it. In the same way the Holy Spirit is constantly giving us strength and help every day of our lives. Just as the seeds from that core can start a new apple tree, so the Holy Spirit can bring us new life. The apple is an inanimate object that can give us more of a sense of the Trinity. But, as human beings, we are a living representation of the Holy Trinity. The activities of our daily lives can be associated with each of the three persons.

All of the creative and generative activities of our lives can be identified with the Father, who created all life. Whenever we build relationships, create new life, develop our environment, or create objects for our use, we are sharing in the work of God the Father. When we engage in works of compassion, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation, we are sharing in the work of God the Son. We are doing the work of God, the Holy Spirit when we are using inspiration, creativity, imagination and love to enrich our activities that can be associated with the Father and the Son.

Why did God choose to manifest himself in three persons? That is part of the mystery of our faith. Possibly, God became three unique persons in order to share his love for us in so many different ways. And, God's love continues to be shared with us through the Eucharist, our spiritual "apple a day." When we receive the Eucharist we cannot treat it as an antibiotic to cure us of sin. In preparation to receive, it is beneficial to look at how we cooperate in the work of God in our daily lives and ask for help in specific areas where we need guidance, wisdom or strength. It is when we all work in cooperation with God in everything we do, that the Kingdom will truly come.

May almighty God, one God in three persons, bless all of us, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Homily 20040807 (8-7-2004)

8. **THE WAY OF FAITH**

Faith is common theme that runs through today's readings. Faith is important to us and we cannot be whole human beings without it. We were made for faith. Just as we were created with the need for love and the capacity for love, we were created with the need for faith and the capacity for faith. "Faith" is a word that suggests some kind of virtue in itself. "Faith" just sounds right or good. The word has many meanings, however, and faith is understood by different people in different ways. Not everything called faith has equal value or validity.

We should avoid some expressions of faith. "Blind faith," for example, may be a matter of believing something only because someone says it is true. But faith should never be a substitute for thinking. Neither should faith be an attempt to avoid the realities of life, a form of escapism. Avoiding dealing with issues in our lives because we think God will handle them doesn't work. We need to have faith that God will help us confront what we have to. Faith need not be irrational or out of touch with the real world. Faith that cannot survive an encounter with truth or with reality is hardly worthy of our time and attention, much less our life's devotion. Each person's faith is inadequate in one way or another. Who among us does not need a better faith?

Also, faith should not be confused with knowledge. Father O'Malley was preaching on the difference between faith and knowledge. He pointed to Annie and Sean Quinn and their twelve kids sitting in the front pew. He said that Annie knows that the twelve children are hers. Sean has faith that the children are his.

Today we heard the Letter to the Hebrews. St Paul calls us to a greater and deeper faith. The scripture helps us understand this call. Hebrews is not a call for us to enter the way of faith so much as an encouragement for us to remain in the way of faith, to endure in our faith. For whatever reasons, these Christians Paul is writing to are in danger of giving up, of falling back from following Jesus Christ.

Here are people who have found the way of faith, and entered it, but are now about to forfeit the race before finishing it. Paul is upset about this. He is like a parent whose children are forgetting what they have learned and are flirting with danger. He reminds them of how they once were. In the past they had known some kind of persecution. They had endured admirably, nobly. It was their firm faith that had made this possible.

The point is, these Christians had been strong. In the time of crisis they had endured in the way of faith. Paul's words described what they needed to do to persevere.

In a sermon called “The Peril of Ordinary Days,” Edmund Steimle, a Lutheran minister who was a radio preacher between 1955 and 1975, says, “If you are ever tempted to lose faith in God, nine times out of ten it will not be in moments of crisis when action or unusual courage is demanded, but rather in periods which the mystics call ‘dry periods’ - - - the days when nothing much happens and God seems far away and unreal. That is the peril of ordinary days because it is then that it is the easiest thing in the world to lose faith in God.”

In the second reading we hear “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In other words, true faith has a forward look, a future orientation. Later in the reading, Abraham is an example of true faith. Why Abraham? Because in him we see so clearly that faith is primarily a way. Faith is a way of living, a way of moving into the future God has for us.

Too often we make faith a compartment in our heads, a little place where our beliefs are kept. But is faith the sum of our intellectual beliefs? What we believe is very important, but in Scripture faith is more. Sometimes we locate faith in our hearts. Faith is the place where trust is kept. It is like an internal emergency kit; it’s there when you need it. Faith as trust is very important, but in Scripture faith is more.

Faith is a way. It is external as well as internal. Faith is a way of moving through life, a way of living life. Faith is active. It has to do with what moves us. Faith is as much in the hands and feet as in the head and heart. Faith is a way of living.

Jesus did not ask people simply to believe something about him. He didn’t call on them merely to feel good about God in their hearts. Jesus challenged people to follow him. He said, “Follow me,” over and over again. In following him those first believers came to know him as “the way, the truth, and the life.” Through them, and others who have followed, Christ’s call reverberates to our time and place. Haven’t you seen in them that faith is a way?

A retired university chaplain reflects on growing up with an alcoholic parent. He speaks of the difficulty of learning to trust, because of his mother’s terrible illness. He learned early that the only constant in such an environment was change. Always a crisis, always chaos, always the surprise of the unknown. There was a way up and out for him, however. It was a true gift of God’s grace. It came in the person of his grandmother. She provided shelter and security. She offered love, as well as the loving limits of reasonable discipline. “When I was in the second grade,” he says, “she invited me into her life and heart. No one else made such a proposal. But one offer that is true and trustworthy is more than enough.”

In his grandmother the boy found more than trustworthy love. He said “Through the word that became flesh in my grandmother, I was introduced to another, Jesus Christ. He became the truly significant other, who could be trusted.

Grandmother had known him most of her life. He had provided for her, even when her husband's heart failed, leaving her a forty-year-old widow with ten children to raise. Jesus was the forerunner, who went ahead on our behalf. He went all the way. He entered into the heart of God by way of the cross and an empty tomb. He is the sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. He is God's promise and our eternal hope."

Think of all the people, from Abraham to someone's grandmother, who have shown us a better faith. In them we have seen that faith is a way. It is a way of being and of living. It is the Word made flesh. Was there someone, before Jesus, who was like Jesus to you? Give thanks to God for those people. Is this not our calling, too?

9. **LIFE'S REVERSALS**

There is no single or simple answer as to why life is so full of reversals. A person seems to be living a charmed life when suddenly a devastating financial crisis comes. In the midst of this, a health problem arises.

Sometimes we are responsible for life's reversals. For good or bad, we may turn things around ourselves. Nothing is more inspirational than when someone who is far down a destructive path finds the will and courage to turn, retraces his or her steps, and finds a better way. On the other hand, nothing is more tragic than when someone full of promise shifts life into reverse, choosing a downward course.

Sometimes life's reversals are the work of God. An example is in the Gospel parable from Jesus as he tells a story about a dramatic reversal.

It is a story of two men. One was very rich. He dressed in the "purple and fine linen" of royalty and "feasted sumptuously every day." The rich man is anonymous in the parable. Jesus did not name people in his parables, with one exception. The exception is the other man in this parable, a poor beggar named Lazarus. This man lay at the gate and waited for scraps from the rich man's table. Both men died. Lazarus went to the heavenly banquet feast and was given the place of honor right next to Abraham. The rich man went to hell. Now he is on the outside looking in. The two men's earthly roles are reversed in eternity. Jesus' point is that God is in the business of reversing human injustices. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is frequently shown being challenging the rich and blessing the poor.

From the fires of hell, the rich man sees Abraham. He asks Abraham for water and suggests that he send Lazarus to get it! Abraham explains that there is a "great chasm" between him and the rich man that no one can cross, not unlike the chasm that existed in the world between the rich and the poor. At the end of the parable the rich man finally thinks of someone else, his brothers. They must be warned! Send Lazarus to warn them! Abraham says they have been warned already. They have Moses and the prophets and through scripture, - God's truth has been made plain to them. The tormented rich man persists, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." Abraham says if they haven't listened to the scriptures they won't be convinced "even if someone rises from the dead."

There is much that is not said about these two men. Jesus' parables are often streamlined to keep us on track. What we are told is that they represent opposite ends of the human spectrum - - - socially, economically, morally, and spiritually. There is an inequity in this that Jesus cannot accept. One person has a daily feast while he is indifferent to another who starves a few feet away. Jesus is saying that

God will not tolerate such inequities forever. God will see to the reversal of human injustices.

Is it true? Where is such justice? The facts around us don't reflect a balancing out of things. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Maybe divine reversals take place only in eternity.

Hebrew Scripture, however, shows us a God who is not indifferent and works within time and history, a God who has prophets decry the injustices of their own people, a God who does not spare even the Holy City when it turns away from justice and mercy. The New Testament is built on the announcement of God's impending kingdom. Jesus came preaching and teaching, "Behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand." It isn't restricted to the afterlife, but is happening in our world all the time. God is at work in the world to establish the eternal kingdom.

Why, then, do the injustices continue? Why is there so much suffering? If God wants to establish a kingdom, why doesn't it happen? The one thing God will not do is override human freedom.

Our freedom is a part of what it means to be made in God's image. God has chosen not to win in the earthly arena by force or coercion. God's kingdom is the kingdom of love. We are invited to join the cause, to find situations in God's earthly kingdom, to not be indifferent and to spread God's love.. We can give ourselves and our gifts to the facilitating of what will be. We are to work for the reversals for which God works, not to be indifferent and preserve the status quo or worse, stand by and allow suffering and poverty to increase.

Despite the injustices that exist, "there is a tide," as Shakespeare wrote in Julius Caesar, that runs through human affairs. There are persuasive powers of right, goodness, and truth running like currents through human history. They can be opposed, but they cannot be destroyed.

In Jesus' day two-thirds of the world lived in slavery. Yet, even though our own nation's history is tainted by this evil, slavery has always been doomed. Even if it enters history again, it is ultimately doomed. It is not on God's agenda. It is our strong faith, our willingness to follow the example of Jesus, and our resolve not to be indifferent to human suffering around us that will help with God's plan to reverse the injustice and suffering in today's world.

Talk about Swaggart

Story of lost calf

Homily 20041031 (10-31-2004)

10. **STORY OF ZACCHEAUS**

Zaccheaus, as the Gospel story tells us, was a tax collector. In the first century, tax collectors were held in low esteem not only because they were agents of the Roman government, but because they became wealthy by taking as much money as possible from the people. They kept the difference between what the Romans required them to turn in to the treasury and what they actually collected. Most of the first century citizens were poor; so much of the tax collectors' income came from the poor.

It is impossible to know how much Zaccheaus extorted from the poor before he met Jesus. But we do know that after his encounter with Jesus, there was repentance and an offer to give half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back any illegally gotten gains four times over.

This story is another example of God's concern for the poor and suffering, which has been expressed in over 5000 years of Judeo-Christian history.

In the first five books of Hebrew Scripture, the Torah, there are many rules written that are designed to protect the poor. The Hebrew prophets spoke strong warnings against neglect and mistreatment of the poor that God loves so much. If all of the portions of the Gospels about the poor and vulnerable were removed from the Gospels, there would be very little remaining.

It is only fitting that with the election on Tuesday that we consider making choices that are in line with taking care of God's beloved poor.

Unfortunately, neither major political party has a platform that is totally consistent with the teaching of the Church and the teaching of Sacred Scripture. It is not an easy choice.

The Sojourners, a Christian ecumenical social justice organization that lives and works among the poor is in the midst of a campaign called "God is not a Republican or a Democrat." The purpose of their campaign is to encourage people to reflect on and then vote their values, not their favorite political party or the personality of candidates.

Unfortunately, the moral issues in the upcoming election have been confined by politics to abortion, stem cell research and same sex marriage.

Although these are important issues, they are not the only ones that we, as Christians, need to consider. The real evil in abortion is the interference in the creative activity of God. By creative activity of God, I don't just mean the creation of life. God's creativity goes far beyond starting life. God's creativity extends through the entire cycle of human lives where people are given the opportunity to use of their God given gifts to grow into all that God intends them to be.

Concern for life does not end at birth. It extends past birth to natural death. How can we have so much concern for the unborn and not have the same concern for the countless people in our world that are as vulnerable as the unborn; people who don't have enough to eat, reasonable shelter, education or adequate medical care. Famine, war and plain neglect have taken their toll on much of the world's population.

The moral teaching of our Church is that all of us must be concerned for all peoples in the Second Vatican Council document, the Church in the Modern World. In the opening paragraph, the Church identifies itself with all humanity by saying; "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the humans of the world, especially those who are poor and afflicted in any way, are the hope and joy, the grief and anguish of all followers of Christ as well.

Pope Paul the Sixth expanded on this concept after the Second Vatican Council in his encyclical, "On the Development of Peoples." He wrote, "Let each person examine their conscience ... Is he or she prepared to support out of their own pocket works and undertakings organized in favor of the most destitute? Is he or she willing to pay higher taxes so that the public authorities can intensify their efforts in favor of development." He continues by stating "... the superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations."

The politicians have asked us to vote based on whether or not we are better off than we were four years ago. The Church is calling us to base our decisions on whether the community, the nation, and the world are better off than we were four years ago.

The US Council of Catholic Bishops published a document called Faithful Citizenship about this time last year that identified the issues that we as Catholics are called to think about as the election approaches. In summary these ten broad issues are:

- 1. How can we build a safer, better world, respectful of human dignity?**
- 2. How can we protect the weakest, born and unborn?**
- 3. How can we address the fact that 30,000 children die every day and the fact that the younger you are the more likely you are to be poor in our wealthy country?**
- 4. What can we do to help parents raise their children with strong moral values and respect for life?**
- 5. How can we address the growing number of people without affordable health care?**
- 6. How can we eliminate all forms of prejudice and discrimination?**

7. How will our nation promote peace and justice in a world overwhelmed with injustice and poverty?
8. How can all families, communities, organizations and governments work together for the common good and eliminate major world problems?
9. When should our nation use or avoid the use of military force?
10. How can we work with all other nations for greater respect for life, greater human dignity, justice and care for all of God's creation; people and the environment?

If our decision of how to select political candidates is a quick and easy one, we probably have not reflected on all that is at stake. Like Zacchaeus, we need call out to Jesus, we need to let Jesus come into our hearts and homes when he asks, and we need to give some part of our lives to doing the right thing for others, especially the poor and the marginalized.

Homily 20041120 (11-20-2004)

11. **FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING**

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of Christ the King. This is an interesting holiday because it does not celebrate any particular event in salvation history. The Feast was incorporated into the liturgical calendar by Pope Pius the Eleventh in 1925 to counteract atheism, and secularism as well as the nationalism and fascism that was on the rise in Europe. The feast proclaims Christ's sovereignty over all institutions; political, social, and economic.

Christ's kingship is not what usually comes to mind when we think of kings. He certainly was not the messiah that the Jews expected to be in the form of King David --- a mighty warrior.

That kind of king would never have allowed himself to be reviled and tortured prior to his execution. The warrior king would have offered a vigorous defense and tried escape the fate that Jesus allowed himself to be led into; the fate that he endured so that all humanity might achieve salvation.

There is a sharp contrast between the first two readings and the Gospel for today. In the first reading God shows how much love he has for humanity; people of his creation on whom he bestowed a unique human dignity that his other creations do not share. In second Samuel, he gives a mandate to King David, telling David that he should Shepard God's people Israel and be the commander of Israel. We are the modern-day Israel, and Jesus takes the place of David as our sovereign.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians he sings praises to God for delivering God's people from the power of darkness to the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel, we are made aware of the ungodly side of humanity when Jesus' persecutors afford Jesus no human dignity. In fact, the treatment of Jesus is the ultimate assault on human dignity as the earthly life of God-with-us, Emmanuel, is brought to a violent end.

The important question that we need to ask ourselves is; "How should the events in the readings affect our lives?" We are baptized priest, prophet and king. Like Jesus, we are all created in God's image.

Although Jesus is the supreme sovereign, we are called by our baptism to share in Jesus' kingship by caring for others as Jesus cares for us. Jesus set the ultimate example as he hung dying on the cross. He showed compassion for a sinner, the criminal who was being executed for his ill deeds. This man asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. Jesus did better than that, he took the man with him.

There is a story that some of you may be familiar with. A young boy was walking home through a park after attending a Sunday school class. Somehow, he could not stop thinking about the lesson for that day on Jesus' parable of the last judgment.

What impressed him the most was when the teacher said, “When you give something to another person, you are really giving it to Jesus.

As he continued walking through the park, he noticed an elderly woman sitting on a bench. She looked lonely and hungry. So he sat down next to her and took from his pocket a chocolate bar that he was saving and offered some to her. She accepted with a smile. He liked her smile so much that after she ate her piece of chocolate, he gave her more. This time they exchanged smiles and, for a while, they sat together in the silence, just smiling at each other.

Finally, the boy got up to leave. As he began to walk away, he turned, ran back to the bench, and gave the woman a big hug. She gave him her very best smile. When he arrived home, his mother saw a big smile on his face and asked, “What made you so happy today.” He said, “I shared my chocolate bar with Jesus and she has a great smile.”

Meanwhile, the elderly woman returned to her little apartment that she shared with her sister. “You’re all smiles,” said the sister. “What made you so happy today?” To which she replied, “I was sitting in the park eating a chocolate bar with Jesus. And, you know, he looks a lot younger than I expected.”

We too are called to be Jesus to others. Unfortunately human behavior has not changed much since the first century and some of the societal problems that existed then are still with us today. Modern men and women have done little more to affirm and promote human dignity. At this time there are millions of people, 35 million in the United States, the wealthiest country in the world, who cannot fully realize their God given human dignity because they are entrapped in the vicious cycle of poverty.

Some of the other affronts to human dignity suffered by those in poverty are inhuman working and living conditions, unjust wages, poor quality education, and violence and fear in poorer neighborhoods.

Most Catholics will tell you they are pro-life. But many people seem unaware of the value of life after birth occurs. How can we see God’s creation in the unborn and often overlook it in the born, many of whom are just as vulnerable as fetal life?

Jesus was willing to take care of a man who was a criminal. Are we willing to meet our baptismal obligation as people who share in Jesus’ kingship and be Jesus to others whether they are friends or strangers, people we like or people we don’t care to like? We are the body of Christ and may we all pray that we make a real effort to live up to our calling every day of our lives.

Homily 20041128 (11-28-2004)

12. **FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

Today is the First Sunday of Advent. It is the beginning of the Church's liturgical year. The word Advent means come. Today's readings suggest much more than the coming of a new liturgical year. The readings we heard weave together a call to be prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ and the vision of hope for a world that lives in peace and harmony. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah looks forward to a time when all people from all nations come together in peace, when they shall walk in the light of the Lord.

The second reading calls us to put aside all sinful behavior, to rise above sinful tendencies and to put on Christ. It is not enough just to avoid sinning, but we also must act towards others and towards God the Father as Christ did during his earthly ministry. St. Paul also reminds us to be ready for the coming of Christ.

The Gospel also warns us to be prepared for judgment at the end time; a time that God only knows. So, Scripture describes God's vision for a time of peace, what we need to do to live in God's light and a warning that we know not the time of the coming of the Day of Judgment.

Advent is a time for hope and preparation. Not only preparation for the coming of Christ on the final day, but preparation for the birth of Christ at Christmas and preparation for all of the events in our lives when Christ comes to us through other people or experiences. Judgment Day is not something that we need to worry about as long as we work at putting on Christ every day.

The world that we live in today is hardly the one described by Isaiah in the first reading. War and violence is all around us. There is war between nations, war between religions, violence in our streets and violence in families and other relationships. It is becoming more and more obvious that peace can't be won by armies. It can only be won by people respecting each other, accepting each other, and caring about each other. It is easy to despise people we don't know, but hate becomes much more difficult when we get to know people; when we understand that all are created by the same God and that although we have differences, we are all more alike than different.

It seems overwhelming to think about bringing peace to the world we live in. But the key comes from Mother Theresa. She was once asked how she hoped to solve the problems of the multitudes of suffering in India. She responded that she loves the person she is with at the time. We too can build peace, love, and understanding, one person at a time.

I would like to tell you a story that I heard recently. A young boy was walking home through a park after attending a religious education class. Somehow, he could not stop thinking about the lesson for that day on Jesus' parable of the last judgment.

What impressed him the most was when the teacher said, "When you give something to another person, you are really giving it to Jesus.

As he continued walking through the park, he noticed an elderly woman sitting on a bench. She looked lonely and hungry. So he sat down next to her and took from his pocket a chocolate bar that he was saving and offered some to her. She accepted with a smile. He liked her smile so much that after she ate her piece of chocolate, he gave her more. This time they exchanged smiles and, for a while, they sat together in the silence, just smiling at each other.

Finally, the boy got up to leave. As he began to walk away, he turned, ran back to the bench, and gave the woman a big hug. She gave him her very best smile. When he arrived home, his mother saw a big smile on his face and asked, "What made you so happy today." He said, "I shared my chocolate bar with Jesus and she has a great smile."

Meanwhile, the elderly woman returned to her little apartment that she shared with her sister. "You're all smiles," said the sister. "What made you so happy today?" To which she replied, "I was sitting in the park eating a chocolate bar with Jesus. And, you know, he looks a lot younger than I expected."

We too can be Jesus to others and let others be Jesus to us. We can replace difficult relationships all around us with smiles and love. We can be healers. We can truly put on Jesus.

There are so many examples in this community, like St. Vincent de Paul which touches so many lives. We also had a parish Thanksgiving meal where many parishioners sat down and broke bread with loaves and fishes clients. Jesus is alive and at work in many families and friendships. Some of you are aware that Deacon Bill and I work as chaplains in the Apostleship of the Sea where we minister to seafarers who work on the ships that dock in Port Canaveral. On Thanksgiving morning we had a service for the seafarers, mostly Catholics from the Philippines.

About a dozen members of this parish, spanning three generations, came with Filipino food and fellowship for the seafarers. They brought a bit of home to men and women that are so far from home and gave up their holiday morning to do it. There are many examples of people in this parish reaching out to one another.

We each face situations in our lives every day when we can show love and therefore be Jesus to those around us. Loving creates a ripple effect and can reach many when we show it to one. Just saying hello and smiling may make a person's day, and they may in turn touch someone else and it can go on and on.

As the First Sunday of Advent is New Years Day in the calendar of the church, it is an appropriate time for all of us to make a resolution to let Jesus come to be more present in our lives and to be Christ to all come in contact with. We can truly be messengers of the hope that only Jesus can give.

Homily 20041225 (12-25-2004)

13. **BETHLEHEM – House of Bread (of Life)**

Have you ever been to Bethlehem? In England, in 1247, a new hospital was named St. Mary of Bethlehem. It is a good name for a hospital - - - warm, comforting, peaceful. Two centuries later, it became a hospital for the mentally ill. Instead of being a place of quietness and hope it became a place of disorder, confusion, and terrible sounds. With the passage of time names are often shortened, and the hospital came to be called simply “Bethlehem.” Now, if you say “Bethlehem” as the English do, it becomes almost a two-syllable word: “Beth-lem.” Gradually it came to be called, not “Beth-lem,” but “Bedlam.” This reference to the old hospital is the actual derivation of the word “bedlam” as it is used today.

It is easily said that there is a good deal of bedlam in our world. There may be a good bit of it in our lives around Christmas-time. It is amazing how rushed and crazy we can become in our preparations to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. We all need to ask ourselves what is the source of bedlam in our lives. The old English hospital went from “Bethlehem” to “Bedlam,” but most of us need to get from bedlam to Bethlehem.

Have you ever been to Bethlehem in the Holy Land? Bethlehem is a little city only five miles south of Jerusalem. It overlooks the main highway to Hebron and Egypt. It sits in the Judean highlands, about 2500 feet in altitude. It was a walled city. Many of its narrow streets, lined with substantially-built, flat-roofed houses, reveal how the prosperous settlement may have looked at the time Mary and Joseph sought shelter there.

Today the population is predominantly Palestinian Christian. There are also Muslims living in Bethlehem, but very few Jews. Bethlehem is an Arab town. Its focal point is Manger Square. There is the Church of the Nativity, begun by Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. The church was built over a hillside grotto believed to be the site of Jesus’ birth. Inns often had hillside grottos, or caves, for their stables. Do you know what “Bethlehem” means? It means “house of bread,” or “house of food.” Our lives need the nourishment of Bethlehem. Bethlehem gave the world the “Bread of life.”

What does it mean, spiritually, to go to Bethlehem? It means to hear the heavenly announcement that because of a humble, apparently ordinary, birth a new possibility for peace has been opened up for the world. The Gospel proclaimed, there was a multitude of heavenly beings with the angel, and they praised God: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” To go to Bethlehem is to know that at the center of all things is the God of peace. It is to know that God has the last word and that it is a word of peace. Beyond all our bedlam - - - wars and international insecurity, interpersonal conflict and struggles in our souls - - - God’s peace endures.

For twenty-two years in the late 1800’s one of the century’s most gifted preached graced the pulpit of Trinity Church in Boston. Before the American Civil

War, Brooks had denounced slavery as American's greatest evil. During the war, on the battlefield, he ministered to soldiers on both sides of the conflict. In December of 1865, at age thirty, Phillips Brooks made his first visit to the Holy Land. He had wanted to go for some time, but the Civil War had made it impossible. He arrived in Jerusalem on Christmas Eve. He and a few others rode horses down to Bethlehem and joined the gathering in Manger Square. Three years later, Brooks wrote down his reflections on that experience. He gave the lines to the church organist to set to music, thinking the children of the church might enjoy singing them. Those verses will outlive everything else Brooks said or did:

**“O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.”**

What is the secret of peaceful people? It is not that there is no bedlam in their lives. The same sorts of things tend to happen to all of us. We all live with a mixture of hopes and fears. Perhaps inner peace comes from the knowledge that, whatever happens, God's peace has the last word. God's peace came to life in the little town of Bethlehem. One was born over 2000 years ago in whom our highest hopes are fulfilled and our deepest fears relieved.

I would like to share a story of another journey to Bethlehem. On Christmas, during the Second World War, an English soldier was on duty, It had been his tradition to go to Church with his family on Christmas, but he was serving in a remote suburb of London so it was not possible. Instead, he set out to go to church with some of his army buddies.

As they were walking along the main road, they came upon an old gray stone building with the word Orphanage carved above the doors. They decided to see what kind of celebration was going on inside, so they knocked at the door. A matron answered the door and explained that the children here lost their parents during the German bombing of London.

The soldiers went inside just as the children were tumbling out of bed. There was no Christmas tree in the corner. There were no presents anywhere. The soldiers moved around the room wishing the children Merry Christmas and giving them gifts of whatever they had in their pockets; a stick of chewing gum, a life saver, a small coin, a pencil, a pocket knife, a good luck charm.

The soldier got his buddies together to leave and then noticed a little boy alone in the corner who reminded him of his nephew at home. He went up to the little boy and said, “What do you want for Christmas?” The boy replied, “Will you hold me?” The soldier, with tears overflowing in his eyes, picked up the little boy in his arms and just held him very close.” The soldier made it to Bethlehem.

Have you ever been to Bethlehem?

Homily 20041226 (12-26-2004)

14. **A CHRISTMAS STORY**

Society has made Christmas into a holiday of nice music and postcard perfect scenes of beautiful decorations and just enough snow to set the proper festive mood. Although a white Christmas is not likely part of the holiday in most of Florida or the Philippines, it is part of the sanitized image of Christmas. Even the music sanitizes Christmas; the little Lord Jesus no crying does he make. Can you believe that? All newly-born infant's cry. It is the only way they can communicate. Even the stable was sanitized, in the Christmas story it was said to be warm and clean. Yet anyone who has been around livestock knows no stable is clean and Bethlehem nights, since the city is at a higher altitude, can be very cool.

“Put Christ back into Christmas,” is an expression that we all have heard. But, we also need to put Herod back into Christmas as well. Jesus was not born into a perfect world. Joseph had friends and relatives in Bethlehem, and it was more than there being no room at the inn. Family and friends were showing their moral outrage because Joseph showed up with his pregnant girlfriend. Jesus was born into a society that was being oppressed by the Roman Empire and Herod started plotting to kill Jesus before he was even born. The little family was forced to flee to Egypt for their safety when Herod started to kill male infants in hope that he would eventually get Jesus who was a real threat to the First Century power structure.

Jesus is still a threat to those who dominate today's power structure. The world that Jesus was born into is not much different than the world today two thousand years later. Children are still born into poverty, people are afraid for their lives, and the world is still being run by the greedy and cruel. Herod is alive and well in today's world.

But, Jesus did not get born into the world because it was a perfect place. If the world were perfect, his mission on earth would have been unnecessary. Jesus was born into poverty and a world that was in such a sorry state because his message was needed so badly. He came as a human so that he could show all of humanity how to live and how to love and to prove that God's light is alive and well in a world socially, economically and politically controlled by the likes of Herod.

Yet, we hope that we as individuals and as families can make a difference just as the courageous little family did in the opening years of the First Century. I would like to tell you a story of two families that was first told about 150 years ago by a fifteen-year-old boy:

“It was Christmas Eve 1881. I was fifteen years old and feeling like the world had caved in on me because there just hadn't been enough money to buy me the rifle that I'd wanted for Christmas. We did the chores early that night for some reason. I just figured Pa wanted a little extra time so we could read the Bible. After supper was over I took my boots off and stretched out in front of the fireplace and waited for Pa to get down the old Bible.

“I was still feeling sorry for myself and, to be honest, I wasn't in much of a mood to read Scriptures. But Pa didn't get the Bible; instead, he bundled up again and went outside.

“Soon Pa came back in. It was a cold clear night out and there was ice in his beard. "Come on, Matt," he said. "Bundle up good, it's cold out tonight." I was really upset then. Not only wasn't I getting the rifle for Christmas, now Pa was dragging me out in the cold, and for no reason that I could see, so I got up and put my boots back on and got my cap, coat, and mittens.

“Ma gave me a mysterious smile as I opened the door to leave the house. Something was up, but I didn't know what.

“Outside, I became even more dismayed. There in front of the house was the work team, already hitched to the big sled. Whatever it was we were going to do wasn't going to be a quick, little job. We never hitched up this sled unless we were going to haul a big load. Pa was already up on the seat, reins in hand. I reluctantly climbed up beside him. The cold was already biting at me. Pa pulled the sled around the house and stopped in front of the woodshed. He got off and I followed. "I think we'll put on the high sideboards," he said. "Here, help me." The high sideboards! It had been a bigger job than I wanted to do with just the low sideboards on, but whatever it was we were going to do would be a lot bigger if the high sideboards were on the wagon.

“After we had exchanged the sideboards, Pa went into the woodshed and came out with an armload of wood---the wood I'd spent all summer hauling down from the mountain, and then all fall sawing into blocks and splitting.

"Pa," I asked, "what are you doing?" "You been by the Widow Jensen's lately?" he asked. The Widow Jensen lived about two miles down the road. Her husband had died a year or so before and left her with three children, the oldest being eight. "Yeah," I said, "Why?" "I rode by just today," Pa said. "Little Jake was out digging around in the woodpile trying to find a few chips. They're out of wood, Matt.

“That was all he said and then he turned and went back into the woodshed for another armload of wood. I followed him. We loaded the sled so high that I began to wonder if the horses would be able to pull it.

“Finally, Pa called a halt to our loading, then we went to the smoke house and Pa took down a big ham and a side of bacon. He handed them to me and told me to put them in the sled and wait. When he returned he was carrying a sack of flour over his right shoulder and a smaller sack of something in his left hand. "What's in the little sack?" I asked. "Shoes. They're out of shoes. Little Jake just had gunnysacks wrapped around his feet when he was out in the woodpile this morning. I got the children a little candy too. It just wouldn't be Christmas without a little candy."

“We rode to Widow Jensen's pretty much in silence. I tried to think through what Pa was doing. We didn't have much by worldly standards. Of course, we did

have a big woodpile, though most of what was left now was still in the form of logs that I would have to saw into blocks and split before we could use it. We also had meat and flour, so we could spare that, but I knew we didn't have any money, so why was Pa buying them shoes and candy? Really, why was he doing any of this? Widow Jensen had closer neighbors than us; it shouldn't have been our concern. We came in from the blind side of the Jensen house and unloaded the wood as quietly as possible, and then we took the meat and flour and shoes to the door.

"Widow Jensen opened the door and let us in. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The children were wrapped in another and were sitting in front of the fireplace by a very small fire that hardly gave off any heat at all. Widow Jensen fumbled with a match and finally lit the lamp. "We brought you a few things, Ma'am," Pa said and set down the sack of flour. I put the meat on the table. Then Pa handed her the sack that had the shoes in it. She opened it hesitantly and took the shoes out one pair at a time. There was a pair for her and one for each of the children---sturdy shoes, the best, shoes that would last.

"I watched her carefully. She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling and then tears filled her eyes and started running down her cheeks. She looked up at Pa like she wanted to say something, but it wouldn't come out.

"We brought a load of wood too, Ma'am," Pa said. He turned to me and said, "Matt, go bring in enough to last awhile. Let's get that fire up to size and heat this place up." I wasn't the same person when I went back out to bring in the wood. I had a big lump in my throat and as much as I hate to admit it, there were tears in my eyes too. In my mind I kept seeing those three kids huddled around the fireplace and their mother standing there with tears running down her cheeks with so much gratitude in her heart that she couldn't speak.

"My heart swelled within me and a joy that I'd never known. I had given at Christmas many times before, but never had it made so much difference.

"I soon had the fire blazing and everyone's spirits soared. The kids started giggling when Pa handed them each a piece of candy and Widow Jensen looked on with a smile that probably hadn't crossed her face for a long time. She finally turned to us. "God bless you," she said. "I know the Lord has sent you. The children and I have been praying that he would send one of his angels to spare us."

"In spite of myself, the lump returned to my throat and the tears welled up in my eyes again. I'd never thought of Pa in those exact terms before, but after Widow Jensen mentioned it, I could see that it was probably true. I was sure that a better man than Pa had never walked the earth.

"Tears were running down Widow Jensen's face again when we stood up to leave. Pa took each of the kids in his big arms and gave them a hug. They clung to him and didn't want us to go. I could see that they missed their Pa, and I was glad that I still had mine. At the door Pa turned to Widow Jensen and said, "The Mrs. wanted me to invite you and the children over for Christmas dinner tomorrow. The turkey will be more than the three of us can eat. We'll be by to get you about eleven.

It'll be nice to have some little ones around again. Matt, here, hasn't been little for quite a spell."

"Widow Jensen nodded and said, "Thank you. I don't have to say, "'May the Lord bless you,' I know for certain that He will."

"Out on the sled I felt a warmth that came from deep within and I didn't even notice the cold. When we had gone a ways, Pa turned to me and said, "Matt, I want you to know something. Your ma and I have been tucking a little money away here and there all year so we could buy that rifle for you, but we didn't have quite enough. Then yesterday a man who owed me a little money from years back came by to make things square. Your ma and I were real excited, thinking that now we could get you that rifle, and I started into town this morning to do just that. But on the way I saw little Jake out scratching in the woodpile with his feet wrapped in those gunnysacks and I knew what I had to do.

"Son, I spent the money for shoes and a little candy for those children. I hope you understand."

"I understood very well, and I was so glad Pa had done it. Now the rifle seemed very low on my list of priorities.

"For the rest of my life, whenever I saw any of the Jensens, or split a block of wood, I remembered. Pa had given me much more than a rifle that night; he had given me the best Christmas of my life."

So the story that began in a smelly barn in Bethlehem did not end on the cross at Calvary. Instead it continues in our lives, in our holy families, and it is what we do in Christ's name that makes the post card Christmas scenes and idyllic Christmas Carols come true in the lives of others. It is Christ's light shining through us that illuminates the dark world we live in where Herod is unfortunately alive and well.

Homily 20051211 (12-11-2005)

15. **TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS**

We Catholics are people of signs, symbols, rituals and traditions. One of the greatest signs that we have been given in Scripture is John's foretelling of Jesus. Some people believed him, some didn't. The Pharisees and the people of the priestly class were very interested in who John was and why he was baptizing people. In the Jewish tradition, converts needed ritual cleansing but not those who were already Jewish. John was baptizing anyone who asked; Jews and Gentiles alike.

By Jewish tradition, any male who was born into the priestly tribe was automatically a priest and those who were not could never become a priest. Because John's father was a priest, therefore John was a priest.

When word got around that this hermit who kept to himself, ate insects and wore animal skins was baptizing, inquiring minds wanted to know! As it is today, members of the religious orthodoxy were skeptical of anything new and different and the First Century religious leaders were skeptical of John.

Imagine that you are in the Melbourne Mall and you are approached by a homeless person known to live in the wilds of West Melbourne, dressed in rags and rumored to eat insects. This man who you think is acting crazy comes up to you and starts preaching about the coming of the Messiah. How much credibility would he have with you? It would probably be your instinct to write him off as a mentally ill person.

This was the reaction of the religious establishment that went out to see what John was up to. But, we know today that they were wrong. They missed a very important sign.

We too miss important signs while focusing on things that are not so important. I recently received an e-mail with a picture of a Christmas tree and a caption that said it is not a Hanukah Bush, it is not a Kwanza Shrub, it is not an Allah Branch, it is not a Holiday Hedge, it is a Christmas Tree. But how can we be so self-righteous about a symbol that we borrowed from the pagans. We are a multi-cultural and multi-religious world and nation. Why can't the tree be a symbol of life for whomever claims it?

Then there is the controversy over whether we should say "Happy Holidays" or "Merry Christmas"

As for what we should be wishing people, it does not seem like Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas expresses true Christian sentiment. Christmas is meant to celebrate the coming of the Christ child. You can bet that the first Christmas wasn't too merry for the Christ child and his family, freezing in a dirty stable with farm animals! But it was a blessed event. We have made Christmas into a big commercial party that is an economic reward for the retail industry. The retail industry and the greeting card industry certainly have something to be merry

about, and the people that have jobs because of Christmas have something to rejoice about!

But the true meaning of Christmas isn't the party and the gift giving frenzy. It is the celebration of Christ being born again with us, in our hearts. The focus should not be on the gifts we receive or the gifts that we give to others. The greatest gift that we as individuals can give Jesus is to follow his command to love one another. Whether we say Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays does not affect the quality of Christ's love. Whatever we say is a gift to another if it is sincerely said with love.

It would be wonderful if everyone belonged to the same church and held the same beliefs. It would be wonderful if everyone was a Christian.

But it is not our job to judge how other people believe, but to recognize that every sincerely practiced faith brings people closer to the same God and we should be truly grateful for that. And a sincere and warm Happy Holiday is a greater gift of Christ's love than a perfunctory Merry Christmas. A more appropriate wish would be for a Blessed Christmas or a Blessed holiday.

The sign that our society seems to measure Christmas by is retail sales. But what do retail sales have to do with the coming of Christ? The first reading from Isaiah gives us other signs that are more relevant to such a holy day.

How are we doing with bringing glad tidings to the poor? How are we doing with healing the broken hearted? How are we doing with proclaiming liberty to captives? By looking at our troubled world, the answer has to be, "not very well."

As we continue living the season of Advent, may we make ourselves ready for the rebirth of Christ's love in our hearts and the desire to share that love with others. May we have the wisdom to see and do what is truly important and not be side tracked from doing God's work by the unimportant signs, symbols and traditions. It should be our prayer that all of us have a deep, spiritual Advent experience that will lead us to a truly blessed and joy-filled Christmas. If we also have a Merry Christmas, that is a bonus.

Homily 20060306 (3-6-2006)

16. **FOUR PLAYERS IN OUR SOCIETY**

There are four players or groups of players in today's Gospel that reflect the realities that exist two thousand years later in our society.

First there is Jesus who listens to God, does God's will and ignores the barriers put in front of him to prevent doing the right thing. Jesus set himself on a collision course with the Pharisees and with the Romans by challenging the status quo of the day. His mission is clearly defined in Isaiah. Jesus said that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed."

Secondly, the man born blind is, in a sense, the symbol of all of us, but particularly the poor, the captives and the suffering. It was thought by first century Jews that illness came from sins committed in the womb or from the sins of the parents. We know today that this is not true unless the parents have engaged in substance abuse. Yet, there are many who are born into a cycle of poverty and suffering through no fault of their own. And many of us suffer from spiritual blindness where we look after our own self-interests at times instead of denying ourselves to help others as Jesus did. When the man born blind was healed, it was a spiritual healing as well as a physical healing as the Gospel tells us that he began to follow Jesus.

Third, there were the parents who were afraid to stand up for their son because of the threat of excommunication. That meant that they would have no friends or livelihood because they would be banished from community life. How of us are afraid to get involved where there is injustice because of the social and economic ramification it may have for us?

Finally, there are the Pharisees who put many minute laws above love and thought that they were above the law themselves. We still have Pharisees today, even within the church community. A good example right here in our own diocese is a newsletter called the Orlando Truth.

They are the self-proclaimed guardians of orthodoxy in the diocese and lash out at clergy, religious, and lay people with outrageous character assassination while remaining anonymous and cowardly, hiding behind a post office box.

They are hypocritically supportive of the magisterium, the teaching authority of the church. They condemn "smorgasbord Catholics" who pick and chose to follow doctrine that they agree with and disregard what they don't agree with. Yet, they support the war in Iraq, which the Pope begged us not to start. They support capital punishment, which the Pope has come down against to the point of removing from the catechism the statement that the death penalty is acceptable in extreme cases.

On the other hand, several months ago, they accused the church of “doing too much pastoral work,” which is the mission of Jesus and the mission of his disciples, which includes all of us.

In the past weeks news, the Supreme Court has taken up the issue of displaying the Ten Commandments and other religious images in public buildings. There were demonstrators on both sides of the issue in front of the Supreme Court in Washington. A leading force among the atheists suggested that people should run a black marker through “in God we trust” on paper money. I wonder if she is right, absolutely not because we shouldn’t trust in God, but because as a society we don’t show that we trust God by putting the mission of Jesus first in our lives.

We were once a society that did great things for people here and abroad. There are so many examples of where we are as a society that don’t reflect Jesus’ mission. There has been a suggestion in the social security debate that black Americans should get higher payments than Caucasian Americans because their life expectancy is shorter. An analysis shows that the reason for the lower life expectancy is a high infant mortality rate and high rate of death by violence among young black males. As a society we need to take steps to fix the system; in this case provide better pre-natal care and decent living conditions and food, not apply a band-aid at the end of life!

How do you think Jesus would regard the budget currently under debate that provides more tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans while cutting programs for nutrition, education, seniors, law enforcement, veterans and the environment to name a few. When it comes to displaying religious objects in public, we are a Christian country. When it comes to the mission of Jesus, we are walking backwards.

We were once the most loved nation in the world because we were there to do the right thing for others. Now we spend less per capita on foreign aid than any other first world country.

Several months ago there was a whole page of letters to the editor in Florida Today saying that we should not help the tsunami victims because they were Muslims. The writers said to let the terrorists help them. I know our community was very generous in donating to the relief effort. I was astonished during the mission this past week when Sr. Bernadette said that she heard on the news that Nigerians are not inoculating their children against polio because they are afraid that the vaccine is poison and that there is an American plot to wipe out their children. Of course this is nonsense, but this is just another indication of a serious decline of the world view of our country.

We have recently brought this image on ourselves by behaving in such a way that it appears to the rest of the world that when there is a choice, we will always put our own self interests above those of humanity and the mission of Jesus.

There are those Christians who believe that wealth comes because they are being blessed by God and that people who are poor are cursed by God. Mother Theresa stated "Poverty is not created by God, but by you and me because we don't share." That sharing won't happen in significant quantity until our spiritual blindness is healed and we to embark, whole heartedly, on Jesus' mission.

For the remainder of Lent, we might want to reflect on how we are like Jesus, the man born blind, the parents and the Pharisees and how we can better carry out the mission of Jesus in our lives and how we might bring others to become dedicated to that mission.

Homily 200060326 (3-26-2006)

17. **FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT**

God so loved the world that he gave his only son. So what does that mean to us? Do we say, "God, you are a great guy, thank you very much" and go on doing what we are doing? Can we love likewise? Isn't that what God hopes we will do in return?

Where do we spend our love? That is certainly a fitting question to ask ourselves on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. The Gospel also speaks to light and darkness. Unfortunately, there is so much darkness around us today, in our world, in our own country and probably in our neighborhoods. One of the most sinful areas of darkness is that of child poverty, which has reached shocking proportions in our own country.

According to which numbers you care to believe, one out of every four or five children in the United States lives below the poverty level. The US Council of Catholic Bishops puts the number at 26.9%, one of the highest percentages among industrialized nations.

I recently read an article about Val who is a young single mother living in a large city. She has two children Denise, a pre-schooler, and Stephen, in kindergarten. Val is a joyous woman who loves life and her family. But her life is that of a survivor.

She and her children live on the \$1200 Val earns each month from two part-time jobs. Rent is \$850 a month. The rest of her income has to pay for food, medical, clothing, diapers, transportation, laundry and everything else. Trapped between her low income and rising rents, Val faces the terrible dilemma of "paying the rent or feeding the kids." She uses the local food bank and weekly community church suppers to supplement her family's food needs.

Yet the struggle to balance rent with other basic needs is not what causes Val grief. Her sorrow comes from watching her children be deprived of simple pleasures:

- No money for gifts means not going to birthday parties of friends, cutting off important social contacts.
- Getting a pet would cost far too much.
- Val can't afford dance lessons for Denise, gymnastics classes for Stephen, swimming lessons, or other activities that many families take for granted.
- School trips are beyond reach, and of course holidays are out of the question.

Some people react to stories such as Val's with statements such as "people shouldn't have children if they can't afford to raise them." But, Stephen and Denise

are real and we can't be like the Pharisees and their followers and condemn children for what we judge to be the sins of their parents.

As Christians, we find child poverty to be morally unacceptable. Throughout scripture, there are references to the importance treating children properly. Hebrew Scripture repeatedly calls for the proper treatment of widows and orphans. In Christian Scripture, Jesus welcomed and blessed children and called his disciples to act as children in receiving the word of God. Jesus tells his disciples; "Whoever receives one child . . . in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me". This parallels the story of the last judgment, where we learn that in serving "the least among us," we serve the Lord; this parable insists that our judgment depends on our response to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked. In our day the "orphans and widows" include poor children and single parents; the "least of these" include hungry and deprived children.

Pope John Paul II sums up the teaching of the Catholic church in one statement from his document *Familiaris Consortio*, he says, "In the Christian view, our treatment of children becomes a measure of our fidelity to the Lord himself." (repeat) So, as Christians and as Catholics and really as humans, we are called to shine the light on this dark area of child poverty and do something to help reduce the suffering of our brothers and sisters. Although it is a large problem, each of us can play a part in the solution.

The solution begins by recognizing the seriousness of the problem by all of us and by reflecting that in our prayer life. We can all bring child poverty to the attention others. The apostle John writes in his first letter, "If any one has the world's goods and sees someone in need, yet closes their heart, how does God's love abide in such a one?" The world's goods include both our money and our time, which we could give to organizations that help children and families. There are community service organizations that exist to benefit children. But what we do as individuals obviously is not enough.

We are beginning the run up to the elections in November. We need to listen to what the politicians are saying about where children fall in their priorities so that we will be able to vote wisely. We also need to let them know through letters, petitions, emails, phone calls and letters to the editors that child poverty is one of the most serious moral issues our country is facing. We need to say that we want to see action towards it's solution in the political process.

God so loved the world, he gave us his only son, can we do likewise by loving all of his children the way Jesus did?

Homily 20060723 (7-23-2006)

18. **CYCLE B 16th ORDINARY**

The first reading from the prophet Jeremiah, as indicated by the opening word, woe --- a sign of impending doom in Scripture, presents a scathing indictment of the leaders of the time. Jeremiah was prophesizing, probably around the year 600 BC, a time of great political turmoil in the Middle East. Within the Southern Kingdom of Judah, there was much infidelity to the laws of God and the kings, the shepherds of the people, were not living up to their responsibilities to the people. The people of Judea were also much divided into factions. Jeremiah was likely speaking against Zedekiah who could not withstand the faction of Judea who want to provoke King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who ultimately conquered Jerusalem and then the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Jews were forced into captivity in Babylon and brutal slavery.

There is a misguided notion among some Catholics that Hebrew Scripture has been made obsolete by Christian Scripture. As Catholics we know this is not true because the first reading is always from Hebrew Scripture except during the Easter season when the first reading is from Acts. Hebrew Scripture continues to speak directly to Christians. Although from Jeremiah's perspective, he is probably looking forward to a more immediate reunification of the Jewish people with their land, as Christians we can easily visualize Jesus Christ as the shepherd that comes to lead us.

Unfortunately, we have not learned much as people in the past 2500 years. We still have factions that polarize the people and politicians and other government officials who are not good shepherds of ALL of the people. There are those who believe that the church should not be involved in politics. I agree that the church should not be involved in partisan politics or endorse specific candidates. But, since the time of the prophets and throughout the history of the Church, religious leaders have raised the important issues of the day and the important issues of today still need to be raised by the Church. We have uncountable moral issues in the world and in our own country.

One only has to take a look around us, watch TV news or read the papers. Our popular cultural is scary. Movies and music are full of violence, promiscuity, and portray the successful people as those who have money, power and possessions. The divorce rate is around 50%, both in the population and among Catholics. People believe that they have to exercise the constitutional right to own weapons to defend themselves. Drugs run rampant. What is wrong with this picture? Why have we as Americans who have a history of being good and generous people let our situation go so far?

Unfortunately, there is a lot more to the sad picture that is not obvious to us. According to the US Council of Catholic Bishops, the child poverty rate in the United States has grown to over 25%, the worst among first world nations. Elderly

people who have worked hard all their lives to do the best they could for themselves and for their children are having to make decisions they shouldn't have to make; between life-saving medication and life-saving food. Our educational system, once one of the best in the world has been bypassed by many other countries. The future of our children and their children is badly compromised. They are the future of both our country and our Church.

We, as Knights and as Catholics are pro-life people. Unfortunately, the term pro-life has become synonymous with anti-abortion. However, the Church calls us to respect the gift and dignity of life from conception to natural death. We live in a society that tends to forget about people after they are born while many born as almost as vulnerable as the unborn.

Unfortunately, those who we elect to office regardless of party are not good shepherds in the image of Jesus. Jim Wallis, an Evangelical Minister who has worked many years to help the poor in the Washington DC area, has written a book, *God's politics*. He covers all of the contemporary moral issues that we face as Catholics and as Americans. He ran a campaign called "God is not a Republican or a Democrat." He portrays a very hopeful third way, where the issues are looked at through God's eyes rather than partisan politics. We need to pray for the emergence of those types of candidates. Today, all types of decisions are being made that place man's laws above God's laws.

We have a serious responsibility as Catholics and as Knights to make sure that God's laws are placed first. Pope Paul the Sixth said that the litmus test of how a society is doing is how well the poorest are doing. We need to somehow make sure that we as a society are passing that test. One way is to critically compare our choice of candidates to Christ's teaching and determine who best measures up.

The second reading links all humanity together and to God through Christ. We are all our sister's and brother's keepers. The Gospel ends with Jesus saying that the people he was speaking to were sheep without a shepherd and began to teach them things. We, too, in many ways have no good shepherd. Accepting Jesus as our shepherd is easy, but if we truly accept Jesus as shepherd, we must also go out and be shepherds to others in need in Jesus' name.

19. 30 ORDINARY Cycle B - BLINDNESS

Blindness was a distressingly common disease in Palestine. It came partly from the glare of the eastern sun on unprotected eyes, and partly because people knew nothing of the importance of cleanliness and hygiene. The clouds of unclean flies carried infections that led to loss of sight.

Bartimaeus, the blind man addressed Jesus by the name Son of David. This name is almost always used in Scripture by people who knew Jesus at a distance. The term Son of David describes Jesus in the popular conception of the Messiah. For centuries the Jews had awaited the promised deliverer of David's line, the leader who would not only restore their freedom, but who would lead them to power and glory and greatness. It was in that way that Bartimaeus thought of Jesus. He saw him as the wonder-worker who would lead the people to freedom and to conquest. He came to Jesus with a very inadequate idea of who Jesus was, and yet he believed that Jesus had the power to heal him.

Clearly Jesus did not answer his shouts at once. Jesus wished to be quite sure that he was sincere in his desire for what he could give him. Even though those around Bartimeaus rebuked him, he persisted in begging Jesus to help him.

Jesus asked Bartimeaus only one question: "What do you want me to do for you?" The essential condition for a miracle is faith. There is nothing mysterious or theological about this. No doctor can cure a sick person who goes to him in a completely hopeless frame of mind. No medicine will do any good if we think we might as well be drinking water. The way to a miracle is to place one's life in the hands of Jesus Christ, and say, "I know that you can make me what I ought to be."

Bartimeaus had the faith to know that Jesus would heal him. Being blind had separated Jesus from the community. Physical ailments were thought in the first century to be a result of sin. All Bartimaeus was able to do was as a blind person was to isolate himself at the edge of the town and beg passersby for charity. When Jesus healed him, he could have moved back into the mainstream of community life and found a way to make a living and satisfied his selfish needs. Instead, he followed Jesus and became a disciple.

As humans, we are not perfect. In our life journeys, it is God's will that we become more and more like his son, but the fact is that all of us have some sort of blindness, spiritual blindness, regarding what is going on in the world around us. It is unquestionably obvious from reading, hearing or watching the news, that there is indifference towards human life if not all out assault on human life. We all need to be asking ourselves some questions about our own blindness. Some examples of these questions are:

Do we see what prejudices blind us from seeing the goodness of people who are from a different culture, a different faith, a different race that keep us from

embracing them as brothers and sisters, children of God, members of the Body of Christ?

Do we see how our complacency allows evil to flourish because we don't care enough to get involved in standing against it?

Do we see how our preoccupation with accumulating wealth, influence and enjoying a life of ease distracts us from working for justice for the poor and marginalized?

The list of self examination questions can go on and on until we like Bartimeaus ask Jesus to give us sight, to let us see our personal role in the devastating loss of respect for life itself and the dignity of every person from conception to natural death. It is true that each one of us as individuals cannot solve all of the problems of the world, but we each need a strong vision, a passion, for what we can do.

Our Church calls us to defeat the culture of death and to promote the culture of life; to embrace the seamless garment of pro-life --- to protect the unborn, to provide a dignified level of life including decent food, clothing, shelter and healthcare for the living, education for our children, well-being of our seniors until their natural deaths. All of these things are interconnected. For example, since the turn of this century, more and more families, children and senior citizens have fallen below the poverty level and the abortion rate has increased reflecting the lack of hope for the future in potential parents.

Jesus was not a member of any military group. But he was a militant and by the definition of his society, a radical. He went against many of the thousands of rules set down by the Scribes and Pharisees that were part of daily life, because these rules did not support the love of God and respect for life. Jesus had friends and admirers among all classes of people but showed a special love for the outcasts and the poor. As Christians, we are called to follow the example of Jesus. Christianity is a religion for action not only a religion of prayer and worship.

Bartimeaus had little basic understanding of who Jesus was, but he trusted that Jesus could and would perform miracles. We too need to have the same trust in Jesus, that he will give us sight that we need to be his co-workers of miracles in the world. Each time we receive the Eucharist, we are inviting Jesus to dwell with in us. We become the sacrament that we receive. Let us pray as we receive Christ today, that we will see how he is calling us to work miracles to spread the culture of life in the world around us and to give faith, hope and sustenance to those in need.

Homily 20061006 (10-6-2006)

20. **PEACE AND JUSTICE – WORKERS**

The following is a quote from church teaching. That the spirit of revolutionary change, which has been long disturbing the nations of the world, should have passed beyond the sphere of politics and made its influence felt in cognate sphere of practical economics is not surprising. The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvelous discoveries of science; in the changed relationship between masters and workers; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals and the utter poverty of the masses, the increased self-reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally in the prevailing moral degeneracy.

The momentous gravity of the state of things now obtaining fills every mind with painful apprehension, wise people are discussing it, practical people are proposing schemes; popular meetings, legislatures, and rulers of nations are now busied with it – actually, there is no question that has taken deeper hold of the public mind.

This quote comes from the opening paragraph of an encyclical of Pope Leo the 13th, *On Capital and Labor* that was written in 1891. He was addressing major social and economic changes that occurred during the industrial revolution. The prevailing conditions of that time still exist in similar form today.

The nature of work has changed and technology has accelerated rapidly changing both the work and the economic situation, but many of Leo's concerns of his time continue to exist today.

This encyclical, the first of many social encyclicals published by popes since 1891, upholds the rights of individuals to own property and manage the resources that they own; it also maintains that workers also have rights. The Church teaches that we are all made in God's image and that whatever work we do is a result of God's gifts and the creativity which we have been endowed by God.

Leo quotes St. Thomas Aquinas, "Man should not consider his material possessions his own, but as common to all so to share them without hesitation when others are in need." Section 34 of the encyclical states that Justice demands that the working classes should be carefully watched over so that they who contribute so largely to the advantage of the community may themselves share in the benefits that they create --- that being housed, clothed and bodily fit, they make their lives less hard and more endurable for it cannot be but good for the commonwealth to shield from misery those that it so largely depends on for the things it needs.

Section 42 states that the first thing of all is to save unfortunate working people from the cruelty of people of greed who use human beings as mere instruments for money making. Section 49 speaks to the right of working people to

join unions for the purpose of collective bargaining and to provide for the common good of the membership.

There are a number of industries today where teachings of the Church are ignored. Undocumented immigrants are often subjected to working in sweatshops or the fields for very low wages, in dangerous circumstances and for very long work weeks.

Many of the ships of the world fall into this category. We have heard of some serious accidents in mines over the past year. Most of the retail industry has people working without benefits for minimum or close to minimum wages.

I remember growing up that most retail businesses were family owned and both employees and customers were cared for by the owners. People made a decent living in retail and there was long term loyalty between employers, employees and customers that even spanned generations. Those days seem to be gone. Tonight we are going to see a movie about one large retailer and their labor practices. Understand that most of the big box retailers are similar in their labor practices and one is not being singled out.

(Talk about minimum wages – Nickled & Dimed)

The encyclical makes the point that a family should be able to get by on one wage. Two or more jobs in a family should not be required in order for a family to live above the poverty level. Yet some people are working two or three jobs to support their families and are still living in poverty.

It is unfortunate that all employers are not good Catholics or people who are driven by more than profit. The economic conditions that we live under today drive most of us to shop where we can get the best deal and to buy products that give us the most for our money.

As for myself, I try to shop in places that will keep my money in the community and where I get some sense that my business is appreciated. I will avoid places of business and products where I believe that workers are not being treated justly. Each of us has to make our own decisions based on conscience that is formed by teaching of the Church.

Homily 20061091 (10-1-2006)

21. **26th Ordinary Cycle B**

In the time of Jesus, everyone believed in demons. They believed that both mental and physical illness was caused by the influence of these evil spirits. There was one very common way to exorcise them. If a healer used the name of a still more powerful spirit and commanded the evil demon in that name of that spirit to come out of a person, the demon was supposed to be powerless to resist. It could not stand against the might of the more powerful name. This is the kind of picture that the Gospel portrays. John had seen a man using the all-powerful name of Jesus to defeat the demons. John tried to stop him, because he was not one of the intimate band of the disciples.

But Jesus declared that no man could do a mighty work in his name and be altogether his enemy. Then Jesus laid down the great principle that "he who is not against us is for us."

He who is not against us is for us. This statement is counter to much of today's thinking. It seems that many believe that "He who is not 100% for us is against us." Recently, in the news, we have heard politicians state that if we are not 100% behind everything that the government does, we are unpatriotic. There are many fundamentalists who believe that Catholics are not Christians because we don't believe exactly as they do.

There are people who believe that those who are not of their race, culture, religion, or socio-economic class are not as good as they are; that others are outsiders and therefore are not 100 percent for us so they must be against us. We draw our lines in the sand, basing them on differences of some kind that defines who is for and who is against us.

Yet, human beings are more alike than different. We have the same body parts. We bleed when we are cut. We have the same needs of nourishment, shelter, love, and companionship. And most important, we are all creations of God. And yes there are differences, but these differences are the gifts of God that make us each unique and these differences are also caused by the circumstances in which we live.

Today, our community of Palm Bay is divided over the issue of undocumented immigrants, who many people perceive as a physical or economic threat. But, put yourself in the shoes of the immigrant for a moment. Imagine that you have lost your job and possibly your home. Even with an education, you cannot find work that pays enough for minimal sustenance of life. You hear that there are decently paying jobs in Canada. It is not legal to cross the border and work in Canada without proper documentation. It is winter and risky to find a place to safely cross the border in a remote spot on foot. What would you do? Those that I posed this question to, including myself, would attempt to go to Canada if that was the only way to find work and feed our families. We are not so different from the people who have come to our country for a better life.

Yet, even though people are more alike than different, we live in a world that is in turmoil because of differences and we have lived in that condition for the almost six thousand years of Judeo-Christian history. Recently in a television interview, a politician said that the biggest problem confronting the world today is the illusion that our differences matter more than our common humanity.

Brian McClaren, pastor of a non-denominational church in the Maryland suburbs of Washington DC said "The growth of religious, ethnic, political and racial hatred contradicts and conflicts with the message of Jesus, which is a call to reconciliation with God, neighbor and enemy."

These hatreds McClaren speaks of seem so endemic and pervasive in today's world and as individuals, these hatreds feel so far out of our control. As ordinary citizens, we have little voice except perhaps at election time, and even then, it is hard to speak as a Catholic because no parties and no candidates are completely in line with the teachings of Christ.

The logical conclusion is that we can only change ourselves. The realization is that as human beings, creations of God, we are more alike than different, makes it easier to look at others, even enemies, in a more understanding light. Asking ourselves what we would do if we were in their shoes and trying to understand what motivates their behavior, even if we don't approve of their behavior, helps us to see things differently. Jesus found compassion for those who hated and persecuted him. We are called to do the same and are all capable of bringing love and compassion to those we encounter.

There is an old eastern fable. A man possessed a ring set with a wonderful opal. Whoever wore the ring became so sweet and true in character that all people loved him. The ring was a charm. Always it was passed down from father to son, and always it did its work. As time went on, it came to a father who had three sons whom he loved with an equal love. What was he to do when the time came to pass on the ring? The father got two other rings made precisely the same so that none could tell the difference. On his death-bed he called each of his sons in, spoke some words of love and to each, without telling the others, gave a ring. When the three sons discovered that each had a ring, a great dispute arose as to which was the true ring that could do so much for its owner. The case was taken to a wise judge. He examined the rings and then he spoke. "I cannot tell which is the magic ring," he said, "but you yourselves can prove it." "We?" asked the sons in astonishment.

"Yes," said the judge, "for if the true ring gives sweetness to the character of the man who wears it, then I and all the other people in the city will know the man who possesses the true ring by the goodness of his life. So, go your ways, and be kind, be truthful, be brave, be just in your dealings, and he who does these things will be the owner of the true ring."

The matter was to be proved by life. Each of us has the power to bring goodness to our lives and the people whose lives intersect ours. As the song says, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

Homily 20061126 (11-26-2006)

22. FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING – B

Today, the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Church celebrates The Feast of Christ the King. A relatively new celebration within the Church, Christ the King was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius the Eleventh to counter the anti-theological thinking of Communism, Nazism, and Fascism. This day does not mark any specific event in salvation history, but honors Christ's sovereignty over all, peoples, families, nations and the universe.

In the Gospel, Pontius Pilate questions Jesus about his kingship. The Romans thought that Jesus had proclaimed himself a king in competition with the Roman Empire, which was absolutely not the case. Jesus' kingship is above politics, above empire and is not about power in the sense of government.

Jesus' kingship is about truth, about love and about serving others.

When Jesus said his Kingship is not of this world, he did not mean that his Kingship was only in heaven, but that his Kingship exists on earth, in the here and now, regardless of any political institution. We recognize Jesus' kingship each time we pray the Our Father. "Thy Kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven."

We recognize Jesus' kingship in two ways. First, as the Messiah, our Savior, who gave his life to redeem our lives two thousand years ago. Second, as an ongoing insistence that Jesus is sovereign in our lives from our birth to our death and resurrection and particularly in the "now," each moment of our lives, as we try to build the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Attending church does not place us in the Kingdom of God. The Church is not the same thing as the kingdom. The church is there to assist us in building of the kingdom, and to help us draw others into the kingdom. The church as a whole and we as individuals cannot build the kingdom unless we recognize Jesus as sovereign and imitate his life in ours.

Truly accepting Jesus as sovereign is not as easy as saying, "I accept Jesus in my heart." In fact it can be a real challenge to our loyalties, goals, ambitions and beliefs. Jesus' authority has to come before our government, those we work for, and those things that we want for ourselves, to mention a few of our challenges.

Our society is preoccupied with royalty; powerful government leaders, sports figures, entertainers, models, even the royal families in other countries. A very recent movie, The Queen chronicles how the British royal family dealt with the death of Princess Diana in 1997. The family appears stone cold and void of any emotion. You have to wonder how Jesus would have handled the situation. Certainly, with warmth and love.

Contrast the modern "royals" with Jesus and you will get a good picture of what Jesus meant by being not of the world. Jesus is the true servant king. He gave

everything he had during his ministry. In the end, he gave his life, to serve all of the people of the world.

He expected no one to serve him, but called us to serve each other. Jesus did not live a secluded life separated from the people, unlike the modern royals. He lived among the people; teaching them, eating with them, healing them --- he was like them in all things except sin.

We too are called to live among the people. Most every one of us can have a specific ministry in service of others. Those who do not have the mobility can pray. A great deal of service and prayer is needed. We live in a world where country fights country, religion fights religion and culture fights culture. Many are dying because their basic needs for food, shelter, cleanliness and basic health care are not being met.

Even in our wealthy country, somewhere close to a third of our people, especially children and the elderly, survive under the poverty level. Our king, Jesus, calls us to serve those people and to sacrifice our time and or resources to do it. Can you imagine the difference we could make if each person did what they could to build the kingdom?

Pope Pius the Eleventh had good reason to choose the last Sunday of Ordinary Time as the Feast of Christ the King. Next weekend, the Advent Season begins and it will give us a chance to prepare again for Christ coming into our world, into our lives by discerning how we can better proclaim Christ as our King through our thoughts and actions.

Homily 20070128 (1-28-2007)

23. SUNDAY 4 ORDINARY C – LOVE

The second reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is often proclaimed at weddings and sometimes at wakes. It is indeed a tribute to love and the litany of the aspects of love causes us to think about the quality of our own love. "... love is patient, kind, not envious or boastful, not rude, it does not insist on its own way. It is not self-seeking or prone to anger. It does not brood over injuries. It rejoices with truth. There is no limit to its forbearance, to its trust, its hope, and its power to endure."

This scripture gives us an opportunity to examine the quality of our own love. It gives us a benchmark to compare the quality of our love to.

Probably, most of us find ourselves lacking in some of the aspects of the kind of love Paul is describing. But more than point out our own inadequacies, the reading is also consoling in that it describes the love that God has for us. Our Church teaches us that God is love, and that he loves us no regardless of our faults and failings; that God is ever kind and patient with us, endless in mercy and not prone to anger or holding grudges. Our God loves us unconditionally and forgives us every time we ask.

God does not consider anyone unlovable. Each human is a creation of God and God lives within each of his creations. Yet, we as humans have a difficult time loving all people unconditionally. Growing up, many of us have heard our parents say, "I don't like your behavior right now, but I love you." That has to be how God sees us in our imperfections. That is how God expects us to see others.

Living a life of Christian love does not just mean loving the lovable. Anyone can do that. It means also loving the unlovable --- not approving of the bad things that people do, not liking the unlikable, but loving people just because they are creations of God.

Christian love does not call for people not paying the consequences for sinful behavior, but it means treating people with mercy, justice, compassion, forgiveness and human dignity.

There have been several examples of Christian love in the national media over the past several weeks:

- Man who saved man in NYC subway
- Son who risked his life to donate part of his liver to father he had a bad relationship.

Christian love is not some "pie in the sky" concept that is not possible or practical to do. We were not commanded to love one another as God loves us when it is convenient. Loving one another is meant to be and integral part of how we live our daily lives wherever we happen to be.

There is so much meanness in our world and in our culture today, even though we live in a beautiful, wealthy country of generous people. Discrimination due to social class, race, culture and gender is strong. Money prevails where love should prevail. Love has been all but squeezed out of our political system where according to a recent newspaper article, the vast majority of our nationally elected officials --- Democrat, Republican and independent; claim to be Christians. Intense partisanship has drowned out the command to love one another. For example, some people who are concerned about the environment and rights plant and animal life do not support unborn human life at the same level.

There are those that preach family values but favor the causes of the moneyed over the basic needs of poor families, children and seniors. How well do our politicians live up to St. Paul's definition of what love is and isn't?

The media is full of arrogant talk show hosts who do their best to create division rather than unity and love between peoples. The news media is too busy with crime and sensationalism and what celebrities doing to focus on stories of selfless love. We don't see much news about what American service people do as individuals for the citizens of Iraq in the midst of chaos and danger.

Movies and television shows are full of sex and violence while television programs that promoted human values like Touched by an Angel and Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman were cancelled despite high ratings because even more money could be made with other types of programming.

These are just a few examples of the meanness that is all around us. And this meanness is not just endemic to our country but it is the same in one way or another all over the world. The economic and social ways of life are hardly joyful and kind. Marketing messages, politics and media are full of arrogance, rudeness and boasting. We don't have to accept this meanness. We can let the politicians know we are voting for love. We can boycott entertainment that promotes meanness and let the sponsors know what we are doing.

Meanness of society is just not of our time. In last week's Gospel, Jesus told people that he was proclaiming God's love by saying "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Then in the continuing of this Scripture, in this week's Gospel, the crowd gets mean and is ready to kill Jesus for preaching love by tossing him over the side of a mountain.

So things haven't changed much in 2000 years and we can trace the lack of love in the world back a lot further than that. So, the real question is what can we do?

The only answer is to start with ourselves. Paul's letter is not stressing the love we should expect to receive. Instead he is addressing the type of love that we are expected to give regardless of what treatment we receive from others. We are

called to put the self-centeredness that we all have to some degree aside and to love as God loves us.

Paul has a way of really simplifying things and the bottom line that he provides for us is that to be happy we must love and our only reason for loving is to love others like God loves us. He tells us that without love there is nothing and that nothing endures but faith, hope and love and love is the most important of these.

In the end, love when given is contagious. It can be multiplied but never divided. As we come to the table of the Lord today, let us thank God for loving us so much that he created us in his image and gave us the ability to love others as he loves us. Let us pray to God that we have the strength to love and overcome the meanness of the world around us in every aspect of how we live our lives.

Homily 20070225 (2-25-2007)

24. 1st SUNDAY OF LENT CYCLE C

- Gospel speaks of Jesus' temptation in desert
- Our desert times not confined to Lent
- Many times of grief, struggle, uncertainty, abandonment, confusion
- We too are tempted as Jesus was tempted in the desert.
- First temptation- Jesus was hungry, devil said to turn the rocks into bread – convenience
- Second temptation – devil told Jesus he could have all of the lands he could see –wealth & power
- Third temptation – devil told Jesus to jump from high parapet – spectacular
- Face these temptations in desert of every day life – Lenten desert gives us a chance to walk with Jesus while he is preparing to give his greatest gifts to us, his life and our eternal life
- Our Church calls us to walk in the desert with Jesus by prayer, almsgiving and fasting.
- Look more closely for what to pray during Lent – routine to pray for loved ones and needs close to home – spend more time looking for national and world social issues where people really need help, put ourselves in shoes, feel for them and pray for them. Maybe pick several tragic news stories each day

Almsgiving not just money but also time and energy. Should not be from excess, but from substance as Jesus gave us his earthly life.

- Our gift should not be a gift of what we really don't need, but a gift of ourselves.
- Church calls us to fasting and abstinence. Is not eating meat on Friday truly a sacrifice? Or is reduced intake on a couple of days really giving something? These are minimal.
- People often give up things like sweets for Lent. But, how does that serve God. What does it do for the people of God? Jesus didn't give his life just to give something up, but for all of us. Taking certain foods from our lives that are unhealthy during Lent but trying to make the changes permanent to be able to have better health and more energy to serve the people of God is a positive Lenten work.
- Giving up other activities like TV, favorite sports, men or women's nights out and using the time for family, deepening faith
- Fasting might also mean giving up behaviors and attitudes that do not contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God and replacing them with attitudes and behaviors that do.
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An unknown author wrote "Lent: A Season for Fasting, A Season for Feasting."

Some of you may have heard this before. It is a serious of statements that ask us to give up behaviors and attitudes that are harmful to the building of the Kingdom

of God and replace them with positive ways of being. It is also a good examination of conscience for the Sacrament of Reconciliation during the Lenten season.

- **FAST from judging others; FEAST on Christ living within them.**
- **FAST from harsh words; FEAST on words that build others up.**
- **FAST from discontent; FEAST on gratitude.**
- **FAST from anger; FEAST on patience.**
- **FAST from pessimism; FEAST on optimism.**
- **FAST from worry; FEAST on God's care.**
- **FAST from complaining; FEAST on appreciation.**
- **FAST from bitterness; FEAST on forgiveness**
- **FAST from self-concern; FEAST on compassion for others.**
- **FAST from discouragement; FEAST on hope.**
- **FAST from depressing facts; FEAST on uplifting facts.**
- **FAST from suspicion; FEAST on truth.**
- **FAST from weakening thoughts; FEAST on inspiring promises.**
- **FAST from idle gossip; FEAST on purposeful silence.**

Let us pray that we use Lent well this year to grow closer to God, our father, to grow more like Jesus, the son, our brother and savior, and to grow in the wisdom and peace of the Holy Spirit, our consoler.

Homily 20070429 (4-29-2007)

25. 4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER Cycle C – GOOD SHEPHERD

The Church celebrates Good Shepherd Sunday each year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter. The image of God as the Shepherd dates far back in Judeo-Christian history. The image is portrayed many times in Hebrew Scripture, the best known in Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.”

That image of the shepherd is deeply woven into scripture. The central plateau of Judea is about thirty-five miles long and 14 to 17 miles wide. Most of the land was hard and stony. It was pastoral land more than agricultural land. The most familiar figure on this land was the Shepherd.

The job of the shepherd was a difficult and constant job. The sheep were used mostly for wool, rather than for food.

They wandered far to graze and, unattended, they could get lost. Besides keeping his sheep together, the shepherd had to protect them from wolves and other predatory animals as well as from humans who would steal them. Since sheep from different flocks mingled together, the shepherd knew which sheep were his, and the sheep only answered the call of their shepherd. Shepherds were willing to lay down their lives for their sheep as Jesus laid down his life for us. It was only natural that one of the most loved images of Jesus became The Good Shepherd.

The end of today’s Gospel quotes Jesus as saying, “The Father and I are one.” This quote is not a reference to part of the Trinity, but describes the oneness that Jesus has with God because of his obedience and his love. Jesus came to earth to make this the model for Christian community and to call us to oneness with God and each other by being good shepherds to each other. We are also called to be Good Shepherds in our families, our communities, our Church and in the world.

In 1964 Pope Paul the Sixth declared the Fourth Sunday of Easter to also be Vocations Sunday where the entire Church is called to pray for vocations in the Church.

It is fitting that besides praying for vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate and religious communities of sisters and brothers, that we also pray for lay vocations in the Church and vocations to serve others in the local or wider community.

Unless we understand that vocation is something that we are all called to, it is not likely that there will be enough people to respond to the needs of the Church and, by extension, the needs of the wider community. We cannot have a supermarket mentality where our Church is concerned. The supermarket mentality believes Church is there to provide us with Sacraments, spiritual or religious help on demand. But there is a danger that, like supermarkets in some former

Communist countries, there may soon be no goods available and, worse, no one to distribute them!

The Church needs more vocations, both in the hierarchy and in the laity. The Second Vatican Council stressed the importance of vocations among the laity by writing: "The Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is a sign of Christ among us, unless there exists a laity worthy of the name, working alongside the hierarchy, for the Gospel cannot be deeply imprinted on the mentality, life and work of any people without the active presence of the lay people."

All of us together, clergy, religious and lay people, by virtue of our baptism, are the church and we all are called to the vocation of serving the people of God.

[This morning, three of our young people, part of the future of the church, are being baptized into Christian community. Parents, Godparents and all of us --- the entire community have an obligation to set an example of serving God to nurture these children to grow to understand their calling to their unique vocation.]

There are so many ways that we can be good shepherds. A very Christ-like example, that hopefully none of us will every be called to emulate, was the Virginia Tech professor who literally laid down his life in the doorway of a classroom so students could escape out of a window. There are many opportunities to serve each other here in the parish and in the community. We all have the capability of serving in some capacity.

Our Christian communities can only grow and thrive when every member makes his or her contribution to the well-being of the whole. When all are giving, all will be receiving in abundance. Let us pray when we approach the table of the Lord, the Eucharist will strengthen us to be one with Christ and each other and show us how we are to serve God and the Church in our lives. Lord, help us all to become Good Shepherds.

Homily 20070902 (9-2-2007)

26. **22nd Sunday Cycle C – LABOR DAY**

The Gospel parable speaks about humility and calls us not to take the place of honor, but to be humble in our lives. It is fitting scripture for the celebration of Labor Day weekend. To be successful in our work, a great deal of humility is required to deal with those we work for, whether they are our management or the customers we work for. Humility is also a great asset in dealing with those that work for us. We have to be humble to listen and to care and to make decisions that benefit both the employer and the employee. Humility is an important approach to any work, whether paid, volunteer or a parent in the home.

Helen Keller once said, “I long to accomplish great and noble tasks, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.” It is for those tiny pushes by many that we celebrate Labor Day each year.

Why do we celebrate Labor Day? For many, it is the conclusion of the fun weekends of summer. For others it is time to close the lakeside camp. For others, it is a just another long weekend. Labor Day dates back to 1882 with roots in the union movement. The first celebration was in New York City on the first Monday of September when a huge rally and celebration was held in Union Square. It became a state holiday in Oregon in 1887 and by 1890 a federal holiday. There were religious holidays, civil holidays and holidays commemorating famous individuals, but there was no celebration for the work of common people who have done so much for our country just by doing their jobs. This is a holiday that belongs to all of us.

From a Catholic perspective, even though Labor Day is not on the Church calendar, we should consider it a very important day because our work is holy. The US Council of Catholic Bishops states, “The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation.

If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected; the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property and to economic initiative.” They add, in A Catholic Framework for Economic Life, that a fundamental measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring.

We need to recognize the importance of all work, not just because we need to work to support ourselves; not just because we spend a significant portion of our lives at work, but because all work is necessary to a functioning society and a growing economy. We tend to place high values on jobs that require a great deal of education and pay high salaries. It is easy for us to overlook those who do

supposed menial tasks that provide services to all of us. We value a doctor more than a garbage collector. We might have reason to think differently when large city garbage collectors strike for several weeks at the hottest time of the year and we can't stand to go out on the street.

While we undervalue some, we overvalue others, such as some people in the sports and entertainment industries who set a very poor example by flaunting the law and being seen being interested only in having a good time. As a society we also undervalue entire groups of people. On the average, women earn 77 cents for every dollar a man earns in the same job. For African-American women it is 70 cents and Hispanic women it is 58 cents. And, it is sad that both single and two parent families have to work multiple jobs. Many of us can remember the times when only one parent had to work and could provide for a large family.

The Church teaches that work is far more than economic support, but is an activity that is basic to our lives. Regardless of whether we are retired, go to work or work in the home, work is very much a part of who we are. All work is creativity and God co-creates with us. So work is important and even above that, work is holy.

We need to celebrate Labor Day by considering the past, the present and the future. We need to acknowledge all of those who worked before us. They gave much to win 40-hour workweeks, employee benefits such as vacation time, sick time and in many cases, health benefits, and safe working conditions. Many fought for the right to organize and unionize. Some lost their lives to fight for the benefits that we take for granted today. We need to give thanks for those who came before us.

But there is much work left to be done to create a present where workers are treated fairly and humanely and to ensure a future of economic stability for all. We can take a number of simple steps to improve the lives of all who work. We need to be competent in all of the work that we do. Give an honest day's work for the pay we receive. We can treat those who work for us with care and dignity by caring about them as people, paying them a living wage and treating them with love and respect.

Not everyone can have a job that they love. But we can show appreciation and encouragement for all who provide us with services and help them to feel good about what they do.

We can, as much as possible, try not to do business or patronize businesses evenings and Sundays so that fewer workers are required to give up time that they should be spending with their families and communities. We can be moderate in our own work so we can have the time we need with our families and to serve God.

So let us pray this Labor Day for all of those who came before us and made our jobs better for us and let's commit to improve living and working conditions for the people of God. May God bless all of us with love, humility and concern for all who work to serve us, our community, and our God.

Homily 20070905 (9-5-2007)

27. **18th Sunday Ordinary Cycle C – Earthly Things**

Tell “Streets in Heaven paved with gold story.”

All three readings address accumulation of earthly things including material possessions, power, having a good time and having things our way. These things might have value to us during our earthly lives but have little value after as the story indicates. There is a rather grim Spanish proverb that says it well; “Shrouds do not have pockets.”

As Christians, we are not called to live a life of poverty. We certainly are entitled to enjoy what we work for. But, we are not called to worship possessions, power, or good times and particularly we are not called to worship ourselves. It is important to share our gifts with others. That is why God has given us all different gifts, to complement each other while working for the good of the entire Body of Christ.

In the first reading, Koh-HEL-et uses the term vanity, not as vanity about personal appearance, but as an all-encompassing term for all of the non-spiritual things in life that we strive for. He goes further to say that these vanities cause grief and worry and sleepless nights. We all give some thought to protecting what we have. In the Gospel parable, Jesus warns us that it is foolish to put a great deal of energy into this kind of thinking, because there are so many things in life that we cannot control or plan for, such as the imminent death of the wealthy man.

The second reading expands upon what is said in the first reading. Paul tells the Colossians, and tells us that all of the arbitrary criteria for divisions between people are obsolete in Christianity.

He says “Christ is all and in all.” Although today most religions believe that God loves all humanity, Christianity was the pioneer in that regard. God’s love for all people transcends cultural, ethnic, gender, socio-economic and national borders. We are called to use our gifts to the benefit of all others.

In the Luke’s Gospel, Jesus refuses to arbitrate a financial dispute and then attacks greed and lives spent accumulating material things. Jesus makes it very clear that what humans consider to be wealth and what God considers to be wealth are two very different things. God treasures our willingness to give of ourselves to others, not what we accumulate for ourselves.

We need to ask ourselves how well we share those gifts that God gives us with others. Do we share our wealth with others? John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church started out with a salary of 30 British Pounds a year. It took 28 pounds for him to sustain himself he gave the rest away. His salary increased over time to 120 pounds a year, he continued to live on 28 pounds and gave the rest away. Can we come anywhere close to this kind of giving?

Another God-given-commodity that we hoard is time. We all need time for ourselves and things that we like to do. We should not over commit our time to where the quality of what we use our time for suffers. But, do we use some portion of our time to benefit others? Do we take a significant amount of time to pray for the needs of others?

Power and control are important to many. Some our given the gift of leadership. Do we use our ability to lead for the benefit of others or do we use it to isolate ourselves from humanity and for the sake of our own wealth?

There are so many needs in our own communities, in our country and in the world. We could accomplish so much if we all gave of ourselves, especially of our time and love. Our parish community does a great deal of reaching out to others. But, there is need for so much more giving by more people. St. Vincent de Paul does so much for those with needs in our community thanks to the generosity of people in the parish. The demand for their help far exceeds their financial ability and staffing levels.

Traditionally, they have provided families with food for Thanksgiving and food and gifts for Christmas. This year there is not enough money for both holidays. Their plan is to provide for Christmas and ask members of our parish to sponsor families through a \$30 grocery store gift certificate. More details on how this will be done will appear in the bulletin soon.

We have a soup kitchen that serves a hot lunch on Fridays. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could find people and funding to expand this operation to other days? There are so many worth efforts to help those in need in the parish and in the community that are desperate for funds and volunteers. Each of us can make some effort, even if it is to pray for those in need and the people that serve them.

Stephen Grellet fled the French Revolution and came to the United States. He joined the Quakers and dedicated his life to serving others. He is quoted as saying "I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good, therefore, that I can do or any kindness I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it for I shall not pass this way again." These words are truly our Christian calling to build God's Kingdom on earth. If we heed them, we will please our God and live in God's heavenly kingdom.

Homily 20071202 (12-2-2007)

28. **ADVENT 1 Cycle A – VOICE OF ADVENT**

Have you noticed how loud the world is, how much noise there is out there? There is the noise of car alarms that go off in the middle of the night; or the cars that pull up beside yours giving off the pounding bass line of whatever music they are listening to; or the noise of people who speak loudly into their cell phones in public places; the sounds of helicopters and jets taking off and landing; the noise of cars with defective mufflers; emergency vehicles and the inconsiderate neighbor who decides to mow his lawn at 6:00 am on Sunday morning. As bad as these noises are, at least they do not compete with and try to shout out our inner voices, the ones that we struggle to hear for direction, sanity and wisdom.

The noise that competes with our inner voices is always there but seems to pick up two or three months prior to Christmas. Big stores set up their Christmas displays as soon as they can remove the Halloween candy, costumes and trappings. They start playing Christmas music or at least the elevator versions of Christmas music. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television launch the barrage of Christmas advertising before we have finished Thanksgiving dinner. It is really loud out there, isn't it?

Amid all of the noise that clutters our heads, we have to struggle to hear another voice, the voice of Advent, which is very difficult to hear with the sound of jingle bells constantly resonating in our ears.

We need to find ways to seek out the quiet places in our lives for these four weeks to hear the Advent voices in our minds and hearts. The voices of Advent don't call us to dangerous and difficult change or try to make us feel guilty about who we are. The Advent voices try to move us in the direction of welcoming Jesus Christ; both to commemorate of his birth and when he returns as he promised. The Advent voices try to move us to change our lives to be more like Christ, to be more pleasing to God. The Advent voices have our best interests at heart. Today in Scripture, we heard three Advent voices; the voice of the prophet Isaiah, the voice of St. Paul and the voice of Jesus himself in the Gospel.

The well known verse from Isaiah comes from a time when Isaiah denounced Israel for the sin and empty worship that was taking place. He tells the people to beat their swords into plowshares. He creates a vision so that people warring with each other and people warring with their own sin will come to peace with each other and themselves and find a path to justice and to peace.

Isaiah's vision so many years ago, so many years before Christ, is a vision for us as well. Although most of us don't own swords nor do we use plowshares to work the land, we do individually fight constant wars; a war to hear the inner voice, a war not to judge, a war to choose between being selfish and being giving, and a war against getting sucked into the commercialism of the world we live in to name

a few. To live lives of justice and reconciliation is one of the important voices of the Advent season. Living according to this voice is difficult and we constantly need to pray for God's help.

St. Paul's Advent voice is a call to vigilance, a call to be ready. Paul is telling us we have a choice between living in the light and living in the dark; the dark partly represented by the list of bad behaviors he mentions that we should avoid. St. Paul's Advent voice urges us not to sin, but to put on Christ, to think and to behave like Jesus does.

Jesus' Advent voice, in the Gospel, is also extremely challenging. It has no mention of the birth of Christ and we are being called not to listen for a baby's wail, but to the call of the adult Jesus to live according to his will. Since we do not know the hour of Jesus' return, we can't let the world lull us into its call to obtain more, bigger and better and put off our preparation for his coming until it is too late.

We might wonder why Jesus speaks of Noah in this Gospel. Consider the point that he was trying to make. All of the people in the time of Noah were not evil and worthy of destruction. Many were doing the normal things of life such as eating, drinking and marrying. Then they were drowned in the flood.

Only Noah and his family were not destroyed. Why? Because only Noah listened to the quiet voice of God and was not deterred from his task by the noise in the world around him.

The parable of the two men and women grinding their grain is similar to the Noah story. Two were not living with the concern for the return of Christ. Like the people of Noah's time and the two grain grinders, it is easy to go about our daily lives without preparation for the coming of Christ. We prepare for him by living in the light of his teaching and striving to love others the way Jesus loves us. He gives us the Holy Spirit as his ever-present everlasting gift. It is the Spirit that comes to us as that inner voice, the voice of Advent, the voice that compels and commands us to love one another.

In the Gospel, Jesus was speaking to his disciples. Two thousand years later, Jesus is still speaking to his disciples, us. As his disciples we heard the three Advent voices in Scripture today. Despite the commercialism and holiday rush and noise around us, we hear these voices speak to us about being prepared. Part of preparedness is the understanding that God has already done the important work in our behalf, sending us His son to light our way. But, that does not mean we are home free. There is plenty left for us to do to prepare for his return. We are his coworkers and we need to look at our troubled world to see what swords need beating into plowshares and what actions we need take do to be part of that process.

The voices of Advent call us to look forward to a new day that is to come, a new day that we help to bring about. Let us pray that we are not lulled asleep by the noise of the world and that we are awake and prepared to greet our Savior.

I want to share a reflection called Mary's Dream.

MARY'S DREAM

I had a dream, Joseph. I don't understand it, not really, but I think it was about a birthday celebration for our Son. I think that was what it was all about?

The people had been preparing for it for about *six* weeks.

They had decorated the house and bought new clothes.

They'd gone shopping many times and bought elaborate gifts. It was peculiar, though, because the presents weren't for our Son.

They wrapped them in beautiful paper and tied them with lovely bows and stacked them under a tree. Yes, a tree, Joseph, right in their house.

They'd decorated the tree also. The branches were full of glowing balls and sparkling ornaments. There was a figure on the top of the tree. It looked like an angel might look. Oh, it was beautiful. Everyone was laughing and happy.

They were all excited about the gifts. They gave the gifts to each other, Joseph, not to our Son. I don't think they even knew Him. They never mentioned His name.

Doesn't it seem odd for people to go to all that trouble to celebrate someone's birthday if they don't know Him? I had the strangest feeling that if our Son had gone to this celebration He would have been intruding. Everything was so beautiful, Joseph, and everyone so full of cheer, but it made me want to cry. How sad for Jesus – not to be wanted at His own birthday celebration. I'm glad it was only a dream.

How terrible, Joseph, if it had been real.

Lord, help us to spend Advent celebrating Advent looking forward to the coming of Christ. May we reflect on the true meaning of the coming of Christ and truly celebrate his coming into our lives and celebrate it well when Christmas arrives.

Homily 20071230 (12-30-2007)

29. **FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY**

This weekend the Church celebrated The Feast of the Holy Family in honor of Jesus, Joseph and Mary. It is a relatively new feast day prescribed by Pope Leo the 13th in 1892. It was originally celebrated on the second Sunday of January but when the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord was moved to that date in the liturgical year starting in 1969, Holy Family was moved to the Sunday after Christmas. If New Years Day falls on the first Sunday after Christmas, then Holy Family is celebrated on December 30th.

It is intended that the Holy Family should be a model for all families. While we honor the Holy Family, we also look at our own families and think about what we need to do to be more like the Holy Family.

Things have not changed much since 2000 years ago when Herod launched his campaign of terror against the children in Bethlehem and its surroundings. He killed a number of newborn children in his failed mission to destroy the Christ child. Many innocents continue to be killed due to the wars and terrorism that have taken place around the world since the first century. Recently, it has been in places like Afghanistan, Iraq and in the Holy Land revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims. But, all of the continents except maybe Antarctica have been touched in some way at some time in the past 2000 years.

The overt acts of violence replay the murderous acts of Herod but families also suffer from other Herodian assaults that are less obvious but none the less have a tragic effect on family life.

The Holy Family did not have it easy. They had to flee Bethlehem to go to a foreign country, Egypt, to find safety for Jesus. Joseph and Mary were not wealthy. A humble carpenter had no chance of wealth. They lived in poverty and Jesus was born in a dirty barn among farm animals. Yet, this little family went to great lengths to protect themselves and stay together. We believe that Jesus grew up doing manual labor, working as a carpenter's apprentice to Joseph.

The Holy Family should be an example and inspiration to modern families. Scripture tells us what they went through together. We have few examples today. Television certainly does not reflect functional, normal, loving families for the most part.

TV shows a lot of advertising to make us want to buy things that make our lives easier. Uncommitted sex and violence for the sake of violence are standard fare. The divorce rate in the US is fifty percent among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Children are left unsupervised due to the need for at least two salaries. Teenagers, for the most part, are left to their own devices and are influenced by television, movies and advertising to live in direct opposition to family values. To

see, just spend some time watching music television! Those of you who are seafarers know too well what you have to go through to maintain family while you are working so far away from home to support them.

The Holy Family that and other families in biblical times were dependent on each other within their communities. Families had to stick together and support each other. Most people never strayed more than a mile or two from where they were born. They knew that they were all in life together for the long haul. When one person was hurting, they all hurt. If the crops were bad due to drought or famine, everyone knew what the others were going through because they were suffering in the same way themselves. Hospitality to strangers was a very important part of their culture.

In today's world, we have lost empathy for those who are suffering. This, despite the fact that communication has shrunk the world; we can see strife in places like Rwanda and Somalia for ourselves.

Yet, we may distance ourselves from these scenes because we think that they are not about us; they are not part of our family, are they? Our church does indeed teach that these nameless, faceless, suffering people are part of our family, the human family created by God our father.

In the past week, Benazar Bhutto, a fighter for democracy in Pakistan, was brutally assassinated. Her senseless and untimely death should be considered a personal affront to all of us despite the geographical distance, cultural difference and religious difference. Her premature death affects all of us because it leaves us with one less voice for the lifting up of humanity. We all suffer from her death because our world has been made less safe.

The Scripture we heard today was all about family. The first reading from Sirach tells us that honoring our parents, even when they are difficult brings us blessing and pleases God, our heavenly father. The second reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians speaks of what we must do to live in harmony with others and with God. He calls us to Christ-like behaviors; among them real compassion, kindness, humility, patience and most important love. He goes on to tell us how to achieve harmony in a family; by love and mutual respect between members. Matthew's Gospel emphasizes to what lengths parents will go to ensure the safety of their child and the health of the family unit.

If we want to change the world, to make it a more loving and compassionate place, we need to start in our own families showing love and compassion for each other.

We need to give each other support, encouragement, forgiveness, guidance and protection from the anti-family values and pressures that exist in today's world. God gave us the Holy Family to model ourselves after. We need to think about what we need to do in our own families to be more like Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

All of us who work in this seafarer's center are volunteers who are here to give you as much of a home away from home as we can. We hope that we can be your family at Port Canaveral. On behalf of all of the staff here, I would like to wish you a most blessed Christmas and health, happiness and holiness in 2008.

Today, let us pray for the grace to lead lives that imitate those of the Holy Family. As we prepare to leave the stable in Bethlehem let us turn our gaze to the house in Nazareth, for it was in the "ordinary" life of the Holy Family that "extraordinary" holiness was lived.

May the Holy Family continue to bless and guide you and your family. Amen.

Homily 20080224 (2-24-2008)

30. **3rd Sunday Lent Cycle C – Samaritan Woman**

The Gospel tells us that the Samaritans and Jews did not get along. These two cultures hated each other for over 750 years before Jesus' time even though the Samaritans historically were Jews. After their capture in a war with the Assyrians there was intermarriage and their customs changed. The Samaritans only read the first five books of Hebrew Scripture. Their holiest site was Mt. Gerizim, not Jerusalem and Samaritans practiced Judaism mingled with some of the Assyrian pagan practices. So, they were considered a bit odd.

Unfortunately, in today's time the kinds of prejudices that the Jews and Samaritans held for each other still exist. This story involves people like us.

A new family moved into an elegant suburb of Detroit. The parish there was very progressive. It had all kinds of committees, ministries, and there were meetings all the time. Teenagers went to Appalachia in the spring to help build homes, and adults ran soup kitchens for the homeless, and there were clothing drives and blood donations. The people in the parish figured that they were pretty good at what they did.

But the new family was different from the others. They had dark skins but they were not African Americans or Hispanics. They talked a funny guttural sounding language, and seemed to have a lot of money. There were a father and a mother and three school age kids and two grandparents, and they had a lot of visitors in their big well-kept home.

Word spread around the neighborhood that they were drug dealers. Then another neighborhood rumor began that they were Arabs, probably Saudi oil millionaires. Then yet another rumor reported that they were Iraqi! Someone in the parish called the FBI and the Bureau said they knew all about them and were watching them closely.

The neighborhood began a nightly "watch." Cars drove by the house, just to make sure there were no dangerous meetings. All they observed were big but quiet parties of very well-dressed men and women. When school began, the three kids showed up for the first day of Catholic school, wearing the approved uniforms.

A committee of the parishioners went to see the pastor to protest letting these "non-Catholics" into the Catholic school. The pastor shook his head and said, "They're Iraqi, They're Chaldean Catholics. They were Christians when we Irish were still pagans. They have a parish down town, but the family moved here so they could send their kids to a Catholic school. The older girl is quite a basketball player. They made a big donation to the parish. They own a string of camera stores."

This story illustrates that the suspicious and sometimes hostile way we perceive people who we don't think are like us has not changed since the day that Jesus and the Samaritan woman met at the well.

From a cultural point of view, the meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman was very surprising. This was not only because of the animosity between the two peoples but because a Jewish man, and especially a rabbi, didn't speak to women in public, not even their own wives. To make matters worse, this Samaritan woman was living a fairly loose. She was probably at Jacob's Well rather than the town well a mile away because she was an outcast among her own people. Jesus knew from the onset exactly who and what this woman was.

The dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the Gospel reveals Jesus' power to convert the hearts of all people. At first the Samaritan woman is astounded that Jesus would even talk to her. Jesus asks her to give him a drink, even though, Jesus, like most travelers of the day, carried an animal skin bag on a rope to draw water when they needed to drink. Jesus must have considered three things when he made this request: first, it was an opportunity to begin a conversation and second, it was a small bit of service that she would probably be willing to render. Finally, it gave him a chance to engage the woman in the conversation that he really wanted to have, about the living water that would nourish her heart and her soul and bring her eternal life.

At first, the woman did not understand the nature of the water that Jesus was offering. She thought it would permanently quench her physical thirst without having to return to the well. But Jesus knows that deep down, whether we recognize it or not, we all have a thirst for the love and safety of God and a desire to live in his image.

Jesus really gets her attention when he reveals that he knows her marital history. She begins to think that maybe there really is something special about him but still questions him about the differences between Jewish and Samaritan beliefs. Jesus responds that the Jewish people did have a place in salvation history, but, all of the old religious rivalries are on the way out and what really matters is the authentic worship of God.

An example of worship that is not authentic is when religious, political and intellectual leaders bend Scripture. They may do it to support the likes of apartheid and racial segregation while ignoring the greater scriptural call not to support these evil institutions.

By this time the disciples return to Jacob's well and are astonished that Jesus is talking to the Samaritan woman, but they are beginning to understand that Jesus does shocking and counter cultural things to draw people closer to God. At the same time the woman is also astonished that Jesus is the Messiah that she is waiting for and runs off back to town to witness what she has learned to the townspeople.

Her excitement about her belief in Jesus and what he says, removes her shame of being an outcast. It is this outcast who brings her community to know and to believe in Jesus.

In the story of the Iraqi family that I told earlier, the family became outcasts just because of who they were. The Samaritan woman was an outcast both because of who she was and because of her promiscuous behavior. These two stories make us ask; how would we behave if we were in the Gospel story?

Of course we need to be like Jesus; to look beneath the surface and relate to the real human being. We need to lead others to living water by engaging in dialogue with them, by being a good example to them showing them what they can be.

We are also like the Samaritan woman. We need to be open to hearing God's voice, to live what we hear and witness God to others by our behavior while acknowledging our own shortfalls and self-centeredness.

The priest and writer Tom Erich recently wrote, "Transformation is largely a personal journey that is difficult to see in others. The real test is am I becoming a better parent, a more ethical employee or employer, a more loving spouse or friend. Am I waking up to the many small ways that I can make the world a better place, touch other people's lives positively, and bring cheer and healing instead of dissent and discord."

Our celebration of the Eucharist, even more so during Lent, is a deep well of living water. It gives us a chance to do what the Samaritan woman did, to pause from our hectic lives and enter into a conversation with Jesus and to be transformed. In this conversation our deepest thirst can be satisfied and we can learn from Jesus how to transform ourselves and see beneath the surface of others and lead them to living water.

Homily 20080413 (4-13-2008)

31. **4th Sunday of Easter C – Good Shepherd**

Once again, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate what is commonly known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The image of God as the shepherd of his people has a long history in Judeo-Christian tradition. The image of shepherds and sheep appears a number of times in Scripture and it was well understood by the people of the First Century Middle East.

Most of us are familiar with herds of sheep through movies or televisions and a few of us may have seen these herds in person. However, the modern shepherd is far different from the shepherd of the first century. The modern sheep herd, consisting of thousands of sheep, is managed by cowboys on horses, driving the sheep from behind, often with the help of dogs. The sheep graze in large fenced in areas owned by ranchers.

The shepherd of biblical times was different. He had a much more intimate relationship with much smaller flocks of sheep. He walked in front of his sheep, leading them out to pasture every morning. He spent the day with them, protecting them from preying animals. At night the sheep would follow him back to the sheepfold, a pen where the sheep belonging to many shepherds would spend the night. The sheepfold had one entrance, and once the sheep were safely inside, the shepherds slept across the entrance. The sheep knew the voice of their shepherd and only followed him.

The Gospel we heard contains two parables. The first is a warning against people who would want to steal sheep and the second focuses on the relationship between the sheep and their shepherd, We understand not only that God is the master shepherd, but that those who act as leaders, in God’s name, are also shepherds. Jesus proclaims himself to be the gate through which those who are truly shepherds pass through. Therefore, true shepherds are faithful to Jesus.

In today’s world, we have examples of both good shepherds and bad shepherds. Good shepherds are those who are truly motivated by God and work to benefit and care for the people that they lead. Unfortunately, we also have bad shepherds who do not care about the people they lead and exploit people for their own benefit. Hopefully, each of us knows what a good shepherd is from our own experience; from people in our lives who have treated us with love and have sacrificed for us. One only has to read the newspaper or watch television news to see evidence of bad shepherds.

The church also calls Good Shepherd Sunday Vocations Sunday. We are asked to pray always, but especially today that our Christian communities will be graced with good shepherds and pastors. In most of our minds, vocations apply to priests, deacons, and brothers and sisters who live and work in religious communities. And it is true; we need more of those types of religious vocations.

There was a time when most parishes had five or six priests and there were enough brothers and sisters to staff Catholic schools, hospitals and other institutions that cared for people. Those days of plenty of religious vocations are gone, but the needs of the people of God that these people filled are not.

In our society of today, so much emphasis is put on filling our own needs and doing what we want to do, do we hear God's voice calling us to our vocations? Do we even listen for God's voice? Or, do we ask ourselves questions like, "Does God really need me?" Or, "Can't God get someone else?" Or do we tell ourselves, "Religious life isn't for me."

Most of us have careers, jobs that we have chosen to do. But, in fact, each of us also has a vocation. We are all baptized to serve God. We all have God given gifts to share.

32. **12th Sunday Ordinary Cycle A – Call of God**

The Gospel states, “nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. What I say to you in darkness, speak in the light, what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.” What Jesus is telling us is that our individual callings from God are likely to come in a soft voice at a time we are not expecting them, but we are to live our callings to be faithful to Christ, through our actions and through our words so that all those we come in contact with will see the Gospel come alive in each of our lives.

The biggest challenge is to hear our call from God. We live in a world full of distracting noise and violence that unfortunately drowns out the call of God.

The greatest offender is probably the business of our everyday lives. But, there is also much other noise in our heads, noise that runs counter to the calling of God in our lives that obliterates the often whispered soft sound of our God calling us specifically. The violence is in music and movies, the sensationalistic reporting of the news. This is especially true during the pre-election period when supporters and detractors of all the candidates and talk show hosts spew negativity and often falsehoods that interfere with our attention to God’s call.

Although there is much useful information available on the Internet, one of the biggest detractors from God’s voice is the growing on-line culture of people taking as Gospel everything they see on the Internet.

Some of the most outrageously false information, much of it hate filled, spreads around the world at the speed of light. Much of this noise has no basis in fact. A recent good example is that the Book of Revelations states that the anti-Christ will be of Muslim descent. Consider that the Book of Revelations was written in the First Century and the Prophet Mohammed did not found the basis of Islam until the Seventh Century. This supposed statement of fact about the anti-Christ came from the series of books, Left Behind, a work of fiction based loosely on the Book of Revelations. There are many other just as outrageous examples of what many people accept as true.

It is important that we unclutter our minds and our lives so that we can hear the most important sound, that of God speaking to us personally. The Hebrew Scripture prophets didn’t have God show up at their front door and say, “I want you to prophesize to the people for me.” For example, in Samuel’s case, God called to him quietly in the night until he said, “Here I am Lord.” In the case of Jeremiah who we heard in the First Reading, and in the case of Isaiah, God’s voice was heard in visions and dreams.

God's call is not limited to our faith history that we read about in Scripture, but has been heard by people down through the ages. A good example of a more recent call from God is the story of Millard Fuller.

Fuller was a fine example of the American success story. He was a high-powered corporate executive working many hours a day, seven days a week. He was making more than a million dollars a year by the time he was 29 years old. Gradually Fuller's health, marriage and integrity suffered bringing upon crisis after crisis.

During his time of crisis, he heard God calling to him, telling him that his life was overly full and his priorities were all wrong. One day, in prayer with his wife Linda, he committed his life to living the Gospel and quit his job. They sold their possessions and gave the money to the poor. After a search, Fuller's family found a Christian community to live in called the Koinonia Farm in Georgia.

One of the ministries he got into was building low-cost housing for the poor. After trying the concept in Zaire, Africa, Fuller returned to the US and founded Habitat for Humanity where low-income families could purchase homes with sweat equity and no interest loans. Today we are all aware of the good Habitat for Humanity has done here in Palm Bay and all over the country.

One who hears God's call and brings God's message to the people is a prophet. We are all called to be prophets at the time of our baptism when we are baptized priest, prophet and king. The life of a prophet is usually not an easy one, not in Scriptural days and not in these days.

The prophet Jeremiah was hated for bringing God's message to people who didn't want to hear it. The first reading is one of Jeremiah's lamentations, lamenting his misgivings for being a prophet of God who is tortured by the people he is trying to help. Yet love for God is strong in his bones and in his heart and he knew he can't say no to God and does not deny his role as prophet.

Millard Fuller did not have an easy time either. In 2005, he and his wife were fired from Habitat for Humanity after founding and nurturing the organization for 29 years. They did not sit around feeling sorry for themselves or feeling animosity towards the board of directors.

Instead, they founded a new organization, The Fuller Center for Housing, where they can continue answering God's call to eventually provide decent housing for all of God's poor.

Each of us has a calling from God. We may not be called to large scale work like Jeremiah, Samuel, Isaiah or Millard and Linda Fuller. We, however, do need to put aside all of life's noise and unclutter our lives and minds so that we can recognize the whisper of our own call, and like Samuel say, "Here I am Lord."

We may face adversity in living our Gospel call as did the Hebrew Scripture prophets, as did Jesus, and as did the Fullers. Our own adversity may be more or less than what these people faced. But, the Gospel message is that we have no reason to be afraid because God loves us. And, even though others might harm our bodies, they cannot harm our souls. Let us pray that the Eucharist we receive today and always will help us to hear and act on our callings from God so that we won't be denied before our heavenly Father.

33. **16th Sunday Ordinary Cycle B – Spiritual Rest**

There is an old story about a woman who goes to her refrigerator and opens the door and is shocked to find Bugs Bunny sitting on one of the shelves. She says to the rabbit, "What are you doing in my refrigerator?" He asks her what it says on the front of the refrigerator, she replies, "Westinghouse." Bugs says, "Well, I'm westing."

While the story is light hearted and cute, rest is an extremely important topic. We all need a Westinghouse. Rest is also a timely topic being summer when students get a rest from school and many of us take vacations. When we have time off from our normal routines and do something we really enjoy, we are refreshed and renewed.

In the Gospel, after the disciples report on the results of their first mission preaching the Gospel, healing the sick and casting out demons, they are exhausted. Jesus tells them to come away to a deserted place and rest for a while. Rest is an important scriptural theme. From the very beginning, in the story of creation, God spent six days working at creation and rested on the seventh. It is not important whether God needed to rest, but God gave us the gift of the Sabbath and God knows, we need the opportunity to rest. It is rest that brings the balance that we require to our lives.

Jesus knew the importance of rest from the beginning of his ministry. He started by isolating himself in the desert for forty days. He took the time to celebrate with family and friends and spent time alone in prayer when he needed it.

Not only is Jesus' ministry an example for our own lives of service, but he gives us a fine example of how to take care of ourselves, body and soul. We know that if we don't get enough sleep, at best, it can be difficult for us to function normally in our lives. If we are sleep deprived for long lengths of time, we risk getting sick. Sleep is extremely important, but it is also important to rest from our normal routine for the sake of our relationship with God; for the sake of our spiritual health. Even people who give their lives to the service of God, through ministry to others need time away from their work for rejuvenation.

Fr. Andrew Greeley tells a story about a woman who has spent most of her life being a mother. When her children leave home and she feels unfulfilled, she throws herself into service in her parish. She is involved in almost every ministry. She is at church every day from early in the morning until late in the evening. A year or so later, she finds herself burnt out and begins to dislike her parish work. She is uncomfortable with her feelings and decides to seek spiritual direction. When she talks with her spiritual director about her situation, she is advised to take one hour a day, one day a week and one week a year for prayer, meditation and development of her relationship with God. When she took this time, she found that she had the energy and motivation to serve her community and her God.

This is a good model for all of us. Daily time dedicated to prayer and meditation puts us in touch with both ourselves and God. Daily prayer time gives us an opportunity to lay down our burdens and give them over to God, at least for a little while. For many of us who are old enough to remember the days when stores were closed on Sundays, we had a day where our options were limited to church, family time and recreational activities. We were literally forced off of the treadmill of life to spend a day of relaxation and enjoying activities and people. that we didn't have time to concentrate on during the rest of the week. We truly had a Sabbath, the day of rest that God intends for us to have. We seem to have lost Sundays as a day of rest in today's world.

An annual retreat removes us from our regular routine and encourages extended periods of relaxation, being in touch with ourselves and with God. There are a number of church related retreats available or we can just take a relaxing vacation away from our day to day lives, finding God in natural beauty or with family and friends.

Time management, particularly for practicing Christians, is a balancing act. As Christians, we face two dangers regarding time. First, we can spend too much time working that not only interferes with our rest, but constant activity does not give God the time to enter our lives, to speak to us or for us to be still and listen to God. We need the opportunity for spiritual renewal and recharging.

How can God help us to weather difficult times and lift burdens that are too heavy for us to carry ourselves if we don't take the time to avail ourselves of God's strength and wisdom?

Second, we face the danger of too much withdrawal into rest. Prayer needs to become action; rest needs to give us the extra surge of strength that allows us to the work that we are called to by God. We do not isolate ourselves in rest to get away from relationship with fellow humans. We don't draw God into our lives to build a barrier that keeps others out. On the contrary, our personal encounters with God in our private place are to give us what we need to serve our fellow human beings in our families and communities.

Occasionally, although we need rest, we receive an urgent call to serve others. The Gospel illustrates such an occasion. Jesus and his disciples badly need well deserved rest and they take off in a boat to travel across the lake to get away from the demanding crowds. But, possibly due to lack of wind that day, by the time their boat gets to the other side, the same crowd that they were fleeing was energetic enough to beat the boat to the other side and greet them when Jesus and his disciples landed.

Many of us would likely have been upset that we couldn't get away from the crowds and be able to relax, but Jesus recognized that this was a time when he

had to forego his personal needs for rest and minister to others. It was probably difficult for him, but he did what his father called him to do.

It is important that we take care of ourselves on a regular basis so that when situations demand us to work when we need to be resting, we, too, have the strength to answer God's call.

Each of us needs a Westinghouse. It is simple. If we don't make plans in our life that will give us physical and spiritual rest, we probably won't get it. We each need to look at the way we live and determine how we can best give ourselves time to rest, with ourselves and with God, that will enable us to live our lives more fully.

Homily 20080727 (7-27-2008)

34. 17th Ordinary Cycle A – Fishermen’s Net Parable

The Gospel that we just heard picks up from last week’s Gospel with Jesus describing the Kingdom of God using more parables. The parable of the pearl and the parable of the buried treasures illustrate the precious value of the Kingdom of God. The parable of the fishermen’s nets is much more challenging because it illustrates the inclusiveness of the Kingdom.

Jesus uses the image of fishing from very early on in his earthly ministry. In his search for disciples, he encounters two fishermen, James and John, and says to them, “come follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” In those days, there were two common kinds of nets.

One was a casting net that took a great deal of skill to successfully fish with. The weighted net was placed in the water and when a catch that the fisherman specifically wanted was over the net, the fisherman would quickly pull it closed over the catch.

The second type of net was a drag net similar to what was outlawed a few years ago in Florida water. This net was a large square net with a weighted bottom that hung almost vertically from the fishing boat. The net was drawn towards land in the shape of a giant cone. The drag net caught everything in its path without any kind of discrimination. When the net was hauled in, the catch was separated into good fish and useless material.

These two types of nets correspond to the two views that people traditionally hold of church. The casting net represents an exclusive view of church. The exclusive view is that church is for people who are really and fully committed who are different from the rest of the world. Looking at the life of Jesus through Scripture, we would find this view not in line with what Jesus did, associating with saints and sinners alike.

The view that the drag net represents is that the Church, a major instrument of the Kingdom of God on Earth, does not discriminate and welcomes anyone that comes. Christ meant the church to be inclusive of all kinds of people. This is a major challenge for some.

The exclusive view of church allows us to judge who is worthy of being church, while in the inclusive view, we are not the ones who judge. In fact, scripture tells us that we must not judge. Matthew Chapter 7 Verse 1 states, “Stop judging, that you may not be judged.” Like the parables we heard last week, this parable also teaches that there will be a time of separation of the good and the bad, but it is God, not you and I, who is to determine the separation.

There have been a few inspirational Internet stories about derelict looking people coming to church to worship that were rejected by the members based on their appearance. In these stories, the derelict appearing person ended up being

Jesus Christ himself. How might we have judged or treated the subject of these stories?

There is a true story of a man who was an alcoholic and a drug addict who served time for bank robbery. He turned his life around as a result of finding God and became an ordained minister. His ministry has been helping the poor, the hungry and the homeless.

He is pastor of a church in Washington state called Scum Church. The name comes from 1st Corinthians, Chapter 4, where Paul is describing the life and treatment of disciples of Christ saying, “To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clad and roughly treated, we wander about homeless and we toil, working with our own hands. When ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we respond gently. We have become like the world's rubbish, the scum of all, to this very moment.”

The members of the scum church include street people, homeless people, people with body piercing, and people with hygiene issues. Many of the members have been made to feel uncomfortable in more traditional churches. However, the pastor will tell you that the faith of his congregation, their caring for each other, and the Christian lives that they live are on a par with those attending more traditional churches.

Would we judge members of the Scum Church if they were sitting in our pews? Would we make them feel welcome? Would we see them part of that mixture of people that makes up the church, or would we toss them aside as fisherman using a drag net would with useless material?

We know from scripture that Jesus ministered primarily to the broken. We know from life experience that none of us is perfect. Yet, it is us, imperfect people that are called to build the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. How many of us would have written off the drug addict and bank robber who became a minister? He turned his life around because there were people that accepted him and his past and helped him to change. Each one of us is called to do the same. At the same time, we should be open to others who are there to help us grow.

At the end of the Gospel, Jesus asks the question, “Do you understand these things?” He was not only speaking to his disciples two thousand years ago, but to us today.

When Jesus says “That is why every scribe, who has been instructed in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure house things old and new,” he was telling us that as his followers, we need to look at how we can put our God-given gifts to work kingdom building. We can only help to build the Kingdom of God when we help others to work with us.

We can't do it all. If every one of us could find just one way to help the lives of others for the better, think about how much better this world would be. We would be much closer to that Kingdom on earth that we pray for each time we say the Lord's Prayer.

Homily 20081005 (10-5-2008)

35. **Parable of the Vinyard**

The similarity of the first reading and the Gospel is no accident. When Jesus spoke the parable of the vineyard, those around him knew that he was referring to Scripture from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus quotes the beginning of the verses from Isaiah when he begins to speak. Isaiah says very explicitly that the vineyard is the people of Israel. Prospering vineyards were in biblical times and are today a source of great wealth. The vineyard of Isaiah was not prospering; it was producing low quality wild grapes because it was not tended with love and compassion.

The crops that God, the master of the verse, was looking for were justice and righteousness. Instead, the Israelites were concerned about their personal well-being rather than providing for the sick and those suffering economically like widows and orphans.

When Jesus tells the story himself, he has added a few details of interest.

The master leaves the vineyard flourishing in the hands of his people and goes away apparently with some sort of agreement to split the profits with the workers. When it comes time to settle accounts, the master sends his agents and they are beaten and sent away with nothing or worse, killed. Finally, the master sends his son believing that the workers will respect him, but the workers kill him too.

This parable has a past, a present and a future from the perspective of Jesus. The past included all of the times that God sent prophets to the house of Israel. The prophets were spurned, scorned and mistreated. As a result God let the Israelis suffer punishment at the hands of brutal enemies.

In the present, Jesus was speaking to the religious leaders who reduced Judaism to observing hundreds of minute laws without practicing the love and justice that the Father called for. Jesus knew that he was the final prophet in his era, the son that the Father sent who would be killed for challenging the status quo by trying to get people to build the vineyard, the Kingdom of God. The future that Jesus hoped for is a time of the Kingdom. A time when the vineyard of the Body of Christ is a place of peace, love, justice, mercy, forgiveness, redemption and compassion. Sadly, Jesus' hope still has not been achieved.

The modern-day prophets who have tried to work for the Kingdom, such as those working for civil rights, political leaders trying to bring justice to their countries and those bringing comfort and help to the very poor have been intimidated, beaten and even assassinated.

Not much has changed since the days of the prophets. Someone did a calculation that during the 3358 years between 1496 BC and 1861 AD there were 227 years of peace and 3130 years of war, that is thirteen years of war for each year

of peace. During the last three hundred years of that period, there were 286 wars in Europe and 2000 separate treaties that were supposed to guarantee permanent peace but lasted just an average of two years.

If this study extended to the current time, things probably won't have changed much. Besides the wars we are familiar with in Afghanistan and Iraq, there are other armed conflicts occurring all over the world and in countries where the citizens are controlled by armed forces.

There is a different and more horrifying kind of war going on around the world as well. It is even being fought in our own country. Two thirds of the people in the world live in extreme poverty and misery. There are many shocking statistics available but just to give an idea, 15% of the children in Africa do not live to see their fifth birthday; 20 people die world-wide every minute of every day due to hunger related causes. In 2002, when economic times were better than today, there were 700,000 homeless people in our own country. We would also be remiss if we did not consider the environmental damage that humanity has inflicted on our earth, God's creation.

We should be asking ourselves, "What happened to God's vineyard, why can't we get it right after all of this time?" We can see why just by reading the newspaper or watching television news. Problems are caused by the presence of selfishness, jealousy, greed, lust for power, materialism and anger. But, just as much, they are also caused by our own indifference, apathy, hopelessness, ignorance and lack of concern when issues don't seem to affect us personally.

We are today's tenants of God's vineyard. The vineyard is our families, our neighborhood, our country and our world. The tools that we need to cultivate our vineyard are Gospel values, all of our God given talents and skills. We must deepen our recognition of Christ suffering on the cross in all of the suffering people of the world, whether they are near or far. When the master calls for us to pay our rent for the vineyard, we will pay in love for our neighbors where love is not a feel-good word, but what we do for others, This includes those whose lives have been torn apart by poverty, natural disasters, economic disaster, sickness and all other troubles.

Perhaps James was thinking of this parable when he wrote, "What good is it if someone has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save them? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of us responds by saying, 'Go in peace; be warmed and filled' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, in his book, *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*, tells us how to determine if we are paying vineyard rent acceptable to God when he states, "If we see what needs to be repaired and how to repair it, then we have found a piece of the world that God left for us to complete. But if we only see what is wrong and how ugly it is and do nothing about it, then it is ourselves that need repair."

Homily 20081025 (10-25-2008)

36. AOS CENTER – PARABLE OF FIG TREE

We are very familiar with the second part of the Gospel, the Parable of the Fig tree. The first part is not often spoken about. It contains references to two disasters for which there is no definite information, but plenty of theological speculation given the events of the time in the Galilee. Luke refers to Galileans that Pilate murdered while they were involved in making animal sacrifices to God.

The Galileans were a volatile people who were often involved in political problems. This time Pilate had a lot of opposition because he wanted to build a new and improved water supply for Jerusalem, financing it from temple monies. It was a needed project and certainly justifiable, but the people were up in arms about using temple money to finance a public project.

Pilate commanded his soldiers to disguise themselves and mingle with the mob of Jews and at a signal disperse the mob. The scene turned angry and many Jews were killed.

The second incident was when the tower in Siloam fell and killed eighteen people who were likely working on Pilate's aqueduct. It is believed that the Jews thought that the tower fell and killed people for working for God's money that had been taken from the temple.

The Jews long held that suffering was connected to individual sin and we see that played out in a number of stories when Jesus healed the sick. Jesus, during his ministry, denied that individual sin and suffering were connected.

Jesus did understand that suffering would occur due to societal sin. He foretold the fall of Jerusalem due to the plotting, political ambitions and political intrigue among the Jewish nation. He knew that sooner or later the Romans would step in and destroy the city. This happened because the people were pursuing an earthly kingdom and rejecting the Kingdom of God.

We have no evidence that individual sin leads to suffering. Each individual is fairly isolated and with few exceptions, comparatively few individuals have controlled enough people to cause Mass suffering. But when most of a nation chooses the wrong ways, that nation is on a collision course with the ways of God. In these cases, many individuals are caught up in situations that they were not part of their making.

So we cannot say that individual sin and suffering are connected. But, when a nation chooses a wrong way, a way contrary to the ways of God, suffering is inevitable.

In many of the countries that seafarers come from, the entire population suffers from the few that have political and economic power. Employment opportunities for livable wages are few; unemployment and the resulting poverty are rampant.

Much of the economy of the Philippines comes from its major export, people earning wages abroad. In the case of the poor of our own country, people are exported to places like the South Bronx where they and their poverty are highly invisible to those in power. We can only speculate about what kinds of disasters and widespread suffering these situations can end in.

More appropriate than speculating about disaster, is looking at what can be done to ensure that we live in harmony with the way of God. The second part of the Gospel, the parable of the fig tree, speaks to the chances that God gives us to change our ways. The fig tree is spared but sooner or later, if it only takes and does not give, if it does not bear fruit, it will be cut down.

We have institutions and people in all societies that take and do not give back, at least not in proportion to what they get. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that the more that we are given, the more responsibility we have.

It is unfortunate that the term “spreading the wealth” is being generously thrown around in this year’s political campaign. The issue is not wealth spreading. This issue is a fair system where society provides for those who are cast aside.

We know that the problem is not one of laziness and wanting to be supported by someone else’s hard work. The problem is one of fostering a society where basic needs are met and everyone who wants to has the opportunity to become self sufficient. But this won’t happen until all people are willing to make sacrifices to help those who can’t help themselves to reach a position in life where they can help themselves.

The last two paragraphs of the article from Mikes Noise concerning the book, Amazing Grace, describe the situation in the world today and where God’s people have to bring themselves.

“Humanity seems to be absorbed in the pursuit of luxury. We strive to build societies that continually offer more and more “value” to their residents. Often these values are embarrassingly superficial: designer clothing, cutting-edge technology, exclusive neighborhoods, access to the cocktail party scene, celebrity status ... yet we continue to believe that the more of this stuff we have, the greater our relevance becomes, and the more entitled we are to belong to the ruling class.

It is natural for those with the most money to be the ones who pay the most taxes, and it is natural for the top taxpayers to expect the most in return for their contributions. But the Bible clearly teaches that when we forfeit the quality of life for others in order to create a luxurious community for ourselves, we spit in the faces of those whom God loves. We will be held accountable for these choices.”

Let us pray that we can do our parts to create a world where God’s love is not only felt by all, but given by all.

Homily 20081222 (12-22-2008)

37. **THE MAGNIFICAT**

Today's Gospel, the Magnificat, has become one of the great hymns of the Church. The language is very much of Hebrew Scripture and is similar to Hannah's song of praise in 1 Samuel at the beginning of Chapter 2. Karl Marx is known for saying that religion is the opiate of the people; but Stanley Jones, a 20th Century Methodist theologian said, "The Magnificat is the most revolutionary document in the world."

The Magnificat speaks of three revolutions of God. First, "He dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart." This states a moral revolution. Christianity is the death of arrogance because it is impossible to be arrogant when a person tries to live in a Christ like fashion.

The author, O'Henry illustrates how a person can want to change their life when they are shamed by the light of Christ. A young man used to sit next to a girl in a rural school and they were very fond of each other. He moved to the city became a pickpocket and a petty thief. One day he snatched an old lady's purse and he was very pleased with himself for the way he did it. It just so happened that he saw the girl who he knew in school walking down the street. She was still beautiful with the radiance of innocence. Suddenly he saw himself for the cheap, vile thing he really was. Burning with shame, he leaned his head against the cool iron of a lamp post. "God," he said, "I wish I could die."

He saw himself. When Christ enables a man to see himself, it is the deathblow to arrogance. This starts a moral revolution in a person.

Second, The Magnificat states, "He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly." This is a social revolution. Christianity puts an end to the world's labels and prestige. This is illustrated by the story of Muretus, a wandering scholar of the middle ages. He was poor. Got sick in a town in Italy and was taken to a hospital for poor people who could not pay for care. The doctors were discussing his case in Latin, never dreaming he could understand.

They suggested that since he was such a worthless person, they might use him for medical experiments. He looked up and answered them in Latin, "Call no man worthless for whom Christ died!" When we realize what Christ did for all people, it is no longer possible to speak about one person being better than another. All class distinctions are gone.

Third, The Magnificat states "The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich he has sent away empty." This is an economic revolution. A non-Christian society is an society where each person is out to get as much as they can get.

A Christian society is a society where no person would think of having excessive wealth while others have too little, a society where everyone must get only to give away.

The Magnificat is truly beautiful. But in that beauty, there is also an explosive, revolutionary element. Mary, the young, poor, uneducated Jewish girl who said yes to God, was not as naïve as one would expect because of her humble origins. She said the words that should cause a revolution in every Christian person that changes the world into the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

It is our challenge to rid ourselves of arrogance, judging of people who are different than us, and any type of greed. We need to live in a way that shows our awareness of and respect for the dignity of every person that Christ died for. When we do that, we can genuinely welcome the birth of Christ into our hearts on Christmas Day.

Homily 20081228 (12-28-2008)

38. **HOLY FAMILY ABC**

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Holy Family; Jesus, Mary and Joseph. More personally, we can also see this feast as a celebration of our own holy families. The Church holds dear the holiness of families and refers to families as the “domestic church.” Pope John Paul II said “The family finds in the plan of God the Creator and Redeemer not only its identity, what it is, but also its mission, what it can and should do.”

The catechism of the church says, “In our modern world, families are extremely important centers of living faith. They are “domestic churches” in which the parents are the first heralds of faith. In the home, father, mother, and children exercise their baptismal priesthood in a privileged way. The home is the first school of Christian life where all learn love, repeated forgiveness, and prayerful worship.”

Although we don’t know much about Jesus’ family life between childhood and his three years of public ministry, scripture reveals some information. The Christmas story tells us that Jesus was born in a barn among animals because there were no decent accommodations available. Because of Herod’s threat, the family found themselves as refugees in Egypt. He obviously received religious formation from Joseph and Mary. Today’s Gospel finds him being consecrated at the temple in accordance with Jewish tradition. Simeon’s pronouncement that Mary would be “pierced by a sword” due to Jesus’ role must have been very scary and possibly similar to a mother learning that a child is fatally ill.

We probably all know the fear that Joseph and Mary felt when they found that Jesus was missing on the way back from Jerusalem. This could be when our children get lost in the mall or miss their curfew without calling. We know that Joseph died at some point during Jesus’ youth leaving Mary a widow and Jesus fatherless.

As an adult, as an itinerant preacher, Jesus lived homeless and in poverty. Then Mary had to suffer the hardest thing a parent has to go through, being predeceased by her own child and witnessing his brutal death. Each of us in our own families has shared some of the difficult or tragic experiences of the Holy Family.

Mary must have also looked at Jesus with great pride when she saw the loving, gentle, and wise person that he grew into being. We also share that pride in our children when they accomplish good things in their lives.

Unfortunately, today too many families and individuals share one difficult aspect of Jesus life and that is homelessness. There was a cartoon on the Florida Today editorial page on Christmas Day that showed a family driving down a street and the father saying, “When I find myself feeling sad about how we could not

afford much for Christmas this year, it is important to remember that for some poor people, Christmas is just finding a place for the night.” The car happened to be driving by what looked like Joseph leading a donkey with Mary on it.

We know that Jesus was homeless when he was born due to circumstances beyond his control. He died as a homeless man probably by his own choice. Unfortunately, in 2007 there were more than 3.5 million people homeless in our country and over a third of these are families, holy families. This number has grown in 2008 due primarily to the economy. It is difficult to get a census of homeless people so estimates are usually understated. In Brevard County, there are estimated to be in excess of 3,000 homeless people and shelter space for only 500. Most residents of shelters are women who are victims of domestic violence or who are pregnant.

The epidemic of homeless in our country can be tied directly to two factors; increasing poverty and decreasing availability of affordable housing. Poverty has increased due to the loss of manufacturing jobs and other decently paying work that has moved off shore. Housing got extremely expensive during our years of prosperity and the rent for a one bedroom apartment exceeds the income of a person who is making minimum wage.

There are some interesting facts about the homeless that might surprise us. The buying power of the minimum wage has eroded by almost half in the last thirty years. An estimated quarter of homeless people are employed. The number of homeless school children has increased by over two thirds in Florida in the last year. Four out of ten homeless are US military veterans.

Much of our population is one serious accident, one serious illness or one or two missed paychecks away from homelessness. Little in the way of public assistance is available to most homeless people.

A question we may be asking ourselves is, “Why should we as Catholic Christians be concerned about the homeless?” Scripture gives us a clear answer in the Last Judgment narrative where we are told that in feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty and taking in the stranger; we are doing the same for Jesus. There used to be a poster in the kitchen of the Daily Bread in Melbourne that was a picture of Jesus and a caption that said, “How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore him on Monday?”

As part of our study of Catholic Social Teaching, our parish Just Faith group visited a homeless camp in Melbourne. The group living in this camp was made up of unrelated individuals who live as a family. They pool their resources, they share the work that needs to be done to maintain the camp, and they give what little they have to help other homeless people. When a homeless man was released from the hospital and had no place to go, they took him in.

None of the members of this family chose to be homeless and the stories that we heard were heartbreaking. Drugs and drunkenness are not allowed in this group and the group parted ways with several members for this reason. Those

members, who are healthy enough to work, do whatever honest work that comes their way.

They have many skills among them. The feedback from those who employ them has been nothing but positive. They do not fit the unfortunate stereotype that portrays the homeless as lazy, dishonest, and addicted to substances.

It was astonishing to learn that there are no less than twelve homeless campsites in Melbourne in wooded areas off a half mile of a well travelled street. Unfortunately, there are no safe, legal, protected campsites in the area except for a few at Wickham Park that are always in use. The police in different cities and towns have varying levels of tolerance for homeless. Palm Bay is known to be a tough place for homeless to find shelter.

Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, Washington, who chairs the US Council of Catholic Bishops Domestic Policy Committee, made a statement following Pope John Paul II's Lenten Declaration on the Homeless in 1997. He said, "We know from our own experience in parishes and dioceses where homeless people sleep on cots in our church basements and eat their meals in our soup kitchens that homelessness and poor housing are destroying lives, undermining families, hurting communities, and weakening the social fabric of our nation," Bishop Skylstad said. "Our Holy Father reminds us of our Christian responsibility--in fact our obligation--to work with others to ensure that families have adequate housing."

Certainly, a good starting point to satisfy our obligation that Bishop Syklstad states is to throw away any stereotypes about homeless people and consider them fellow members of the Body of Christ. We can support organizations that help the homeless in our community such as Daily Bread, and those in our parish such as St. Vincent de Paul and Loaves and Fishes. These groups need both volunteers and financial support. We can also take the needs of the homeless into account when we vote in elections. Finally, we can pray for the homeless and give thanks to God for the fact that the holy families of most of us here today have homes.

Homily 20090208 (2-8-2009)

39. **Gospel story of Taking without Giving**

No sooner had Jesus landed on the other side of the lake than once again he was surrounded by crowds. He must have looked on the crowds with a certain disappointment, because there was hardly a person who had not come to get something out of him. They came to get. They came--to put it bluntly--to use him. What a difference it would have made if, among these crowds, there had been some few who came to give and not to get. In a way it is natural that we should come to Jesus to get things from him, for there are so many things that he alone can give: but it is always shameful to take everything and to give nothing, but that is a very characteristic of human nature. There are four readily available examples of taking without giving.

First, there are those, most often young people, who make use of their homes. They regard their homes as being there for their comfort and convenience. It is there they eat and sleep and get things done for them. Home is a place to which we should contribute, from which we should not only to be taking all the time.

Second, here are those who simply use of their friends. There are some people we never hear from unless they want something from us. There are those who regard other people as existing to help them when they need help, and to be forgotten when there is no use for them.

Third, there are those who make use of the church. They want the church to baptize their children, marry their young people and bury their dead. They are seldom to be seen unless they want some service. It is their unconscious attitude that the church exists to serve them, but that they have no duty to serve the church.

Fourth, there are those who seek to make use of God. They never remember him unless they need him. Their only prayers are requests, or even demands, made of God. Someone has put it this way. Better hotels have bell boys. The hotel guest rings the bell and the bell boy appears; he will bring anything the guest wishes. Some people regard God as a kind of universal bell-boy, to be called when something is needed, but not to be thanked or praised.

If we look at ourselves, we are all, to some extent at some time, guilty of these aspects of human nature. It would gladden the heart of Jesus if more often we came to him to offer our love, our service, our devotion, and less often to demand the help we need.

Homily 20090225 (2-25-2009)

40. **7th Sunday Cycle B – GOD’S MERCY & FORGIVENESS**

As is often the case, today’s first reading and Gospel have a direct connection, God’s mercy and forgiveness. In Isaiah, the prophet is prophesying the deliverance of the Jewish people from Babylonian bondage because God is a merciful, loving and forgiving God. We worship a God that wants to forgive us, a God who is burdened by our punishment. There is no explanation for why God is full of mercy, love and forgiveness, especially in the light of what horrible things humanity has done through the ages since humans first started walking the earth. We can only assume that God is the way he is because that is how he wants to be and yearns for us to be.

In the Gospel, Jesus has a real challenge. He is between a rock and a hard place with the Jewish authorities who believe that only God can forgive. In the First Century, not much was known about illness and Jewish belief was that people became ill because of their sin or sins of their ancestors. It was much more politically correct for Jesus to say, “Get up and walk” than for him to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” But, Jesus got himself into serious trouble because of the perceived connection between illness and forgiveness. Although some sickness can come from sin, it typically does not result from the actions of the sick person, but more likely from those around the sick person or society at large. The fact that there is a more than 50 percent mortality rate of children under five in many third world countries cannot be blamed on the children themselves.

Young children are incapable of sin and what kind of God would punish them. The hunger-related infant and child mortality is caused by exploitation and the callousness of those who profit at the expense of the poor. In our own country, people in poor areas do not get the same kind of medical care as people in wealthier areas. These situations cannot be blamed on lack of God’s forgiveness, but can be a result of society’s neglect of the basic needs of others.

However, forgiveness or lack of forgiveness does affect our mental health. When we choose to forgive, we are more content and happy. When we choose not to forgive, we experience unhealthy stress and anger.

When I accidentally found Colorblind on television, I was so moved by it that I sent an email to Pamela Peak, the writer, director and producer of the video. In the course of our email dialogue, she told me a story that Mr. Bell told her class when they were about nine years old.

She wrote, “In our classroom discussions, Mr. Bell told us of how he had been discriminated against: He was in the US Army Marching Band performing in the hot summer in the South. He was a trombone player. He and his fellow soldiers, all the others white in his band, stopped one hot summer day to get a cold glass of lemonade when suddenly he was told at the lemonade stand, “We don’t serve

Negros here." To that Mr. Bell calmly replied, "I don't want a Negro, I want a glass of lemonade!"

His fellow soldiers stepped up to the window and said, "If you don't serve Alvin, then we don't want anything from your stand." They all backed Mr. Bell and walked away. Mr. Bell was embarrassed by this and he told us, gently, how it felt.

This story strongly impacted us. We knew him so well by that time and loved and admired him so much, we could not imagine that anyone would exclude him from anything. It was then that the horrors of discrimination hit our hearts. But Mr. Bell, being a true Christian, had already turned the other cheek. I remember one of the children asked, "Do you hate those people that wouldn't give you a glass of lemonade when you were thirsty just because you were a Negro?" Mr. Bell said, "No, I don't hate them. You don't hate. You have to realize that they were taught to discriminate. But you don't hate."

Mr. Bell responded to an ugly, hurtful situation with humor rather than returning the insult. Would we have responded that way? This is the kind of non-violent response that was taught by Martin Luther King. This is the kind of non-violent response that we offer when we forgive. This is the kind of non-violent response that black people and other minorities have been mostly living for years. Forgiving does not mean forgetting or letting injustice happen. Forgiveness is all in the way we handle situations.

Pamela went on to say that since Colorblind has been on public television; she has received many emails from black people telling her that her documentary has taught them that they can love white people.

Mr. Bell taught his students to love one another. He taught them to be in solidarity with those that society has oppressed. These are behaviors that many adults don't seem to understand, yet he was able to convey them to elementary school students. What kind of world would we have if every person had a mentor like Mr. Bell? As Catholics and as humans created in the image of God, being like Mr. Bell is our calling. We have the capacity to forgive and heal. In the end, forgiving and healing takes less energy than hating and holding a grudge. In the end, it helps to build the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. As we prepare for the beginning of Lent on Wednesday, rather than giving up something like sweets, we might want to consider being more forgiving and finding ways to implement more Catholic Social Teaching in our daily lives.

Let us take a moment and pray the Prayer of St. Francis so we will be reminded how we must live in God's image.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;

and where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen

