



Lectio Divina

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Monday, January 1, 2024

Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to help us read the Scriptures the same way that You read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, You helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of Your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to Your voice in Creation and in the scriptures, in events and in people, and above all in the poor and suffering. May Your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of Your resurrection and witness to others that You are alive in our midst as a source of fraternity, justice and peace. We ask this of You, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us Your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Luke 2: 16-21

A Key to the Reading:

The reason for Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem was the census imposed by Rome's emperor (Lk 2: 1-7). Periodically, the Roman authorities decreed these censuses in the various regions of their immense empire. It was a matter of registering people and knowing how many had to pay taxes. The rich paid taxes on land and goods. The poor paid for the number of children they had.

In Luke's Gospel we note a significant difference between the birth of Jesus and that of John the Baptist. John is born at home, in his land, in the midst of parents and neighbors and is welcomed by all (Lk 1: 57-58). Jesus is born unknown, away from His surroundings of family and neighbors and far from His land. "There was no room in the inn." He had to be left in a manger (Lk 2: 7).

Let us try to put our text (Lk 2: 16-21) into the wider context of the visit of the shepherds (Lk 2: 8-21). As we read, let us try to pay attention to the surprises we find and the contrasts that appear in this text.

A Division of the Text:

- Luke 2: 8-9: The shepherds in the field, the first people invited
- Luke 2: 10-12: The first announcement of the Good News is made to the shepherds
- Luke 2: 13-14: The praise of the angels
- Luke 2: 15-18: The shepherds go to Bethlehem and tell of their vision of the angels
- Luke 2: 19-20: Mary's response, as well as the shepherds, concerning these events
- Luke 2: 21: The circumcision of the child Jesus

The Text:

The shepherds went in haste to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them. When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What did you like best in this text? Why?
- What surprises and contrasts do you find in this text?
- How does the text teach us that the little ones are great in heaven while being the poorest on earth?
- What is Mary's and the shepherds response concerning the mystery of God just revealed to them?
- What is the message Luke wants to communicate to us through these details?

To go deeper into the theme

The Context of Then and of Today:

The text of the feast of the Mother of God (Lk 2: 16-21) is part of the broader description of the birth of Jesus (Lk 2: 1-7) and the visit of the shepherds (Lk 2: 8-21). The angel had announced the birth of the savior and gave a sign of recognition: "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger!" They were expecting the savior of a whole people, and they were to recognize Him in a newborn child, poor, who lies close to two animals! What a great surprise!

God's plan is fulfilled in an unexpected way, full of surprise. This happens today too. A poor child is the savior of the people! Can you believe this?

A Commentary on the Text:

- Luke 2: 8-9: The first invited people.
The shepherds were marginalized people and not appreciated. They lived together with the animals, separate from the rest of humanity. Because of their constant contact with animals, they were considered impure. No one would have ever invited them to visit a newly born baby. This is why the Angel of the Lord appears to pass on the great news of the birth of Jesus to them. Seeing the vision of the angels, they are full of fear.
- Luke 2: 10-12: The first announcement of the Good News

- Luke 2: 13-14: The praise of the angels: Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace for those He favors.

A multitude of angels appears descending from heaven. It is heaven that bends itself towards the earth. The parts of this verse summarize God's plan. The first part tells us what happens in the world up there: Glory to God in the highest heaven. The second part tells us what will happen in the world here below: On earth peace for those He favors! If people could experience what it means to be favored by God, everything would be different and peace would dwell on earth. And this would be to the greater glory of God who dwells in the highest!

- Luke 2: 15-18: The shepherds go to Bethlehem and tell of their vision of the angels. The Word of God is no longer a sound produced by the mouth. It is an event! The shepherds literally say: "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us." In Hebrew, the expression DABAR means word or talk. The word of God is a creative force. It fulfills what it says. At creation God said: "Let there be light, and there was light!" (Gen 1: 3). The word of the angel to the shepherds is the event of the birth of Jesus.

- Luke 2: 19-20: Mary's attitude and that of the shepherds concerning these events

Luke immediately adds that, "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." These are two ways of hearing and welcoming the Word of God:

- (i) The shepherds get up to see the events and verify the sign given by the angel, and then they go back to their flocks glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard.
- (ii) Mary, on the other hand, carefully keeps all these events in her mind and meditates on them in her heart. To meditate on things in one's heart means to reflect on them in the light of the Word of God, to better understand their full significance.

- Luke 2: 21: The circumcision and Name of Jesus.

According to the norms of the law, the child Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day after His birth (cf. Gen 17: 12). Circumcision was a sign of belonging to the people. It gave the person an identity. On this occasion each child received his name (cf. Lk 1: 59-63). He receives the name of Jesus that had been given Him by the angel before His conception. The angel had said to Joseph that the name of the child had to be Jesus, as "He is the one who is to save His people from their sins" (Mt 1: 21). The name of Jesus is the transliteration of the name "Yehoshua," or Joshua, and means Yahweh saves. Another name that will gradually be given to Jesus is Christ, which means Anointed or Messiah. Jesus is the awaited Messiah. A third name is that of Emmanuel, which means God with us (Mt 1: 23).

Further Information:

Mary in Luke's Gospel

- The role of the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel:

These are two rather well-known but less understood chapters. Luke writes them in imitation of the Old Testament. It is as though these two chapters were the last of the Old Testament so as to open the door for the coming of the New Testament. In these chapters, Luke creates an atmosphere of softness and praise. From beginning to end the mercy of God is sung: God, who comes to fulfill His promises. Luke shows

us how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and begins the New Testament. And He does so in favor of the poor, the *anawim*, who knew how to wait for His coming: Elisabeth, Zachary, Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna and the shepherds. That is why the first two chapters are history but not in the sense that we give to history today. They were more like a mirror for the Christians converted from paganism. They could discover who Jesus was and how He had come to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament, satisfying the deepest aspirations of the human heart. These chapters were also a mirror of the events that were taking place within the communities in Luke's time. The communities originating from paganism will be born from the communities of converted Jews. But these were different. The New did not correspond to what the Old Testament imagined and expected. It was "the sign of contradiction" (Lk 2:34), and caused tensions and was the source of much suffering. In Mary's reaction, Luke presents a model of how the communities could react to and persevere in the New.

A Key to the Reading:

- In these two chapters Luke presents Mary as a model for the life of the community. The key is given to us in the episode where the woman in the crowd praises the mother of Jesus. Jesus modifies the praise and says: "More blessed still are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Lk 11: 27-28). Herein lies the greatness of Mary. It is in the world where Mary knows how to relate to the Word of God that the communities contemplate. The better way of relating to the Word of God: welcoming it, incarnating it, living it, deepening it, reflecting on it, giving it birth and making it grow, allowing oneself to be overpowered by it even when one does not understand it or when one suffers because of it. This is the vision underlying the texts of chapters 1 and 2 of Luke's Gospel, which speak of Mary, the mother of Jesus.
- An application of the key to the texts:
 - Luke 1: 26-38: The Annunciation: "Let it happen to me as you have said!" Opening one's self so that the Word of God may be welcomed and incarnated.
 - Luke 1: 39-45: The Visitation: "Blessed is she who believed!" Recognizing the Word of God in the events of life.
 - Luke 1: 46-56: The Magnificat: "The Almighty has done great things for me!" A resistance hymn of hope.
 - Luke 2: 1-20: The Birth: "She treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."
The marginalized welcome the Word.
 - Luke 2: 21-32: The Presentation: "My eyes have seen the salvation!"
God's promise is fulfilled.
 - Luke 2: 33-38: Simeon and Anna: "A sword will pierce your soul" Being a Christian means being a sign of contradiction.
 - Luke 2: 39-52: At twelve years: "Did you not know that I must be in My Father's house?"
They did not understand the Word of God addressed to them!
- The contrasts that stand out in our text:
 - In the darkness of the night a light shines (2: 8-9).
 - The world up there, heaven, seems to embrace our world here below (2: 13).

- The greatness of God manifests itself in the weakness of a child (2: 7).
- The glory of God is made present in a manger, close to animals (2: 16).
- Fear generated by the sudden apparition of an angel is changed into joy (2: 9-10).
- Those completely marginalized are the first to be invited (2: 8).
- The shepherds recognize God present in a child (2: 20).

Praying with the Psalm 23 (22)

“Yahweh is My Shepherd!”

Yahweh is my shepherd,

I lack nothing.

In grassy meadows He lets me lie. By tranquil streams He leads me to restore my spirit.

He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits His name.

Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death I should fear no danger,

for You are at my side.

Your staff and Your crook are there to soothe me.

You prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup brims over.

Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life.

I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May Your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which Your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, Your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

The first thing the angel says is: Do not be afraid! The second is: Joy to be shared by the whole people! The third is: Today! Then the angel gives three names to indicate who Jesus is: savior, Christ and Lord! Savior is the one who frees all people from all ties! The authorities in those days liked to use the title savior. They attributed the title of Soter (Greek) to themselves. Christ means anointed or messiah. In the Old Testament this was the title given to kings and prophets. It was also the title of the future messiah who would fulfill the promises made by God to His people. This means that the newly born child, who lies in a manger, has come to fulfill the hopes of the people. Lord was the name given to God himself! Here we have the three greatest titles imaginable. From this announcement of the birth of Jesus as savior, Christ and Lord, can you imagine anyone with a higher standing? If an angel says to you: “Be careful! I give you this sign of recognition: you will meet a child in a manger, in the midst of poor people!” Would you believe him? God’s ways are not our ways!

Tuesday, January 2, 2024

Opening Prayer

All-powerful Father,

You sent Your son Jesus Christ to bring the new light of salvation to the world. May He enlighten us with His radiance, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 19-28

This is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, "Who are you?" He admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, "I am not the Christ." So they asked him, "What are you then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?" He said: "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as Isaiah the prophet said." Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Reflection

Today's Gospel speaks about the witness of John the Baptist. The Jews sent "priests and Levites" to question him. In the same way, some years later, they sent people to control the activity of Jesus (Mk 3: 22). There is a resemblance between the response of the people regarding Jesus and the questions which authorities address to John. Jesus asks the disciples: Whom do people say that I am? They answered: "Elijah, John the Baptist, Jeremiah, one of the Prophets" (cf. Mk 8: 27-28). The authorities address the same questions to Jesus: Are You the Messiah, or Elijah, the Prophet? John responds by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "I am a voice of one who cries in the desert: Prepare a way for the Lord." The other three Gospels contain the same affirmation concerning John: he is not the Messiah, but he has come to prepare the coming of the Messiah (cf. Mk 1: 3; Mt 3: 3; Lk 3: 4). The four Gospels give great attention to the activity and the witness of John the Baptist. Why do they insist so much in saying that John is not the Messiah?

- John the Baptist was put to death by Herod around the year 30. But up to the end of the first century, the time when the Fourth Gospel was written, John continued to be considered a leader among the Jews. After his death, the memory of John continued to have a strong influence in the living out of the faith of the people. He was considered a prophet (Mk 11: 32). He was the first great prophet who appeared after centuries without prophets. Many considered him the Messiah. In the year 50 Paul passed through Ephesus, in Asia Minor, and found a group of people who had been baptized with the baptism of John (cf. Acts 19: 1-4). Because of this, it was important to spread the witness of John the Baptist himself, saying that he was not the Messiah, and instead proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. John himself contributed to radiate better the Good News of Jesus.

- “How is it that you baptize if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? The John's response is another affirmation in which he shows that Jesus is the Messiah: “I baptize with water, but standing among you, unknown to you, is one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo the strap of His sandal.” Further ahead (Jn 1: 33) John refers to the prophecies which announced the coming of the Spirit in the Messianic times: “The one on whom you will see the Spirit descend and rest upon Him, is the one who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit” (cf. Is 11: 1-9; Ez 36: 25-27; Joel 3: 1-2).

Personal Questions

- Have you had someone like John the Baptist who has prepared the way for you to receive Jesus?
- John was humble. He did not try to make himself greater than what he was in announcing Jesus. Have you been that way for someone in your life?

Concluding Prayer

The whole wide world has seen the saving power of our God. Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth, burst into shouts of joy! (Ps 98: 3-4)

Wednesday, January 3, 2024

Christmas Season

Opening Prayer

Father, You make known the salvation of mankind at the birth of Your Son.

Make us strong in faith and bring us to the glory You promise.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 29-34

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel." John testified further, saying, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."

Reflection

In the Gospel of John, history and symbol join together. In today's text, the symbolism consists in recalling texts of the Old Testament which reveal hints to the identity of

Jesus of Nazareth. In these few verses (Jn 1: 29-34) we find the following expressions which contain a symbolical description:

- 1) Lamb of God;
- 2) Who takes away the sins of the world;
- 3) He existed before me;
- 4) The descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove;
- 5) Son of God.

- **Lamb of God.** This title brings to mind the Exodus and the night of the first Passover. The blood of the Paschal Lamb, with which the doors of the houses were signed, was a sign of liberation (Ex 12: 13-14). Jesus is the new Paschal Lamb who liberates His people (1 Co 5: 7; 1 P 1: 19; Rev 5: 6-9).
- **Who takes away the sins of the World.** This recalls a very beautiful phrase of the prophecy of Jeremiah: "There will be no further need for everyone to teach neighbor or brother: "You will know the Lord, they will all know me, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord; since I shall forgive their guilt and never more call their sin to mind" (Jer 31: 34).
- **He existed before me.** This recalls several texts of the Books of Wisdom, in which God's Wisdom, which existed before all the other creatures and which was with God, fixed her dwelling among the people of God (Pro 8: 22-31; Eccl 24: 1-11).
- **The descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove.** It denotes creative action where it is said that the "Spirit of God sweeping over the waters" (Gen 1: 2). The text of Genesis suggests the image of a bird which flies over its nest. An image of the new creation is thanks to the action of Jesus.
- **Son of God.** This is the title which summarizes all the others. The best comment on this title is the explanation from Jesus himself: "The Jews answered Him: 'We are stoning You not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy: though You are only a man, You claim to be God.'" Jesus answered: "Is it not written in your Law: I said: you are gods?" So the word 'gods' refers to those people to whom the word of God was addressed (and Scripture cannot be set aside). Yet to someone whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world you say, "You are blaspheming because I said, I am Son of God? If I am not doing My Father's work there is no need to believe Me, but if I am doing it, then even if you refuse to believe in Me, at least believe in the work I do; then you will know for certain that the Father is in Me and I am in the Father" (Jn 10: 33- 38).

Personal Questions

- Jesus offered himself completely for the whole of humanity. What can I offer to help my neighbor?
- We have also received the Holy Spirit. How conscious or aware am I that I am His temple?

Concluding Prayer

Sing a new song to Yahweh, for He has performed wonders, His saving power is in His right hand and His holy arm. (Ps 98: 1)

Thursday, January 4, 2024

Christmas Season

Prayer

Dear Father, You who are God Almighty and a merciful God, receive the prayer of your children, as the Savior that You have sent as a new light on the horizon of the world, rises again and shine on our entire lives.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 35-42

John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah," which is translated Christ. Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas," which is translated Peter.

Meditation

In the first chapter of his Gospel John takes us through a sort time of travel. A week punctuated by the repetition (three times) of the expression "the day after" (vv. 29, 35 and 43). Our track puts us at the second of these moments, the central one and the most important one, characterized by physical and spiritual transition of the first disciples of John to Jesus.

Our scene is brought to life by a very intense exchange of looks: from John to Jesus (v. 35), from Jesus to the two disciples (v. 38), by the disciples of Jesus (vv. 38-39), and finally Jesus speaks as he is looking, to the person of Peter (v. 42).

The evangelist uses different verbs, but all are full of nuances. Not casual looks, but life changing looks instead. Jesus, the Lord looks at His disciples and us, so that, in our turn, we should learn to look at Him. The verb that closes the passage is beautiful; "to look" which means in this manner, "to look inside."

Jesus is walking along the sea, along the shores of our lives, and John acts as a photographer. He records it. He uses verbs which tell us that today, Jesus still is passing by us, and our lives can be visited and intersected by Him. Our world can welcome the imprints of His footsteps.

The center of the passage is centered on the movement of Jesus. He walks first, then turns and stops. His eyes and His heart change the life of the two disciples. Here Jesus is revealed as God incarnate, God came among us. He turned from the bosom of the Father and turned toward us.

It is beautiful to see how the Lord draws us in His movements, in His own life. In fact, He invites the two disciples to "come and see." You cannot sit still, when meeting the Lord and His presence puts us in motion. It makes us get up from our old positions and makes us run. Collecting all the verbs referring to the disciples in this passage, we have:

"followed Him" (v. 37); "followed Him" (v. 38); "they went ... they saw ... they stayed with Him" (v. 39).

The first part of the passage closes with the beautiful experience of the first two disciples who remain with Jesus. They later come into His house and stay with Him. This is the path of salvation, of true happiness, which is offered to us when we accept to remain, to stand still, firm, determined, in love, without turning to and fro, toward one or the other master of the moment. Because, when there is Jesus, the Lord, and you are invited by Him, nothing is missing.

Questions

The time passage of this part of the Gospel, with its "day after" shows us that the Lord is not distant, but He enters our days and years in our concrete existence. Am I willing to open myself to Him, to share my life with Him? I am ready to deliver into His hands my present and my future so that He can drive my "day after"?

The disciples make a wonderful spiritual journey, highlighted by the verbs "heard, followed, went, saw, and stayed." Do I want to start this beautiful adventure with Jesus too? Do I open my ears to hear, to listen deeply, so I can give my positive response to the love of the Father who wants to join me? Do I feel born in me the joy of starting a new journey and walking behind Jesus? Are my heart and eyes wide open to see what really happens in and around me and to recognize in any event the presence of the Lord?

Peter receives a new name from Jesus and his life is completely transformed. Do I feel like that today, giving to the Father my name, my life and my whole person, so that He might give me a new birth as His son or daughter, calling me by name in His infinite love?

Final Prayer

The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.

In green pastures You let me graze; to safe waters You lead me; You restore my strength.

You guide me along the right path for the sake of Your name. Even when I walk through a dark valley, I fear no harm for You are at my side. (Psalm 23)

Friday, January 5, 2024

Christmas Season

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, You give us a new vision of Your glory in the coming of Christ Your Son.

He was born of the Virgin Mary and came to share our life.

May we come to share His eternal life in the glory of Your kingdom, where He lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 43-51

Jesus decided to go to Galilee, and he found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth." But Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Here is a true child of Israel. There is no duplicity in him." Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus answered and said to him, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this." And he said to him, "Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Reflection

- Jesus returned to Galilee. He met Philip and called him by telling him: "Follow Me!" The purpose of the call is always the same: "to follow Jesus." The first Christians sought to preserve the names of the first disciples and of some of them they even kept as their family names and the names of their places of origin. Philip, Andrew and Peter were from Bethsaida (Jn 1: 44). Nathanael was from Cana. Today, many forget the names of the people who were at the start of their communities. Remembering the names is a way of preserving identity.
- Philip meets Nathanael and speaks to him about Jesus: "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." Jesus is the one to whom all the history of the Old Testament refers.
- Nathanael asks: "From Nazareth? Can anything good come from that place?" Probably, even in his question, there shows a rivalry which existed among the small villages of the same region: Cana and Nazareth. According to the official teaching of the scribes, the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, in Judah. He would not come from Nazareth in Galilee (Jn 7: 41-42). Philip gives the same answer which Jesus gave to the other two disciples: "Come and see for yourself!" It is not by imposing, but by seeing that people are convinced. Once again the same way: to meet, to experience, to share, to witness, to lead toward Jesus!
- Jesus sees Nathanael and says: "Truly, he is an Israelite in whom there is no deception." And He affirms that He already knew him when he was under the fig tree. How could Nathanael be an "authentic or true Israelite" if he did not accept Jesus as the Messiah? Nathanael "was under the fig tree." The fig tree was the symbol of Israel (cf. Mi 4: 4; Zc 3: 10; 1 Kg 5: 5). An authentic Israelite is one who knows how to detach himself from his own ideas when he sees that they are not in agreement with God's plan. The Israelite who is not ready for this conversion is neither authentic nor honest. Nathanael is authentic. He was waiting for the Messiah according to the official teaching of the time (Jn 7: 41-42, 52). This is why, at the beginning, he did not accept a Messiah coming from Nazareth. But the encounter with Jesus helped him to understand that God's plan is not always as people imagine or desire it to be. He recognizes and acknowledges his mistake, he changes his idea, and he accepts God as Messiah and confesses: "Rabbi, You are the Son of God: You are the King of Israel!" The confession of Nathanael is only the beginning: The one who will be faithful will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of man. He will experience that Jesus is the new bond between God and human beings. It is the dream of Jacob which has become a reality (Gen 28: 10-22).

Personal Questions

- Which title for Jesus pleases you the most? Why?
- Have you had an intermediary that brought you to Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

For Yahweh is good,
His faithful love is everlasting,
His constancy from age to age. (Ps 100: 5)

Saturday, January 6, 2024

Christmas Season

Opening Prayer

Holy Spirit, You who breathed on the waters of creation and guided the steps of Moses in the desert, come today upon us and immerse us in You, so that our every step and thought may be directed towards Christ as we listen to His Word.

Dwell within us, Spirit of the Father, and guide us to the truth of ourselves and to the knowledge of the Son of God who redeems us and makes us one with Him, so that the Father may be well pleased with us too. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mk 1: 7-11

A Key to the Reading:

It is possible that Christ, in His human journey, grew in the knowledge of His identity and the task in human history entrusted to Him by the Father.

The baptism in the Jordan marks this growing in awareness and launches Jesus beyond the borders of His land, Galilee, into a universal mission and into a dimension where He shares the human condition. It is God himself who "descends" to be by the side of human beings, even though aware of their weaknesses, to allow them to "climb" to the Father and give them access to communion with Him. The "pleasure" of the Father that Jesus hears in the Spirit will go with Him always on His earthly journey, making Him constantly aware of the joyful love of Him who sent Him into the world.

The Text

This is what John the Baptist proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

A Time of Silence

interior, as well as exterior, to open our hearts and allow space for the Word of God to enter into us.

The Word Given to Us

- *The baptism:* purification rites by means of bathing or ablutions were quite common as a daily practice among the Jews at the time of Jesus (cf Mk 7: 1-4), as well as among the Essenes of Qumran.
- The word *baptism* indicates a bath, a complete immersion in water, and comes from the verb *baptizo*, rarely used in the Greek Old Testament: *to immerse or submerge*, producing a permanent change. We find this in 2 Kings 5: 14: the healing of Naaman, which comes about by means of a series of baths in the Jordan at the command of Elisha. It is from this event that the positive use of the word comes in later times.
- *The baptism of John:* is characteristic of this practice (so much so that it becomes known by his name) (cf Mk 1: 4). John works in an unnamed place along the Jordan and baptizes in the flowing water of the river, not in specified places and in waters prepared for the rite. The conversion and penance demanded by him (Mk 1: 4) are more on the moral than on the ritual level (cf Lk 3: 8) and the rite, which signified such an existential change (bath and confession of sins), took place only once in a lifetime. Moreover, John clearly says that his baptism is only the preparation for a more radical purifying event, directly connected with the final judgment of God: "baptism in the spirit" and "in fire" (cf Mk 1: 7-8, Mt 1: 2-3).
- The people of Judea and Jerusalem greatly welcomed John's preaching, so much so that large crowds went to him to be baptized (Mk 1: 5) as Joseph Flavius also narrates.
- *Jesus and John at the Jordan:* John knows quite well that he is not the Messiah and is inferior to him, yet he is called to prepare for His now imminent coming (Mk 1: 7-8). All the Gospels speak of this awareness, emphasized by the use of the verb in the past for his baptism and in the future for the baptism of the Messiah. This reflects the care that the first Christian communities took to show that Christian baptism was superior to John's baptism, as also Jesus, the Christ, was superior to John the Baptist (cf Mk 3: 14; Jn 1: 26-34).
- *Baptism in the Spirit:* it is the eschatological baptism promised by the prophets (cf Joel 3: 1-5), connected with the fire of the judgment or under the form of sprinkling (cf Ez 36: 25). Jesus receives this baptism soon after and His baptism will be the source and model of the baptism of the Christians. Thus the Christian community is founded on the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- *Jesus came from Nazareth:* Jesus stands out among the great crowd of Jewish penitents (cf Mk 1: 5) because He comes from an area where only echoes of the penitential preaching of the Baptist had reached in Galilee (Mk 1: 9). For Mark this is an important place: Jesus begins His activities there and is well received. After Easter,
- it is there that the disciples meet Him (16: 7) and understand Him fully and it is from there that they will leave for their mission (16: 20). In the light of what Mark says immediately after the voice from heaven, Jesus is not only "stronger" than John, but has a nature far superior to that of John. And yet He went down among those who

admitted being sinners, without being afraid of suffering any diminution of His dignity (cf Phil 2: 6-7). He is "the light that shines in the darkness" (cf Jn 1: 5).

- The second Gospel does not report the reasons for which Jesus goes to receive the baptism of penance, even though the event is one of the most historically reliable among those narrated in the Gospels. What primarily interests the Evangelist is the divine revelation that comes after the baptism of Jesus.
- *He saw the heavens torn apart*: this is not a kind of special revelation for Jesus alone. The heavens, literally, "rip themselves open," in answer to Isaiah's invocation: "If you would tear the heavens open and come down" (Is 63: 19b). Thus, after a time of separation, a completely new phase begins in the communication between God and humankind. This new relationship is confirmed and becomes definitive with the redemptive death of Jesus, when the veil of the Temple was "torn" (cf Mk 15: 38) as though a hand from heaven had struck it. The Easter of the death and resurrection is the "baptism wished for" by Jesus (cf Lk 12: 50).
- *The Spirit descending on Him*: Jesus "ascends" from the water of the river and immediately after, the heavens open and the Spirit "descends" and rests on Him. From now on the period of waiting for the Spirit is over and the direct way that unites God with humankind is opened. Mark shows that Jesus is the only possessor of the Spirit who consecrates Him Messiah, makes Him fully aware of being God-Son, and dwells in Him and sustains Him in the mission willed by the Father.
- According to Mark, the Spirit comes to Jesus like a dove. We meet the dove in the story of Noah and the dove is also connected to the waters and the work of God in the world (cf Gen 8: 8-12). Elsewhere, the dove is used as a reminder of fidelity and permanence, and for its faithfulness in returning to the place from which it departed (cf Ct 2: 14; Jn 1: 33-34). The Spirit rests permanently on Jesus and takes possession of Him. In this passage we could also see a reference to the "breathing of the spirit of God over the waters" of creation (Gen 1: 2). With Jesus, a "new creation" really begins (cf Mt 19: 38; 2 Cor 5: 17; Gal 6: 15).
- *A voice came from heaven*: with the coming of Jesus, communication between God and humankind is restored. It is not a matter of what the rabbis called "the daughter of the voice," an incomplete substitution of the prophetic word, but a matter of direct communication between Father and Son.
- *Came ... saw descending ... was heard*: we must admire the condescension of the Trinity that "stoops down" towards humankind, *descends* to the Jordan in Jesus to be baptized like so many sinners, *descends* upon Jesus in the Spirit for the sake of His self-awareness and His mission and *descends* in the voice of the Father to confirm His son-ship.
- *You are My Son, My Beloved; My favor rests on You*: Mark may have deliberately wanted to recall several passages of the Old Testament in order to emphasize, at least by allusion, the importance of the many nuances of these divine words.
- First of all, we recall Isaiah 42: 1 "Here is My servant whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have endowed Him with My spirit that He may bring true justice to the nations." It is JHWH whom introduces His faithful servant. Here, however, the title of "servant" is not used but that of "son," weaving the prophetic text with a psalm of royal and messianic investiture: "He has told Me, 'You are My son, today I have become your father'" (Ps 2: 7). The Evangelist (as the other synoptic) allows the nature of the human-divine identity of Jesus to appear.

- *You are My Son, My Beloved*: In the light of the Paschal faith, Mark could not have meant this revelation to be that God was adopting the man Jesus. The voice from heaven is a confirmation of a special relationship already in existence between Jesus and the Father. The title Son of God is attributed to Jesus in the very first verse of Mark and again at the end of the passion when the centurion says, "In truth this man was a son of God" (Mk 1: 1; 15: 39). However, this title recurs in various forms and frequently (cf 3: 11; 5: 7; 9: 7; 14:61). For Mark, the title "Son of God" is especially relevant for an understanding of the person of Jesus and for a full profession of faith. It is so important that eventually it was the proper name given to Jesus by Christians by which they meant to proclaim the essential elements of their own faith in Him (cf Rom 1:4): the Messiah king, the eschatological savior, the man who had a special relationship with the divine, the one risen from the dead, the second person of the Trinity.
- The fact that the voice from heaven calls Him "chosen" and "beloved" (as will be repeated at the Transfiguration in 5: 7 and 12: 6) emphasizes the completely unique relationship of the Father with Jesus, so special that it overshadows the other relationships between human beings and God. Jacob, like Jesus, is the "only and chosen" son (cf Gen 22: 2) and he is not spared the agony of a violent death (cf Heb 5: 7).
- *My favor rests on You*: these words emphasize once more the messianic election of Jesus, fruit of the Father's benevolence, that thus shows His absolute preference for the Son in whom He finds joy and satisfaction (cf Is 42: 1). While Jesus, obedient to the Father, begins His mission of bringing humanity back to the Father (cf Mk 1: 38).

A Few Questions

to give our reflection and actions direction:

- Like us, Jesus lives on a stage in life. He goes from the "hidden life" to His "public life." We are passing from the Christmas season to "ordinary" time. These are the times for us to realize our mission which consists in our daily commitment (often hard and usually dry) to express in our life an awareness that *God the Son is with us as our brother and savior*, by using the gifts received in baptism.
 - Am I aware of the mission entrusted to me by the Father?
 - Am I able to express this mission in my everyday life or do I limit myself to special occasions?
- Our baptism made us "children of God in the Son." God is also well pleased with us and we too are His "chosen" (cf 1 Jn 2: 7, 2: 21, etc.).
 - Am I aware of the love with which the Father looks at me and relates to me?
Am I able to respond to this love with the simplicity and docility of Jesus?
- Our passage contains a manifestation of the Trinity in action. The Spirit descends upon Jesus, the Father speaks to His Son and thus opens a new way of communicating with us human beings.
 - How is my prayer?
 - To whom do I usually pray?

Psalm 20

Let us pray this Psalm, aware of being chosen by the Father and that the Father is by our side always with great tenderness of heart.

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!
May He send you help from the sanctuary,
and give you support from Zion!

May He remember all your offerings,
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices!
May He grant you your heart's desire,

and fulfill all your plans!

May we shout for joy over your victory,

and in the name of our God set up our banners!
May the Lord fulfill all your petitions!

Now I know that the Lord will help His anointed; he
will answer him from His holy heaven
with mighty victories by His right hand. Some
boast of chariots, and some of horses;

but we boast of the name of the Lord our God.
They will collapse and fall;

but we shall rise and stand upright.
Give victory to the king, O Lord;
answer us when we call.

Closing Prayer

The liturgical context is excellent for an understanding and for praying this Gospel. We, therefore, take up the preface to convey our prayer to God:

Father, in Christ's baptism in the Jordan, You worked signs and wonders to manifest the mystery of the new washing (our baptism).

Your voice was heard from heaven

to awaken faith in the presence among us of the Word made man.

Your Spirit was seen as a dove resting upon Him and consecrated Your Servant with priestly, prophetic and royal anointing,

so that all would recognize Him as the Messiah, sent to bring to the poor the good news of salvation.

Grant that we may thank and glorify You for this priceless gift,

for having sent to us Your Son, our brother and teacher.

Let Your kind gaze rest upon us

and grant that we may bring You joy in all our actions, Forever and ever.

Sunday, January 7, 2024

The Epiphany of the Lord

Opening Prayer

Merciful Father, You have called me to meet You in this word of the Gospel, because You wish that I may have life, You wish to give me yourself. Send, I pray You, Your Holy Spirit upon me so that I may let myself be led along the holy way of this passage of Scripture. May I, today, get out of my prison to set out on a journey to seek You. May I recognize the star that You have lit as a sign of Your love on my journey to follow it tirelessly, intensely, committing my whole life. May I, finally, enter Your house and there see the Lord; may I bend low humbly before You to adore You and offer my life to You, all that I am and all that I have. Lord, by Your grace, may I return by a new route, without ever passing through the old paths of sin.

Gospel Reading – Matthew 2: 1-12

Placing the Passage in its Context:

This passage belongs to the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel, which constitute a kind of prologue to the whole work. We are presented with the historical origin of the Messiah as son of David, as well as His divine origin as Jesus Christ, God-with-us. Matthew immediately leads us into a very deep and engaging meditation, placing before us a choice about the people he introduces in his story: we either recognize and welcome the Lord who is just born, or we remain indifferent, even to wanting to eliminate Him and kill Him. This passage offers us the beautiful story of the journey of the Magi, who come from afar because they want to seek and welcome, love and adore the Lord Jesus. But their long journey and tireless search, and the conversion of their hearts, are facts that speak of us, facts already written on the scroll of our own sacred story.

An Aid to the Reading of the Passage:

The passage may be divided into two main parts, determined by the location where the scenes take place: the first part (2: 1-9a) takes place in Jerusalem, and the second part is focused around Bethlehem (2: 9b-12).

- Mt 2: 1-2: The passage begins with the place and time of the birth of Jesus: in Bethlehem of Judea, at the time of king Herod. Within this quite specific description, the Magi suddenly appear, coming from afar, and arriving in Jerusalem under the guidance of a star. It is they who announce the birth of the Lord king. They ask where they might find Him because they wish to adore Him.
- Mt 2: 3-6: On hearing the words of the Magi, king Herod, and with him all of Jerusalem, is disturbed and afraid. Rather than welcoming the Lord and joining Him, they seek to eliminate Him. Herod calls the authorities of the Jewish people and the experts in scripture. It is they, with the help of ancient prophecies, who reveal Bethlehem as the place to find the Messiah.
- Mt 2: 7-8: Herod calls the Magi in secret because he wants to use them for his own evil ends. His detailed interest is entirely directed towards the elimination of Christ.
- Mt 2: 9a: The Magi, urged by strength of faith and led by the star, leave again and go towards Bethlehem.
- Mt 2: 9b-11: The star reappears, moves with the Magi and leads them to the exact spot where the Lord Jesus is. Full of joy, they enter the house and prostrate themselves. They offer precious gifts because they recognize that He is king and Lord.

- Mt 2: 12: When they have contemplated and adored the Lord, the Magi receive a revelation from God. It is He who speaks to them. They are new men. They have in them a new heaven and a new earth. They are free of the deceits of Herod and therefore they go back to their lives by an entirely new way

The Text:

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel." Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

I listen deeply to the silent voice of the Lord and let the breath of the Spirit come to me and infuse me. In this silence I seek the Lord and repeat in my heart: "Where are You, my God?"

A Few Questions

- I take the first words that come from the mouths of the Magi and make them my own: "*Where is the infant king of the Jews?*" Do I really feel attracted to the place where the Lord is because I desire to be with Him? Am I ready to leave the dark and old places of my habits and my comfort, to undertake a journey of faith in search of Jesus?
- "*We have come to adore Him.*" Here the Word of the Lord tests me and puts me through a crucible: do I really live in a relationship of love with God? Am I able to open my life in His presence and allow Him to enter into my very heartbeats?
- "*From you will come a leader who will shepherd My people.*" Am I capable of placing and giving my whole existence to the guidance of the Lord? To trust in Him, in His love, in His real presence, even though He remains invisible?
- "*Going into the house they saw the child.*" It is precisely because they accept to go into the house, to enter into communion, to give themselves fully and truly, that their eyes can see, contemplate, and recognize. Am I not aware of the fact that the more I stay outside, the more I am distant from the life of my brothers and sisters and the more I become sad and empty?

A Key to the Reading

I look for some key words, some basic themes, that may guide and help me better penetrate the meaning of this passage of the Gospel, so that my life may be enlightened and changed by this Word of the Lord.

- **The journey:** This passage seems to be given the theme of a journey, an exodus, a going out. The Magi, these mysterious characters, get moving, go far away from their land and go seeking the king, the Lord. Matthew presents this fact by means of some verbs that proceed along with the development of the event: “*came, we have come, sent them, go, set out, went before them, going into, not to go back, returned.*” The physical journey of the Magi hides a much more important and meaningful journey: the journey of faith. This is the movement of the soul born from a desire to meet and know the Lord. At the same time it is God’s invitation which calls and attracts us with His own power. It is He who gets us to stand up and sets us in motion and who offers us signs and does not cease to walk with us. Scripture gives us many important examples, and these help us enter into this path of grace and blessings. God said to Abraham: “Leave your country, your family and your father’s house, for the land I will show you” (Gen 12: 1). Jacob was also a pilgrim of faith and conversion. It is written about him: “Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran” (Gen 28:10), and: “Moving on, Jacob went to the land of the sons of the East” (Gen 29: 1). Many years later, the Lord spoke to him and said: “Go back to the land of your forefathers and to your kindred; and I will be with you” (Gen 31: 3). Moses was also a man on a journey. God Himself showed him the way, the exodus, in his heart, and made his whole life a long march of salvation for him and for his brothers and sisters. “So come, I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, My people, out of Egypt!” (Ex 3: 10). As the new people of God, we are the children of the promise and of the new covenant and are called to go out, setting out on a journey in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus. The exodus never ceased. The liberation that comes from faith is always active. Let us look at Jesus, at His apostles, at Paul: not one of them stands still, not one of them hides. All these witnesses speak to us today by their deeds and they repeat: “Blessed is he who finds in You his strength and one who decides in his heart to go on the holy journey” (Ps 83: 6).
- **The star:** This is a very important and central element in this passage because the star has the role of guiding the Magi to their destination, enlightening their nights along the journey, indicating precisely the place of the presence of the Lord, and giving great joy to their hearts. Throughout the Bible, stars appear as signs of blessing and glory, almost as a personification of God, who does not abandon His people, and at the same time, is a personification of the people that does not forget its God and praises and blesses him (cfr. Ps 148: 3; Bar 3: 34). The word *star* appears for the first time in Scripture in Genesis 1: 16. On the fourth day the story of creation tells us of the appearance in the heavens of the sun, the moon and stars, as signs and as light, to set order and give light. The Jewish term for “star” *kokhab* is very beautiful and full of meaning. In fact, the letters that make up the word reveal the immensity of the presence that these celestial elements bring with them. We find two letters kaf, which signify “hand” and which enclose the letter waw which means man. Thus, within the stars there are two hands, kaf and kaf, that lovingly hold within them waw, man. These are the hands of God that never cease to hold us, if only we entrust ourselves to them. Then appears the letter *bet*, which means house. Thus, the stars speak of our journey towards our house, our constant migration, from whence we have come, from the day of our creation and even from all eternity. Often God compares the descendants of Abraham to the stars in the heavens, almost as if each

person is a star, born to give light in the night: "Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can" and then He adds: "Such will be your descendants" (Gen 15: 5). Jesus is also a star, the star that takes its rise from Jacob (Num 24: 17), which rises from on high and is the radiant morning star as the Apocalypse says (22: 16). By taking on flesh the infinite love of God, which bends itself down towards us, His children, opens the palms of His hands to gather and welcome us. Only such love can give our infinite weakness the capacity and courage, the perseverance and joy of accepting to leave and to go on the long and arduous journey of faith which takes us to Bethlehem, to the place where God appears to us.

- **The adoration:** The act of adoration is as old as humankind itself, because since the beginning, the relationship with the divine has been accompanied by this demand of love, humility, and self-offering. Before the greatness of God, we little people feel and discover that we are nothing, a speck of dust, a drop from a bucket. In the Old Testament, the act of adoration appears as an act of deep love towards the Lord, an act that demands the involvement of the whole person. It involves the mind, the will to choose, love full of desire and a body that bows and prostrates itself even to the ground. It is said in several places that the act of adoration is accompanied by a prostration with the face touching the ground. The face of man, his gaze, his breath returns to the dust whence he has his origin and there he recognizes himself as creature of God, as a breath of God's nostrils. "Come in, let us bow, prostrate ourselves, and kneel in front of Yahweh our maker" (Ps 94: 6). This is the invitation of Scripture to us every day which shows us the way to walk so that we may again and again come to the truth and therefore live fully.
- The New Testament goes even deeper in its spiritual reflection on this fact and seems to want to accompany us on a pedagogical journey of conversion and maturity in our interior life. In the Gospels we see the disciples, men and women, adoring the Lord Jesus after His resurrection (Mt 28: 9; Lk 24: 52) because they recognize Him as God. Jesus' words in His dialogue with the Samaritan woman give us a deep insight into the truth of this act, which after all, involves the whole of life and is an attitude of the heart. Adoration is for God the Father and does not happen here or there but in Spirit and in truth, which is in the Spirit and the Son, Jesus. We must not deceive ourselves. It is not by moving from one place to another, nor by seeking this or that spiritual person, that we can adore our God. The movement, the journey, is an interior one and takes place in our deepest being and is a complete surrender of ourselves, our life, and our whole being, to the wings of the Holy Spirit and into the arms of Jesus which are wide open on the cross and ever ready to attract all things to himself. St. Peter says clearly: "Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts" (1 Pt 3: 15). The act of bowing to the ground, of prostrating ourselves before the Lord comes from the heart. If we let ourselves be touched and reach into our hearts, if we allow the Lord to enter our hearts, that sacred space, then He will change us completely, transforming the whole of our person to make of us new men and women.

A Moment of Prayer: Psalm 84

A Hymn Concerning the Trust of Man on His Journey to the House of God

Res. I have seen Your star, Lord, and I have come to adore You!

How lovely are Your dwelling-places, YHWH Sabaoth. My whole being yearns and pines for Yahweh's courts, My heart and my body cry out for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow has found a home, the swallow a nest to place its young: Your altars, YHWH Sabaoth, my King and my God.

How blessed are those who live in Your house; they shall praise You continually.

Blessed those who find their strength in You, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

As they pass through the Valley of the Balsam, they make there a water-hole,

and -- a further blessing -- early rain fills it. They make their way from height to height, God shows himself to them in Zion.

YHWH Sabaoth, hear my prayer, listen, God of Jacob.

God, our shield, look,

and see the face of Your anointed.

Better one day in Your courts than a thousand at my own devices, to stand on the threshold of God's house

than to live in the tents of the wicked. For Yahweh God is a rampart and shield, he gives grace and glory;

Yahweh refuses nothing good to those whose life is blameless.

YHWH Sabaoth,

blessed is he who trusts in You.

Closing Prayer

Lord, my Father, I have really seen Your star, I have opened my eyes to Your presence of love and salvation and I have received the light of life. I have contemplated the night changed into light, pain into joy and solitude into communion; yes, all this happened before You, in Your Word. You have led me through the desert; You have led me to Your house and opened the door for me to enter. There I saw You, Your Son Jesus, savior of my life; there I prayed and adored, I cried and found Your smile, I kept silence and learned to speak. In Your house, merciful Father, I have found life once more!

And now I am going back, I have resumed my journey, but the way is not the one I took before and my life is not what it was before. Your Word has left me with a new heart, capable of opening itself to love, to listen, to welcome and become home to so many brothers and sisters whom You have placed in my way. I was not aware, Lord, but You have made me into a child again, You have given birth to me with Jesus. Thank You, Father, my Father!

Monday, January 8, 2024

Baptism of the Lord

Opening Prayer

Holy Spirit, You who breathed on the waters of creation and guided the steps of Moses in the desert, come today upon us and immerse us in

You, so that our every step and thought may be directed towards Christ as we listen to His Word.

Dwell within us, Spirit of the Father, and guide us to the truth of ourselves and to the knowledge of the Son of God who redeems us and makes us one with Him, so that the Father may be well pleased with us too. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1: 7-11

A Key to the Reading:

Even Christ, in His human journey, had to gradually grow in the knowledge of His identity and of the task, in human history, entrusted to Him by the Father.

The baptism in the Jordan marks this growing in awareness and launches Jesus beyond the borders of His land, Galilee, into a universal mission and into a dimension where He shares the human condition, until then unimaginable for Him and for His prophets: it is God himself who "descends" to be by the side of human beings, even though aware of their weaknesses, to allow them to "climb" to the Father and give them access to communion with Him. The "pleasure" of the Father that Jesus hears in the Spirit will go with Him always on His earthly journey, making Him constantly aware of the joyful love of Him who sent Him into the world.

The Text:

This is what John the Baptist proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

A Time of Silence

interior as well as exterior, to open our hearts and allow space for the Word of God to enter into us.

The Word Given to Us:

- *The baptism:* purification rites by means of bathing or ablutions were quite common as a daily practice among the Jews at the time of Jesus (cf Mk 7: 1-4), as well as among the Essenes of Qumran.

The word *baptism* indicates a bath, a complete immersion in water, and comes from the verb *baptizo*, rarely used in the Greek Old Testament: *to immerse or submerge, producing a permanent change*. We find this in 2 Kings 5: 14: the healing of Naaman, which comes about by means of a series of baths in the Jordan at the command of Elisha. It is from this event that the positive use of the word comes in later times.

- *The baptism of John:* is characteristic of this practice (so much so that it becomes known by his name) (cf Mk 1: 4). John works in an unnamed place along the Jordan

and baptizes in the flowing water of the river, not in specified places and in waters prepared for the rite. The conversion and penance demanded by him (Mk 1: 4) are more on the moral than on the ritual level (cf Lk 3: 8) and the rite, which signified such an existential change (bath and confession of sins), took place only once in a lifetime. Moreover, John clearly says that his baptism is only the preparation for a more radical purifying event, directly connected with the final judgment of God: "baptism in the spirit" and "in fire" (cf Mk 1: 7-8, Mt 1: 2-3).

The people of Judea and Jerusalem greatly welcomed John's preaching, so much so that large crowds went to him to be baptized (Mk 1: 5) as Joseph Flavius also narrates.

- *Jesus and John at the Jordan:* John knows quite well that he is not the Messiah and is inferior to him, yet he is called to prepare for His now imminent coming (Mk 1: 7-8). All the Gospels speak of this awareness, emphasized by the use of the verb in the past for his baptism and in the future for the baptism of the Messiah. This reflects the care that the first Christian communities took to show that Christian baptism was superior to John's baptism, as also Jesus, the Christ, was superior to John the Baptist (cf Mk 3: 14; Jn 1: 26-34).
- *Baptism in the Spirit:* it is the eschatological baptism promised by the prophets (cf Joel 3: 1-5), connected with the fire of the judgment or under the form of sprinkling (cf Ez 36: 25). Jesus receives this baptism soon after and His baptism will be the source and model of the baptism of the Christians. Thus, the Christian community is founded on the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- *Jesus came from Nazareth:* Jesus stands out among the great crowd of Jewish penitents (cf Mk 1: 5) because He comes from an area where only echoes of the penitential preaching of the Baptist had reached in Galilee (Mk 1: 9). For Mark this is an important place: Jesus begins His activities there and is well received. After Easter, it is there that the disciples meet Him (16: 7) and understand Him fully and it is from there that they will leave for their mission (16: 20). In the light of what Mark says immediately after the voice from heaven, Jesus is not only "stronger" than John, but has a nature far superior to that of John. And yet He went down among those who admitted being sinners, without being afraid of suffering any diminution of His dignity (cf Phil 2: 6-7). He is "the light that shines in the darkness" (cf Jn 1: 5).

The second Gospel does not report the reasons for which Jesus goes to receive the baptism of penance, even though the event is one of the most historically reliable among those narrated in the Gospels. What primarily interests the Evangelist is the divine revelation that comes after the baptism of Jesus.

- *He saw the heavens torn apart:* this is not a kind of special revelation for Jesus alone. The heavens, literally, "rip themselves open," in answer to Isaiah's invocation: "If you would tear the heavens open and come down" (Is 63: 19b). Thus, after a time of separation, a completely new phase begins in the communication between God and humankind. This new relationship is confirmed and becomes definitive with the redemptive death of Jesus, when the veil of the Temple was "torn" (cf Mk 15: 38) as though a hand from heaven had struck it. The Easter of the death and resurrection is the "baptism wished for" by Jesus (cf Lk 12: 50).
- *The Spirit descending on Him:* Jesus "ascends" from the water of the river and immediately after, the heavens open and the Spirit "descends" and rests on Him. From now on the period of waiting for the Spirit is over and the direct way that unites God with humankind is opened. Mark shows that Jesus is the only possessor of the

Spirit who consecrates Him Messiah, makes Him fully aware of being God-Son, and dwells in Him and sustains Him in the mission willed by the Father.

According to Mark, the Spirit comes to Jesus like a dove. We meet the dove in the story of Noah and the dove is also connected to the waters and the work of God in the world (cf Gen 8: 8-12). Elsewhere, the dove is used as a reminder of fidelity and permanence, and for its faithfulness in returning to the place from which it departed (cf Ct 2: 14; Jn 1: 33-34). The Spirit rests permanently on Jesus and takes possession of Him. In this passage we could also see a reference to the "breathing of the spirit of God over the waters" of creation (Gen 1: 2). With Jesus, a "new creation" really begins (cf Mt 19: 38; 2Cor 5: 17; Gal 6: 15).

- *A voice came from heaven*: with the coming of Jesus, communication between God and humankind is restored. It is not a matter of what the rabbis called "the daughter of the voice," an incomplete substitution of the prophetic word, but a matter of direct communication between Father and Son.
- *Came ... saw descending ... was heard*: we must admire the condescension of the Trinity that "stoops down" towards humankind, *descends* to the Jordan in Jesus to be baptized like so many sinners, *descends* upon Jesus in the Spirit for the sake of His self-awareness and His mission and *descends* in the voice of the Father to confirm His sonship.
- *You are My Son, My Beloved; My favor rests on You*: Mark may have deliberately wanted to recall several passages of the Old Testament in order to emphasize, at least by allusion, the importance of the many nuances of these divine words.

First of all, we recall Isaiah 42: 1 "Here is My servant whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have endowed Him with My spirit that He may bring true justice to the nations." It is JHWH whom introduces His faithful servant. Here, however, the title of "servant" is not used but that of "son," weaving the prophetic text with a psalm of royal and messianic investiture: "He has told Me, 'You are My son, today I have become your father'" (Ps 2: 7). The Evangelist (as the other synoptic) allows the nature of the human-divine identity of Jesus to appear.

- *You are My Son, My Beloved*: In the light of the Paschal faith, Mark could not have meant this revelation to be that God was adopting the man Jesus. The voice from heaven is a confirmation of a special relationship already in existence between Jesus and the Father. The title Son of God is attributed to Jesus in the very first verse of Mark and again at the end of the passion when the centurion says, "In truth this man was a son of God" (Mk 1: 1; 15: 39). However, this title recurs in various forms and frequently (cf 3: 11; 5: 7; 9: 7; 14: 61). For Mark, the title "Son of God" is especially relevant for an understanding of the person of Jesus and for a full profession of faith. It is so important that eventually it was the proper name given to Jesus by Christians by which they meant to proclaim the essential elements of their own faith in Him (cf Rom 1: 4): the Messiah king, the eschatological savior, the man who had a special relationship with the divine, the one risen from the dead, the second person of the Trinity.

The fact that the voice from heaven calls Him "chosen" and "beloved" (as will be repeated at the Transfiguration in 5: 7 and 12: 6) emphasizes the completely unique relationship of the Father with Jesus, so special that it overshadows the other relationships between human beings and God. Jacob, like Jesus, is the "only and chosen" son (cf Gen 22: 2) and he is not spared the agony of a violent death (cf Heb 5: 7).

- *My favor rests on You*: these words emphasize once more the messianic election of Jesus, fruit of the Father's benevolence, that thus shows His absolute preference for the Son in whom He finds joy and satisfaction (cf Is 42: 1). While Jesus, obedient to the Father, begins His mission of bringing humanity back to the Father (cf Mk 1: 38).

A Few Questions

to give our reflection and actions direction:

- Like us, Jesus lives on a stage in life. He goes from the "hidden life" to His "public life." We are passing from the Christmas season to "ordinary" time. These are the times for us to realize our mission which consists in our daily commitment (often hard and usually dry) to express in our life an awareness that *God the Son is with us as our brother and savior*, by using the gifts received in baptism.
 - Am I aware of the mission entrusted to me by the Father?
 - Am I able to express this mission in my everyday life or do I limit myself to special occasions?
- Our baptism made us "children of God in the Son." God is also well pleased with us and we too are His "chosen" (cf 1 Jn 2, 7, 3, 2: 21, etc.).
 - Am I aware of the love with which the Father looks at me and relates to me?
 - Am I able to respond to this love with the simplicity and docility of Jesus?
- Our passage contains a manifestation of the Trinity in action. The Spirit descends upon Jesus, the Father speaks to His Son and thus opens a new way of communicating with us human beings.
 - How is my prayer?
 - To whom do I usually pray?

Psalm 20

Let us pray this Psalm, aware of being chosen by the Father and that the Father is by our side always with great tenderness of heart.

The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!
May He send you help from the sanctuary,
and give you support from Zion!

May He remember all your offerings,
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices!
May He grant you your heart's desire,
and fulfill all your plans!

May we shout for joy over your victory,
and in the name of our God set up our banners!
May the Lord fulfill all your petitions!

Now I know that the Lord will help His anointed; he
will answer him from His holy heaven

with mighty victories by His right hand. Some
boast of chariots, and some of horses;
but we boast of the name of the Lord our God.
They will collapse and fall;
but we shall rise and stand upright.
Give victory to the king, O Lord; answer
us when we call.

Closing Prayer

The liturgical context is excellent for an understanding and for praying this Gospel. We, therefore, take up the preface to convey our prayer to God:

Father, in Christ's baptism in the Jordan, You worked signs and wonders to manifest the mystery of the new washing (our baptism).

Your voice was heard from heaven to awaken faith in the presence among us of the Word made man.

Your Spirit was seen as a dove resting upon Him and consecrated Your Servant with priestly, prophetic and royal anointing, so that all would recognize Him as the Messiah, sent to bring to the poor the good news of salvation.

Grant that we may thank and glorify You for this priceless gift, for having sent to us Your Son, our brother and teacher.

Let Your kind gaze rest upon us and grant that we may bring You joy in all our actions, Forever and ever.

Tuesday, January 9, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.

Help us to know Your will and to do it with courage and faith.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1: 21-28

Jesus came to Capernaum with his followers, and on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit; he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Jesus rebuked him and said, "Quiet! Come out of him!" The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. All were amazed and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.

Reflection

- Sequence of the Gospels of the days of this week. Yesterday's Gospel informed us about the first activity of Jesus. He called four people to form a community with them (Mk 1: 16-10). Today's Gospel describes admiration for the teaching of Jesus (Mt 1: 21-22) and the first miracle when He expels the devil (Mk 1: 23-28). The Gospel of tomorrow narrates the cure of Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1: 29-31), the healing of many sick people (Mk 1: 32-34) and the prayer of Jesus in an isolated place (Mk 1: 35-39). Mark gathers all of these episodes which had been transmitted orally in the communities, joining them together like bricks of a wall. In the years 70's, the year in which he writes, the communities needed orientation. By describing how Jesus began His activity, Mark tells of what they should do to announce the Good News. Mark gives them a catechesis by telling the communities about the events in the life of Jesus.
- Jesus teaches with authority, differently from the way the scribes do it. The first thing that the people perceive is the diverse way in which Jesus teaches. It is not so much the content, but rather the way in which He teaches that impresses the people. For this reason, by His different way, Jesus creates a critical conscience in people concerning the religious authority of that time. The people compare and say: He teaches with authority, in a way different from the way the scribes do. The scribes of that time taught quoting the authority. Jesus does not quote any authority. He speaks with His experience of God and of His life. His word is rooted in the heart.
- You have come to destroy us! In Mark, the first miracle is the expulsion of the devil. Jesus struggles and expels the power of evil that takes possession of people and alienates them from themselves. The man possessed by the devil shouts: "I know who You are: You are the Holy One of God!" The man repeated the official teaching which presented the Messiah as the "Holy One of God," as a High Priest, or like a King, Judge, Doctor or General. Even today, many people live alienated from themselves, deceived by the power of mass media, mass communication, and the advertising of business. They repeat what they hear others say. They live as slaves of consumerism, oppressed by the power of money, and threatened by debtors. Many think that their life is not as it should be if they cannot buy what the advertising recommends.
- Jesus rebuked the evil spirit: "Be quiet! Come out of him!" The spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him. Jesus restores the person to himself. He gives him back his conscience and his liberty. He makes the person recover his complete judgment (cf. Mk 5: 15). It was not easy then, it was not easy yesterday, and it is not easy today to do this in such a way that a person begins to think and act in a way which diverges from the official ideology.
- A new teaching! He commands even the evil spirits. The first two signs of the Good News are these: His different way of teaching the things of God, and His power over evil spirits. Jesus opens a new road in order for people to attain purity. At that time, a person who was declared impure could not present himself/herself before God to pray and to receive the blessing promised by God to Abraham. He/she should first purify himself/herself. These and many other laws and norms made the life of people very difficult and marginalized many people who were considered impure and far from God. Now, purified by the contact with Jesus, people could present themselves before God. This was a great Good News!

Personal Questions

- Can I really say: "I am fully free, master of myself? If I cannot say it of myself, then something in me is possessed by other powers. What do I do to expel this strange power?"
- Today many people do not live, do not think, but rather are driven by mass media. They do not have a critical mind or way of thinking. They allow other masters into their lives. How can this "devil" be expelled?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh our Lord,

how majestic is Your name throughout the world!

What are human beings that You spare a thought for them, or the child of Adam that You care for him? (Ps 8: 1, 4)

Wednesday, January 10, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.

Help us to know Your will and to do it with courage and faith.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1: 29-39

On leaving the synagogue Jesus entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them. When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. The whole town was gathered at the door. He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him. Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. Simon and those who were with him pursued him and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you." He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come." So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.

Reflection

- Jesus restores life for the service. After having participated in the celebration of Saturday in the Synagogue, Jesus went to Peter's house and cured his mother-in-law. Once healed, she gets up, with her health restored and having recovered her

dignity, and she begins to serve. Jesus does not only heal the person, but He does it in such a way that she begins to serve life.

- Jesus accepts the marginalized. When it begins to get dark, in the afternoon, at the end of Saturday when the first star shines in the sky, Jesus accepts and cures the sick and those possessed whom people had brought to Him. The sick and those possessed were the most marginalized people of that time. They had nobody to whom they had recourse. They depended on public charity. Besides this, religion considered them impure. They could not participate in the community. It was as if God rejected and excluded them. Therefore, the Good News of God consists of what He wants to do in the life of people: to accept the marginalized and the excluded, and to insert them again to live together in the community.
- To remain united to the Father, in prayer. Jesus is presented to us while He prays. He makes a great effort to have the time and the adequate environment to pray. He rises before the others and goes to a deserted place, to be able to be alone with God. Many times the Gospels speak to us about the prayer of Jesus, in silence (Mt 14: 22-23); Mk 1: 35; Lk 5: 15-16; 3: 21-22). Through prayer He maintains the awareness of His mission.
- To maintain the awareness of the mission and not to close oneself up in what is already obtained. Jesus is known. Everybody follows Him. This publicity pleases the disciples. They go to look for Jesus to take Him back to the people who were seeking for Him, and they tell Him: "All are looking for You." They thought that Jesus would go to the banquet. They were disillusioned! Jesus does not pay attention and tells them: "Let us go elsewhere. It is precisely for this that I have come!" Surely, they must have been surprised! Jesus was not like what they had imagined Him to be. Jesus had a very clear conscience of the mission and wants to transmit this to the disciples. He does not want them to close themselves up in the results already obtained. They should not look back. But, like Jesus, they should maintain conscious of their mission. It is the mission received from the Father, which has to orientate their decisions.
- It is precisely for this that I have come! This was the first misunderstanding between Jesus and His disciples. At present, it is only a question of a small difference. Later on, in the Gospel of Mark, this misunderstanding will grow and will practically become a break between Jesus and the disciples (cf. Mk 8: 14-21, 32-33; 9: 32; 14: 27). Today, there are some misunderstandings along the way in the proclaiming the Good News. Mark helps one to be attentive to the differences.

Personal Questions

- Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. Peter's mother-in-law began to serve. Do I act in such a way that my life is a service to God and to my brothers and sisters?
- Jesus is conscious and aware of His mission through prayer. Am I?

Concluding Prayer

Sing to Yahweh, bless His name! Proclaim His salvation day after day, declare His glory among the nations, His marvels to every people! (Ps 96: 2-3)

Thursday, January 11, 2024

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.

Help us to know Your will and to do it with courage and faith.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1: 40-45

A leper came to him and kneeling down begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched the leper, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

Reflection

- Accepting and curing the leper, Jesus reveals a new face of God. A leper came near Jesus. He was an excluded, impure person. He should be far away. Anybody who touched him would also become impure! But that leper had great courage. He transgresses the norms of religion in order to be able to get near Jesus. He calls out: "If You want, You can heal me. You need not touch me! It suffices that You want, and I will be healed!" This phrase reveals two evils: a) the evil of leprosy which made him impure; and b) the evil of solitude to which he was condemned by society and by religion. It also reveals the great faith of the man in the power of Jesus. Jesus is profoundly moved and cures both evils. In the first place, in order to cure solitude, He touches the leper. It is as if He said: "For Me, you are not an excluded one. I accept you as a brother!" And then He cures the leper saying: "I want it! Be cured!" The leper, in order to enter into contact with Jesus, had transgressed the norms of the Law. Jesus, in order to be able to help that excluded person and therefore reveal a new face of God, transgresses the norms of His religion and touches the leper. At that time, whoever touched a leper became impure according to the religious authority and by the law of that time.
- He integrated the excluded person into fraternal living together. Jesus not only cures, but also wants the cured person to be able to live with the others. He once again inserts the person in society to live with others. At that time, for a leper to be accepted again in the community, it was necessary to get a certificate from the priest that he had been cured. It is like today in some places. A sick person leaves the hospital with a document signed by the doctor of the department where he had been hospitalized. Jesus obliges the person to look for that document in such a way that he will be able to live normally with others. He obliges the authorities to recognize that this man has been cured.

- The leper announces the good that Jesus has done to him and Jesus becomes an excluded person. Jesus forbids the leper to speak about the cure. The Gospel of Mark tells us that this prohibition does not survive. The leper, walking away, began to spread the news to the point that Jesus could no longer publicly enter into a city, but remained outside in a deserted place (Mk 1: 45). Why? Because Jesus had touched the leper. Because of this, according to the opinion of the religion of that time, He himself was now impure and should live far away from all others. He could no longer enter the city. Mark says that people did not care about these official norms, in fact, people came to Him from everywhere (Mk 1: 45).
- Summarizing. In the year 70, when Mark wrote, as well as today, the time in which we live, it was and is important to have models of how to live and how to proclaim the Good News of God. In verses 16 to 45 of the first chapter of his Gospel, Mark describes the mission of the community and presents eight criteria in order that the communities of his time could evaluate their mission. The following is the outline:

Text	Activity of Jesus	Objective of the mission
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Mark 1: 16-20

Jesus calls His first disciples

To form the community

Mark 1: 21-22

The people were admired at His teaching

To create a critical conscience

Mark 1: 23-28

Jesus expels a devil

To overcome the force of evil

Mark 1: 29-31

He cures Peter's mother-in-law

To give life back so as to serve

Mark 1: 32-34

He cures the sick and the possessed

To accept the marginalized

Mark 1: 35

Jesus rises early to pray

To remain united with the Father

Mark 1: 36-39

Jesus continues the announcement

Not to stop at the results

Mark 1: 40-45

He cures a leper

To integrate anew the excluded

Personal Questions

- To proclaim the Good News means to give witness to the experience of Jesus that one has. What does the leper announce? He tells others the good that Jesus has done to him. This witness leads others to accept the Good News of God which Jesus brings to us. What is the witness that you give?
- To take the Good News to the people, it is not necessary to be afraid of transgressing the religious norms which are contrary to God's plan and which make communication, dialogue, and the living out of love difficult, even if this causes difficulty for the people as it caused difficulty for Jesus. Do I have this courage?

Concluding Prayer

Come, let us bow low and do reverence; kneel before Yahweh who made us!

For He is our God, and we the people of His sheepfold, the flock of His hand. (Ps 95: 6-7)

Friday, January 12, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.

Help us to know Your will and to do it with courage and faith.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 2: 1-12

When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it became known that he was at home. Many gathered together so that there was no longer room for them, not even around the door, and he preached the word to them. They came bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. Unable to get near Jesus because of the crowd, they opened up the roof above him. After they had broken through, they let down the mat on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to him, "Child, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?"

Jesus immediately knew in his mind what they were thinking to themselves, so he said, "Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth" –he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home." He rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this."

Reflection

- In Mark 1: 1-15, Mark shows how the Good News of God should be prepared and spread. In Mark 1: 16-45, he describes the objective of the Good News and the mission of the community. Now, in Mk 2: 1 to 3: 6 there is the effect of the proclamation of the Good News. A community faithful to the Gospel lives values which can be in contradiction to the interests of the unjust society which surrounds it. This is why one of the effects of the proclamation of the Good News is the conflict with those who defend the interests of the unjust society. Mark gathers together five conflicts which the proclamation of the Good News brought to Jesus.
- In the year 70, the time when he wrote his Gospel, there were many conflicts in the life of the communities, but they did not always know how to behave before the accusations which they received from the Roman authorities and from the Jewish leaders. This series of five conflicts found in Mk 2: 1 to 3: 6 served as a guide to the communities, those of the past as well as those of today. Conflict is not an incident along the road, it forms part of the journey.
- The following is the outline of the five conflicts which Mark presents in his Gospel:
Texts conflict:
 - 1st conflict: Mk 2:1-12
 - 2nd conflict: Mk 2:13-17
 - 3rd conflict: Mk 2:18-22
 - 4th conflict: Mk 2:23-28
 - 5th conflict: Mk 3:1-6

Adversaries of Jesus:

scribescribes

The s of the Pharisees

The disciples of John and the Pharisees

The Pharisees

The Pharisees and the Herodians

Cause of the conflict:

Forgiveness of sins

To eat with sinners

The practice of fasting

Observance of Saturday

To cure on Saturday

- The solidarity of the friends of the paralytic obtains the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is returning to Capernaum. Many people gather before the door of the house. He accepts everybody and begins to teach them. To teach, to speak of God, was what Jesus did the most. A paralytic, carried by four friends, arrived. Jesus is their only hope. They do not doubt about going up and they make an opening in the roof over the place where Jesus was. It must have been a poor house, with the roof being just mud covered with leaves. They lowered the stretcher with the man to Jesus. Jesus, seeing their faith, says to the paralytic: your sins are forgiven you. At that time people thought that physical defects (paralytic) were a punishment from God for any sin that had been committed. The Doctors of the Law taught that the person remained impure and therefore, incapable of getting close to God. For this reason, the sick, the

poor, the paralytics, felt that they were rejected by God! But Jesus did not think this way. Such a great faith was a sign that the paralytic was accepted by God. And for this reason, He declares: "Your sins are forgiven you!" With this affirmation Jesus denies that the paralysis was a punishment due to the sin of the man.

- Jesus is accused of blasphemy by those who held power. The affirmation of Jesus was contrary to the catechism of the time. It was not in accordance with the idea that they had of God. And because of this they react against and accuse Jesus: He blasphemes! According to them only God could forgive sins. And only the priest could declare someone forgiven and purified. How could it be that Jesus, a man without studies, a lay person, a simple carpenter, could declare people forgiven and purified of their sins? There was also another reason which pushed them to criticize Jesus. They had thought: "If it is true what Jesus says, we will lose our power! We will lose our source of income."
- By curing, Jesus shows that He also has the power to forgive sins. Jesus perceives the criticism. This is why He asks: "Which of these is easier to say to the paralytic: Your sins are forgiven you, or to say, get up, pick up your stretcher and walk? It is easier to say: "Your sins are forgiven you." Because nobody can verify if the sins have truly been forgiven or not. But if I tell him: "Get up and walk!" There, all can see if I have or don't have the power to heal. In order to show that He had the power to forgive sins, in the name of God, Jesus says to the paralytic: Get up, take up your stretcher and go off home! He cures the man! The leaders were confronted with a dilemma. Either their teaching was wrong and sickness is not related to sin, or Jesus had the power to forgive sins, proven by their own teaching! Thus, through a miracle, He taught that the paralysis of the man was not a punishment from God, and He showed that the faith of the poor is a proof that God accepts them in His love.
- The message of the miracle and the reaction of people. The paralytic gets up, he takes his stretcher, and begins to walk, and all say: "We have never seen anything like this!" This miracle reveals three very important things:
 - a) The sicknesses of people are not a punishment for sins.
 - b) Jesus opens a new way to reach God. What the system called impurity was no more an obstacle for people to get close to God.
 - c) The face of God revealed through the attitude of Jesus was different from the severe face of God revealed by the attitude of the doctors.
- This reminds us of what a drug addict said once he had recovered and who is now a member of a community in Curitiba, Brazil: "I grew up in the Catholic religion. I abandoned it. My parents were good practicing Catholics and wanted us, their children to be like them. People were obliged always to go to Church, every Sunday and every feast day. And when one did not go, they would say: "God will punish you." I went because this was imposed upon me, and when I became an adult, I no longer went to Mass. I did not like the God of my parents. I could not understand that God, the Creator of the world, could extend over me, a small child, threatening me with the punishment of hell. I liked much more the God of my uncle who never went to Church, but who every day, and I repeat, every day, bought twice as much bread than what he ate, in order to give to the poor!"

Personal Questions

- Do you like the God of the uncle or the God of the parents of the ex-drug addict?

- Which is the face of God that others discover in my behavior?

Concluding Prayer

What we have heard and know, what our ancestors have told us we shall not conceal from their descendants, but will tell to a generation still to come:

the praises of Yahweh, His power, the wonderful deeds He has done. (Ps 78: 3-4)

Saturday, January 13, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of love, hear our prayers.

Help us to know Your will

and to do it with courage and faith.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 2: 13-17

Jesus went out along the sea. All the crowd came to him and he taught them. As he passed by, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the customs post. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed Jesus. While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners sat with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him. Some scribes who were Pharisees saw that Jesus was eating with sinners and tax collectors and said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus heard this and said to them, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Reflection

In yesterday's Gospel, we saw the first conflict which arose concerning the forgiveness of sins (Mk 2: 1-12). In today's Gospel we meditate on the second conflict which arose when Jesus sat at table with the sinners (Mk 2: 13-17). In the years 70's, the time when Mark wrote, there was a conflict in the communities between Christians who had been converted from paganism and those from Judaism. Those from Judaism found it difficult to enter into the house of converted pagans and sit with them around the same table (cf. Acts 10: 28; 11: 3). In describing how Jesus faces this conflict, Mark directs the community to solve the problem.

- Jesus taught, and the people were happy to listen to Him. Jesus goes out again to go near the sea. People arrive and He begins to teach them. He transmits the Word of God. In Mark's Gospel, the beginning of the activity of Jesus is characterized by teaching and by acceptance on the part of the people (Mk 1: 14, 21, 38-39; 2: 2, 13) in spite of the conflict with religious authority. What did Jesus teach? Jesus proclaimed the Good News of God (Mk 1: 14). He spoke about God, but He spoke in a new way. He spoke from His experience, of the experience which He himself had of God and life.

Jesus lived in God. Surely He had touched the heart of the people who liked to listen to Him (Mk 1: 22, 27). God, instead of being a severe Jew who threatens from afar with punishment and hell, becomes a friendly presence and Good News for the people.

- Jesus calls a sinner to be a disciple and invites him to eat in His house. Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector and he immediately leaves everything and follows Jesus. He begins to be part of the group of disciples. The text says literally: While Jesus was at table in His house. Some think that in his house means the house of Levi. But the most probable translation is that it was a question of the house of Jesus. It is Jesus who invites all to eat in His house: sinners and tax collectors, together with the disciples.
- Jesus has come not for the just, but for sinners. This gesture or act of Jesus causes the religious authority to get very angry. It was forbidden to sit at table with tax collectors and sinners, because to sit at table with someone meant that he was considered a brother! Instead of speaking directly with Jesus, the scribes of the Pharisees speak with the disciples: How is it that He eats and drinks together with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus responds: "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I came to call not the upright, but sinners! As before with the disciples (Mk 1: 38), it is the conscience of His mission which helps Jesus to find the response and to point the way for the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus.

Personal Questions

- Jesus calls a sinner, a tax collector, a person hated by the people, to be His disciple. What is the message for us in this act of Jesus?
- Jesus says that He has come to call sinners. He provides a path to forgiveness. How do we act once we have His forgiveness? Do we consciously try to avoid sin?

Concluding Prayer

May the words of my mouth always find favor, and the whispering of my heart, in Your presence, Yahweh, my rock, my redeemer. (Ps 19: 14)

Sunday, January 14, 2024

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Good Shepherd, my Father, today You also come down from the eternal mountains and bring with You Your flock and lead it towards green pastures, of fresh grass, of good water. Today You send ahead of You Your dearest or favorite lamb, the Lamb whom You love with an incommensurable love; You give us Your Son Jesus, the Messiah. Behold, He is here! I beg You, help me to recognize Him, to fix my gaze on Him, my desire, my expectation. Make me follow Him, that I do not separate myself from Him, that I enter His house and remain there always. His house, oh Father, are You, yourself. I want to enter in You, I want to live. May the breath of Your Holy Spirit attract me, support me and unite me in love to You and to Your Son, my Lord, today and forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 1: 35-42

To Place this Passage in its Context:

This passage introduces us to the beginning of the evangelical account of John, clearly showing the succession of one day after another in of a whole week. Here we are already on the third day since John the Baptist began to give his witness of Jesus with the invitation to the disciples to follow the Lord, the Lamb of God. The ministry of Jesus begins during these days, with the Word of the Father who descends in the midst of men to meet them and to speak with them and dwell among them.

This place is Bethany, beyond the Jordan, where John baptized. Here the encounter with the Word of God takes place and the new life begins.

To Help in the Reading of the Passage:

- vv. 35-36: John the Baptist lives a very strong experience of encounter with Jesus, in fact it is precisely here, on the third day, that he recognizes Him fully, that he proclaims Him with his whole strength and shows Him as the true way to follow, as the life to be lived. Here John diminishes himself to the point of disappearing and grows as witness to the light.
- vv. 37-39: Having accepted the witness of their master, the disciples of John begin to follow Jesus. After having listened to His voice, they meet the Word and allow themselves to be challenged by it. Jesus looks at them, He knows them and begins His dialogue with them. He takes them with Him, introduces them to the place of His dwelling, and makes them remain with Him. The Evangelist indicates the exact hour of this face-to-face encounter between Jesus and the first disciples.
- vv. 40-42: Immediately, the witness flares up and spreads; Andrew cannot keep silent about what he has seen and heard, what he has experienced and lived, and immediately becomes a missionary, calling his brother Peter to come to encounter Jesus. He, fixing His look on that man, calls him and transforms his life: he was Simon, now he becomes Peter.

Text:

John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" — which translated means Teacher —, "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they went and saw where Jesus was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah" — which is translated Christ —. Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas" — which is translated Peter.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

I remain in silence and allow that these simple, but powerful words, envelope me, take possession of my life. I allow Jesus, who is coming, to fix His look on me, I allow Him to ask me, like He asked them: "What are you looking for?" and I allow Him to take me with Him, to His house. Because, yes, I want to dwell near Him ...

Listen More Attentively to This Passage

Now, I try to listen more attentively to this passage, by taking every word, every verb, being attentive to the movements, and to the looks. I really try to encounter the Lord in this page, allowing myself to be searched and known by Him.

- **“The next day John stood there again”**

In these words I feel the insistence of the search. I feel the faith of John the Baptist which grows. The days are going by. The experience of the encounter with Jesus is intensified. John does not give up, does not get tired, but rather, he always becomes more sure, more convinced, and enlightened. I place myself in contrast to John the Baptist: Am I one who is there, who remains, or rather, do I withdraw, get tired, or become weak and allow my faith to die out? Do I stand there, or do I sit down, do I wait or I do not wait anymore?

- **“Fixing his look on Jesus”**

Here is a beautiful verb which signifies “to look intensely,” to penetrate with the look” and this is repeated in verse 42, referring to Jesus, who looks at Peter to change his life. Many times in the Gospels it is said that Jesus fixes His look on His disciples (Mt 19: 26), or on a particular person (Mk 10: 21). He fixes His look to love, to call, to enlighten. His look never leaves us. I know that I can find peace by exchanging this look. How can I pretend not to see? Why continue to turn my look from here to there, fleeing from the Lord’s love which has been given to me and has chosen me?

- **“They followed Jesus”**

This expression referred to the disciples. It does not only mean that they began to walk in the same direction with Christ, but much more: that they consecrated themselves to Him, that they committed their life with Him and for Him. He is the one who takes the initiative. He tells me: “You, follow Me,” like with the rich young man (Mt 19: 21) and with Peter (Jn 21: 22). How do I respond? Do I have the courage, the love, the ardor, to tell Him: “Master, I will follow You wherever You go!” (Mt 8: 19), confirming these words with the facts? Or do I also say, like the one in the Gospel: “I will follow You, but first allow me to. ” (Lk 9: 61)?

- **“What do you search?”**

The Lord Jesus pronounces the first words in John’s Gospel and they are a very concrete question, addressed to the disciples who are following Him and to me personally. The Lord fixes His look on me and asks me: “What are you searching for?” It is not easy to respond to this question. I must go deep into my heart and listen to myself. What am I really searching for? My energy, my desires, my dreams, my investments, to what purpose are they aimed?

- **“They remained with Him”**

The disciples remain with Jesus, they begin to live with Him, and to have the house in common with Him. Perhaps, they began to feel and experience that the Lord himself is their new house. The verb which John uses here can simply mean to dwell, to stay, but also to dwell in the intense sense of indwelling one in the other. Jesus indwells in the womb of the Father and also offers to us the possibility of indwelling in Him and in all the Trinity. Today, He offers himself here, to me, to live together this indescribable, splendid experience of love. Therefore, what do I decide? Do I also stop like the disciples and remain with Him and in Him? Or do I leave or withdraw from the love and run to seek something else?

- **“And leads them to Jesus”**

Andrew runs to call his brother Simon, because He wants to share with him the infinite gift which He has received. He announces and proclaims the Messiah, the savior, and has the strength to take his brother with him. He becomes a guide. This is a very important passage. I do not know if I am sufficiently open and enlightened to witness to Him, who reveals Himself to me so clearly. Perhaps I am afraid, I am embarrassed, I do not have the strength, I am lazy, or I am indifferent?

A Key for the Reading

- **The Lamb of God:**

In v. 36 John announces Jesus as the Lamb of God, repeating the cry which he had already given the day before: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

The identification of Jesus with the Lamb is overflowing with Biblical references, both from the Old and the New Testament.

The Lamb already is mentioned in the Book of Genesis, in chapter 22, at the moment of the sacrifice of Isaac; God provides a lamb, to be offered as holocaust instead of the son. The lamb descends from heaven and takes upon himself the death of man; the lamb is sacrificed so that the son may live.

In the Book of Exodus, in chapter 12, the Pascal Lamb is offered, a lamb without blemish, perfect; His blood, which will be poured, will save the sons from the exterminator, who goes from house to house, during the night. From that moment, every son of God will remain signed and sealed by that blood of salvation. The way is opened to freedom, the way of exodus, to go to God and to enter into the land promised by Him.

The element of sacrifice, of the slaughter, of the total gift, constantly accompanies the figure of the lamb. The books of Leviticus and Numbers continually place before us this holy presence of the lamb. He is offered every day in the daily holocaust. He is sacrificed in all the sacrifices of expiation, of reparation, of sanctification.

The Prophets also speak about a lamb prepared for the sacrifice: a mute sheep, sheared without opening its mouth, like a tame and meek lamb led to the slaughter (Is 53: 7; Jer 11: 19). The Lamb sacrificed on the altar every day.

In the Gospel, it is John the Baptist who announces and identifies Jesus as the true Lamb of God, who takes upon himself the sin of man and cancels it by the shedding of His precious and pure blood. In fact, He is the Lamb sacrificed in the place of Isaac. He is the Lamb roasted in the fire on the Pascal night. He is the perennial sacrifice to the Father, offered for us. He is the suffering servant, who does not rebel himself, does not recriminate, but surrenders himself silently out of love for us.

Saint Peter says this openly: “You have been liberated from the futile way of your life thanks to the precious blood of Christ, like the lamb, without blemish and spotless.” (I Pt 1: 19).

The Apocalypse reveals openly all things concerning the Lamb. He is the one who can open the seals of history, of the life of every man, of the hidden heart, of truth (Ap 7: 1-12; 8: 1); He is the one who obtained victory, the one sitting on the throne (Rev 5, 6). He is the king, worthy of honor, praise, glory, adoration (Rev 5: 12). He is the spouse who invites us to His wedding banquet (Rev 19: 7). He is the lamp (Rev 23), the temple

(Rev 21-22), the place of our eternal dwelling. He is the Shepherd (Rev 7: 17) whom we shall follow wherever He goes (Rev 14: 4).

- **To See:**

Expressions concerning seeing are repeated five times. The first one is John, who already has the eye accustomed to see at a depth and recognize the Lord who passes by. He had to render witness to the light and for this reason has the eyes enlightened from within. In fact, near the Jordan River, he sees the Spirit coming down on Jesus (Mt 3:16); he recognizes Him as the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29) and continued to fix His look (v. 36) on Him to indicate Him to His disciples. If John sees in this way, if he is capable of penetrating beyond appearances, it means that he had already been joined by the loving look of Jesus. He had been enlightened before in the same way we are. In v. 38 it is said that Jesus sees the disciples who follow Him and the Evangelist uses a very beautiful verb, which means “to fix the look on someone, to look penetratingly and intensely.” The Lord truly does this with us. He turns towards us, gets close to us, takes to heart our presence, our life, our path following Him, and looks at us, for a long time, above all, with love, intensely involving himself. His look never leaves us alone. His eyes are fixed within us. They are designed within us as Saint John of the Cross sings in his Spiritual Canticle.

And then the Lord invites us, in turn, to open the eyes, to begin to see in a true way. He says: “Come and see.” Every day He repeats this to us without getting tired of addressing this tender and strong invitation, overflowing with promises and with gifts. “They saw where He was dwelling” John points out, using a different verb which indicates seeing profoundly, which goes beyond superficiality. It enters in understanding, knowledge, and in the faith of what one sees. The disciples – and we with them – saw that afternoon where Jesus dwelt. They understood and knew that His true dwelling place is not a place or a space.

Lastly, we have the same verb as in the beginning. Jesus fixes His look on Simon (v. 42) and with that light, with that encounter of eyes, of souls, He calls him by name and changes his life and makes him a new man. The eyes of the Lord are also open in this same way on us and they wash us from the ugliness of our darkness, enlightening us with love. With those eyes He is calling us, making a new creation of us. He is saying: “May there be light,” and there was light.

- **To Remain – to Dwell**

This is another very important verb, very strong, and another precious pearl of the Gospel of John. It is repeated three times, with two different meanings: to dwell and to remain. The disciples immediately ask Jesus where He dwells, where is His house, and He invites them to go, to enter, and to remain: “They remained with Him that day” (v. 39). It is not a physical, temporary remaining. The disciples are not only guests passing by who will leave soon. No, the Lord makes space for us in His interior place, in His relationship with the Father, and there He accepts us for always. He says: “Like You Father, are in Me and I in You, may these also be in us... I in them and You in Me...” (Jn 17: 21-23). He allows us to enter and He also enters. He allows us to knock and He himself knocks. He makes us dwell in Him and puts His dwelling place in us together with the Father (Jn 14: 23). Our call to be disciples of Christ and to announce Him to our brothers and sisters has its origin, its foundation, its vitality, in this reality of the reciprocal dwelling of the Lord in us and we in Him. Our true and lasting happiness springs from the realization of our remaining in Him. We have seen where He dwells, we have known the place of His presence and we have decided to remain with Him, today and always.

“Remain in Me and I in You... The one who remains in Me and I in him bears much fruit ... If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask for anything that you want and it will be given to you... Remain in My love” (Jn 15).

No, I will not go with anybody else, I will not go anywhere else but only with You, Oh Lord, my dwelling, my place of salvation! Allow Me, I pray, that I may remain here, near You, always, Amen.

A Moment of Prayer: Psalm 34

Refrain: Your face, Lord, I seek, do not hide Your face from me.

I seek Yahweh and He answers me, frees me from all my fears.

Fix your gaze on Yahweh and your face will grow bright, you will never hang your head in shame.

A pauper calls out and Yahweh hears, saves him from all his troubles.

The angel of Yahweh encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.

Taste and see that Yahweh is good.

How blessed are those who take refuge in Him. Fear Yahweh, you his holy ones; those who fear Him lack for nothing. Young lions may go needy and hungry, but those who seek Yahweh lack nothing good. Come, my children, listen to me, I will teach you the fear of Yahweh.

The eyes of Yahweh are on the upright, his ear turned to their cry.

They cry in anguish and Yahweh hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. Yahweh is near to the broken-hearted, he helps those whose spirit is crushed.

Though hardships without number beset the upright, Yahweh brings rescue from them all.

Final Prayer

Father, I thank You for having given me the presence of Your Son Jesus in the luminous words of this Gospel; thank You for having made me listen to His voice, for having opened my eyes to recognize Him; thank You for having placed me on the way to follow Him and to enter into His house, Thank You because I can dwell with Him, in Him and because He dwells in You, You are in me. Thank You for having, once more, called me, making my life new. Make of me, I beg You, an instrument of Your love; that I may never stop announcing Christ who comes; that I may not be embarrassed, that I do not close myself, do not give up, but always become happier, to lead to Him, to You, the brothers and sisters whom You, every day, make me encounter. Amen.

Monday, January 15, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers, and show us the way to Your peace in the world.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 2: 18-22

The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast. People came to Jesus and objected, "Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If he does, its fullness pulls away, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins."

Reflection

- The five conflicts between Jesus and the religious authority. In Mark 2: 1-12 we have seen the first conflict. It was about the forgiveness of sins. In Mark 2: 13-17, the second conflict is on communion around the same table, with sinners. Today's Gospel presents the third conflict concerning fasting. Tomorrow we have the fourth conflict concerning the observance of the Sabbath (Mk 2: 13-28). The day after tomorrow is the last conflict concerning the cure on the Sabbath (Mk 3: 1 -6). The conflict concerning fasting has a central place. For this reason, the words on sewing a piece of new cloth on an old cloak and the new wine into fresh skins (Mk 2: 21-22) should be understood in the light which also radiates clearly on the other conflicts, two before and two after.
- Jesus does not insist on the practice of fasting. Fasting is a very ancient practice, practiced by practically all religions. Jesus himself practiced it during forty days (Mt 4: 2). But He does not insist with His disciples that they do the same thing. He leaves them free. This is why the disciples of John the Baptist and those of the Pharisees, who were obliged to fast, want to know why Jesus does not insist on fasting.
- When the bridegroom is with them they do not have to fast. Jesus responds with a comparison. When the bridegroom is with the friends of the bridegroom, that is, during the wedding feast, they do not need to fast. Jesus considers himself the bridegroom. The disciples are the friends of the bridegroom. During the time in which Jesus is with the disciples, there is the wedding feast. A day will come in which the bridegroom will be absent and then, if they wish, they can fast. Jesus refers to His death. He knows and feels that if He wishes to continue on this path of freedom, the religious authority will want to kill Him.
- To sew a new piece of cloth on an old cloak, pour new wine in new skins. These two affirmations of Jesus, which Mark places here, clarify the critical attitude of Jesus before religious authority. One does not sew a piece of new cloth on an old cloak. When the cloak is washed, the new piece of cloth tears the cloak and the tear becomes bigger. Nobody puts new wine in old skins, because the fermentation of the new wine will tear the old skins. New wine in new skins! The religion defended by the authority was like an old cloak, like an old skin. It is not necessary to want to change what is new and brought by Jesus, for old customs. The concepts brought by Jesus cannot be

reduced to fit the measure of Judaism. Either one or the other! The wine which Jesus brings tears the old skins. It is necessary to know how to separate things. Jesus is not against what is "old." What He wants to avoid is that the old impose itself on the new, and thus, He begins to manifest it.

Personal Questions

- Beginning with the profound experience of God which encouraged Him interiorly, Jesus had liberty concerning the norms and religious practices. Today, do we have this same liberty and the freedom of the mystics?
- A new piece of cloth on an old cloak, new wine in old skins. Does this exist in my life?

Concluding Prayer

We have recognized for ourselves, and put our faith in, the love God has for us. (1 Jn 4:16)

Tuesday, January 16, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers, and show us the way to Your peace in the world.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 2: 23-28

As Jesus was passing through a field of grain on the sabbath, his disciples began to make a path while picking the heads of grain. At this the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?" He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry? How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of offering that only the priests could lawfully eat, and shared it with his companions?" Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. That is why the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Reflection

- The Law exists for the good of people. One day on the Sabbath, the disciples passed by a cornfield, and they opened a path by plucking ears of corn. In Matthew 12: 1, it is said that they were hungry. Quoting the Bible, the Pharisees criticized the attitude of the disciples. It would be a transgression of the law of the Sabbath (cf. Ex 20: 8-11). Jesus responded quoting the Bible to indicate that the arguments of the others have no meaning. He recalls that David himself did something which was prohibited, because he took the sacred bread of the temple and gave it to the soldiers to eat because they were hungry (1 Sam 21: 2-7). Jesus ends with two important phrases:

- (a) the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath;
 - (b) The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath!
- The Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath. For more than five hundred years, from the time of the Babylonian captivity to the time of Jesus, the Jews had observed the law of the Sabbath. This secular observance became for them a strong sign of identity. The Sabbath was rigorously observed. At the time of the Maccabees, toward the end of the second century before Christ, this observance had reached a critical point.
 - Attacked by the Greeks on Sabbath, the rebellious Maccabees preferred to allow themselves to be killed rather than to transgress the law of the Sabbath by using arms to defend their own life. For this, one thousand people died (I Mac 2: 32-38). Reflecting on the massacre, the Maccabee leaders concluded that they should resist and defend their own life, even on the Sabbath (I Mac 2: 39-41) Jesus used the same attitude: to consider the law of the Sabbath in a relative way in favor of human life, because the law exists for the good of human life, and not vice-versa!
 - The Son of Man is also the Lord of the Sabbath! The new experience of God as Father gives Jesus, the Son of Man, the key to discovering the intention of God who is at the origin of the Law of the Old Testament. For this reason, the Son of Man is also the Lord of the Sabbath. Living with the people of Galilee during thirty years and feeling in His own person the oppression and the exclusion to which so many brothers and sisters were condemned in the name of the Law of God, Jesus perceives that this could not be the significance of that law. If God is Father, then He accepts all as sons and daughters. If God is Father, then we should be brothers and sisters to others. And this is what Jesus lived and preached, from the beginning to the end. The Law of the Sabbath must be at the service of life and of fraternity. It was precisely because of His fidelity to this message that Jesus was condemned to death. He disturbed the system. He was uncomfortable for them and the system defended itself, using force against Jesus, because He wanted the Law itself to be at the service of life and not vice-versa.
 - Jesus and the Bible. The Pharisees criticized Jesus in the name of the Bible. Jesus responds and criticizes the Pharisees using the Bible. He knew the Bible by heart. At that time, there were no printed Bibles as we have today! In every community there was only one Bible, handwritten, which remained in the Synagogue. If Jesus knew the Bible so well, it means that during 30 years of His life in Nazareth, He participated intensely in the life of the community, where the Scripture was read every Saturday. By comparison, we are still lacking very much in familiarity with the Bible and participation in the community!

Personal Questions

- The Sabbath is for the human being and not vice-versa. How do I interpret this?
- Even without having the Bible at home, Jesus knew it by heart. Do I?

Concluding Prayer

I give thanks to Yahweh with all my heart, in the meeting-place of honest people, in the assembly. Great are the deeds of Yahweh, to be pondered by all who delight in them.
(Ps 111: 1-2)

Wednesday, January 17, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers, and show us the way to Your peace in the world.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 1-6

Jesus entered the synagogue. There was a man there who had a withered hand. They watched Jesus closely to see if he would cure him on the sabbath so that they might accuse him. He said to the man with the withered hand, "Come up here before us." Then he said to the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?" But they remained silent. Looking around at them with anger and grieved at their hardness of heart, Jesus said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death.

Reflection

In today's Gospel we meditate on the last of the five conflicts which Mark presents at the beginning of his Gospel (Mk 2:1 to 3:6). The four previous conflicts were provoked by the enemies of Jesus. This last one is provoked by Jesus himself and reveals the seriousness of the conflict between Him and the religious authority of His time. It is a conflict of life or death. It is important to note the category of enemies which has arisen in this conflict. It is a question of the Pharisees and the Herodians, that is, of the religious and civil authority. When Mark wrote his Gospel in the year 70, many of them still remembered very well the terrible persecution of the 60's, perpetrated by Nero against the Christian communities. In hearing that Jesus Himself had been threatened to death and how He behaved in the midst of these dangerous conflicts, the Christians found a source of courage and direction so as not to be discouraged along the journey.

- Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus enters the Synagogue. He had the habit of participating in the celebrations of the people. A man was there who had a withered hand, a physically disabled person who could not participate fully, because he was considered impure. Even if he was present in the community, he was marginalized. He had to remain far away from the rest.
- The concern of the enemies of Jesus. The enemies were observing Him to see if Jesus would cure on Saturday. They wanted to accuse Him. The second commandment of the Law of God ordered to "sanctify the Sabbath." It was prohibited to work on that day (Ex 20: 8-20). The Pharisees said that to cure a sick person was the same as working. And for this reason, they taught, "It is prohibited to cure on the Sabbath!" They placed the law above the well-being of people. Jesus was an uncomfortable person for them, because He placed the well-being of people above the norms and laws. The concern of the Pharisees and of the Herodians was not zeal for the Law, but rather the will and the desire to accuse and get rid of Jesus.

- Get up and stand in the middle! Jesus asks two things of the physically disabled person: “Get up and stand in the middle!” The word “get up” is the same one which the communities of Mark also used to say: “rise, resurrect.” The disabled person has to “rise,” to get up, to live in the middle and to take his place in the center of the community! The marginalized, the excluded, must live in the middle! They cannot be excluded. They must be together with the others! Jesus calls the excluded one to stand in the middle.
- Jesus’ question leaves the others without knowing what to say. Jesus asks, “Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good or to do bad, to save life or to kill?” He could have asked, “On the Sabbath, is it permitted to cure: yes or no?!” And in this way all would have answered, “No, it is not permitted!” But Jesus changed the question. For Him, in that concrete case, “to cure” was the same as “to do good” or “to save a life,” and not “to kill!” With His question Jesus put His finger on the wound. He denounced the prohibition of curing on the Sabbath, considering this to be a system of death. A wise question! The enemies do not know what to answer.
- Jesus looked angrily around at them, grieved to find them so obstinate. Jesus reacts with indignation and sadness before the attitude of the Pharisees and the Herodians. He orders the man to stretch out his hand, and He cures him. By curing the disabled man, Jesus shows that He does not agree with the system which places the law above life. In response to Jesus’ action, the Pharisees and the Herodians decide to kill Him. With this decision they confirm that, in fact, they are defenders of a system of death! They are not afraid to kill in order to defend the system against Jesus, who attacks and criticizes it in the name of life.

Personal Questions

- The disabled man was called to stand in the center of the community. In our community, do the poor and the excluded have a privileged place?
- Have you, yourself, ever been confronted by people such as the Herodians and the Pharisees, who place the law above the well-being of people? What did you feel at that moment? Did you agree with them or did you challenge them?

Concluding Prayer

Yet You are merciful to all, and nothing that You have made disgusts You, Lord, lover of life! (Wis 11: 23-26)

Thursday, January 18, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers, and show us the way to Your peace in the world.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 7-12

Jesus withdrew toward the sea with his disciples. A large number of people followed from Galilee and from Judea. Hearing what he was doing, a large number of people came to him also from Jerusalem, from Idumea, from beyond the Jordan, and from the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him. He had cured many and, as a result, those who had diseases were pressing upon him to touch him. And whenever unclean spirits saw him they would fall down before him and shout, "You are the Son of God." He warned them sternly not to make him known.

Reflection

- The conclusion reached at the end of this fifth conflict (Mk 3: 2 to 6) is that the Good News as it was announced by Jesus said exactly the opposite of the teaching of the religious authority of the time. This is why, at the end of the last conflict, it is foreseen that Jesus will not have an easy life and will be put to death. Death is already appearing on the horizon. They decide to make Him die (Mk 3: 6). Without sincere conversion it is not possible for people to reach a correct understanding of the Good News.
- A summary of the evangelizing action of Jesus. The verses of today's Gospel (Mk 3: 7-12) are a summary of the activity of Jesus and they highlight an enormous contrast. Earlier, in Mk 2: 1 to 3: 6, only conflicts were spoken of, including the conflict of life and death between Jesus and the civil and religious authority of Galilee (Mk 3: 1-6). Now, in the summary, we have the contrary: an immense popular movement, greater than the movement of John the Baptist, because people come not only from Galilee, but also from Judea, from Jerusalem, from Idumaea, from Transjordan, and even from the pagan region of Tyre and Sidon to encounter Jesus! (Mk 3: 7-12). All want to see Him and to touch Him. The people are so numerous that Jesus Himself is concerned. There is a danger of being crushed by the multitude. This is why He asks the disciples to have a boat ready for Him so that the crowd would not crush Him. And from the boat He spoke to the crowds. Especially the excluded and the marginalized who came to Him with their ailments: the sick and those possessed. Those who were not accepted in the society of the time were accepted by Jesus. Here is the contrast: on the one side the religious and civil leaders decided to put Jesus to death (Mk 3: 6), and on the other side there was an immense popular movement seeking salvation in Jesus. Who will win?
- The unclean spirits and Jesus. Mark insists very much on the expulsion of the unclean spirits. The first miracle of Jesus is the expulsion of the unclean spirits (Mk 1: 25). The first impact caused by Jesus is due to the expulsion of the devil (Mk 1: 27). One of the principal causes of Jesus' clash with the s is the expulsion of the unclean spirits. (Mk 3: 22). The first power which the Apostles received when they were sent out on mission was the power to expel demons (Mk 16: 17). What does it mean in Mark's Gospel to drive out or expel evil spirits?
- At the time of Mark the fear of the devil was increasing. Some religions, instead of liberating the people, increased fear and anguish. One of the objectives of the Good News of Jesus is to help people liberate themselves from this fear. The coming of the Kingdom means the coming of a stronger power. Jesus is "the Stronger Man" Who has come to conquer and overcome Satan, the power of evil, and to take away from Satan those imprisoned by fear (Mk 3: 27). This is why Mark insists very much on the

victory of Jesus over the power of evil, over the devil, over Satan, sin and death. From the beginning to the end, with similar words, Mark repeats the same message: "And Jesus drove out, expelled the impure spirits!" (Mk 1: 26-27, 34, 39; 3: 11-12, 15, 22, 30; 5: 1-20; 6: 7, 13; 7: 25-29; 9: 25-27, 38; 16: 9, 17). It seems almost a refrain which is repeated! Today, instead of always using the same words, we prefer to use diverse words. We would say, "The power of evil, Satan, which causes so much fear to people - Jesus overcame him, dominated him, conquered him, threw him off the throne, drove him out or expelled him, eliminated him, annihilated him, knocked him down, destroyed him and killed him!" What Mark wants to tell us is this: "Christians are forbidden to be afraid of Satan!" After Jesus rose from the dead, it is madness and a lack of faith to invoke Satan at every moment, as if he still had any power over us. To insist on the power of the devil in order to persuade people to return to Church means to ignore the Good News of the Kingdom. It is a lack of faith in the Resurrection of Jesus!

Personal Questions

- How do you live your faith in the Resurrection of Jesus? Does your faith in some way help you to overcome fear?
- To drive away or expel the devil! What do you do in order to neutralize this power in your life?

Concluding Prayer

Joy and happiness in You to all who seek You! Let them ceaselessly cry,"Great is Yahweh" who love Your saving power. (Ps 40)

Friday, January 19, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

ruler of all things in heaven and on earth, listen favorably to the prayer of Your people, and grant us Your peace in our day.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 13-19

Jesus went up the mountain and summoned those whom he wanted and they came to him. He appointed Twelve, whom he also named Apostles, that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach and to have authority to drive out demons: He appointed the Twelve: Simon, whom he named Peter; James, son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James, whom he named Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder; Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus; Thaddeus, Simon the Cananean, and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

Reflection

The Gospel today describes the acceptance and mission of the twelve apostles. Jesus begins with two disciples to whom He adds two others (Mk 1: 16-20). Gradually, the number increased. Luke tells us that He called the 72 disciples so as to go on mission with Him (Lk 10: 1).

- Mark 3: 13-15: The call for a two-fold mission. Jesus calls whom He wants and they go with Him, they follow Him. Then, "He appointed twelve, to be His companions and to be sent out to proclaim the message, with power to drive out devils." Jesus calls them for a double purpose, for a two-fold mission: (a) to be with Him, that is, to form the community of which He, Jesus, is the center; (b) to pray and to have power to drive out devils, that is, to announce the Good News and to fight against the power of evil that ruins the life of people and alienates people. Mark says that Jesus went up to the mountain, and, while He was there, He called the disciples. The call means climbing up. In the Bible, to climb the mountain recalls the mountain that Moses climbed when he had the encounter with God (Ex 24: 12). Luke says that Jesus went up to the mountain, prayed all night, and the following day He called the disciples. He prayed to God so as to know whom to choose (Lk 6: 12-13). After having called them, Jesus makes the election official and creates a more stable group of twelve people in order to give more consistency to the mission and to signify the continuity of God's project. The twelve apostles of the New Testament are the successors of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- Thus, the first community of the New Testament comes into being, a model community, which gradually grows around Jesus during the three years of His public activity. At the beginning they are only four (Mk 1: 16-20). Shortly afterwards the community increases as the mission is developing, extending into the towns and villages of Galilee. There is a time when they do not even have the time to eat or to rest (Mk 3: 2). This is why Jesus was concerned with giving the disciples some rest (Mk 6: 31) and to increase the number of missionaries (Lk 10: 1). In this way, Jesus tries to maintain the two-fold objective of the call: to be with Him and to go on mission. The community which is formed in this way around Jesus has three characteristics which belong to His nature: it is a forming, missionary community, and is inserted among the poor of Galilee.
- Mark 3: 16-19: The list of names of the twelve apostles. Immediately after, Mark gives the names of the twelve: Simon to whom He gave the name of Peter; James and John the sons of Zebedee, to whom He gave the name of Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the man who was to betray Him. The majority of these names come from the Old Testament. For example, Simon is the name of one of the sons of the patriarch Jacob (Gn 29: 33). James is the same as Jacob (Gn 25: 26). Judas is the name of the other son of Jacob (Gn 35: 23). Matthew also bore the name of Levi (Mk 2: 14), who was the other son of Jacob (Gn 35: 23). Of the twelve apostles, seven have a name that comes from the time of the patriarchs. Two have the name of Simon; two are called James; two Judas; one Levi. There is only one who has a Greek name: Philip. It would be like in a family where all have names of ancient times and only one has a modern name. This reveals the desire that people have to remake history from the beginning! It is worthwhile to think about the names which we give our children today. Like the apostles, each one of us is called by God by our name.

Personal Questions

- To be with Jesus and to go on mission is the two-fold purpose of the Christian community. How do you take on this commitment in the community to which you belong?
- Jesus called the twelve disciples by their names. You, I, we, all of us exist because God calls us by our name. Think about this!

Concluding Prayer

Show us, Lord, Your faithful love, grant us Your saving help.

His saving help is near for those who fear Him, His glory will dwell in our land. (Ps 85: 7, 9)

Saturday, January 20, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,

ruler of all things in heaven and on earth, listen favorably to the prayer of Your people, and grant us Your peace in our day.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 20-21

Jesus came with his disciples into the house. Again the crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat. When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

Reflection

The Gospel today is very short. There are only two verses. It speaks about two things: (a) about the great activity of Jesus up to the point of not even having time to eat; (b) the contrary reaction of the family of Jesus up to the point of thinking that He was out of His mind. Jesus had problems with His family. Sometimes the family helps; at other times it constitutes an obstacle. This is what happened with Jesus, and this is what happens with us as well.

- Mark 3: 20: The activity of Jesus. Jesus returned home. His home is now in Capernaum (Mk 2: 1). He is no longer living with His family in Nazareth. People, knowing that Jesus was at home, went there. Such a crowd of people gathered there that He and His disciples did not even have time to eat calmly (Mk 6: 31)
- Mark 3: 20: Conflict with His family. When Jesus' relatives knew this, they said, "He has lost His mind!" Perhaps this was so because Jesus did not seem to be behaving normally. Perhaps they thought that He was jeopardizing the name of the family.

- Whatever it was, the relatives decided to take Him back to Nazareth. This is a sign that the relationship of Jesus with His family was suffering. This must have been a source of suffering for Him as well as for Mary, His Mother. Later on (Mk 3: 31-35) Mark tells what the encounter of Jesus with His relatives was like. They arrived at the house where Jesus was staying. They had probably come there from Nazareth. There is a distance of about 40 km from there to Capernaum. His mother was with them. They could not enter the house because there were many people there at the entrance. This is the reason why they sent Him a message: "Your mother and Your brothers and sisters are outside asking for You!" Jesus' reaction was firm. He asked, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" And He Himself answers, pointing to the crowd gathered there around Him, "Here are My mother and My brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is My brother and sister and mother." He extended the family! Jesus does not allow the family to draw Him away from the mission.
- The situation of the family at the time of Jesus. In ancient Israel, the clan, that is, the large family (the community), was the basis of living together. This was for the protection of small families and of people, the guarantee of the possession of the land, the principal channel of tradition, and the defense of identity. That was the way which the people of that time had to incarnate the love of God in the love toward neighbor. To defend the clan, the community, was the same as to defend the Covenant. In Galilee at the time of Jesus, because of the Roman system introduced and imposed during the long years under the government of Herod the Great (37 BC to 4 BC), and his son Herod Antipas (4 BC to 39 AD), all this had ceased to exist, or existed less every day. The clan (community) was becoming weaker. The taxes that had to be paid to the government and to the Temple, the increasing indebtedness, the individualistic mentality of Hellenism, the frequent threats of violent repression on the part of the Romans, the obligation to accept the soldiers and to give them lodging, the ever-greater problems for survival, all led the families to close in on themselves and on their own needs. Hospitality was no longer practiced; neither was sharing, nor communion around the table, nor acceptance of the excluded. This closing in was strengthened by the religion of the time. The observance of the norms of purity was a factor in the marginalization of many people: women, children, Samaritans, foreigners, lepers, possessed, publicans or tax collectors, the sick, mutilated people, paraplegics. These norms, instead of helping and favoring acceptance, sharing and communion, favored separation and exclusion.
- Thus, the political, social and economic situation as well as the religious ideology of the time, was against and contributed to the weakening of the central values of the clan and the community. Therefore, for the Kingdom of God to manifest itself once again in community living, the people had to overcome the narrow limits of the small family and open themselves up to the larger family and the community.
- Jesus gives the example. When His relatives get to Capernaum and try to take hold of Him to take Him back home, He reacts. Instead of remaining closed up in His small family, He extends the family (Mk 3: 33-35). He creates the community. He asks the same thing of those who want to follow Him. Families cannot close in on themselves. The excluded and the marginalized should be accepted, once again, into the community, and in this way feel accepted by God (cf. Lk 14: 12-14). This is the path to be followed to attain the objective of the Law which said, "Let there be no poor among you" (Dt 15: 4). Just like the great prophets, Jesus tries to strengthen and affirm community life in the villages of Galilee. He takes the profound sense or significance of the clan, the family, and the community, like an expression of the incarnation of the love of God in the love toward neighbor.

Personal Questions

- Does the family help participation in the Christian community or does it make it difficult?
- How do you take on your commitment in the Christian community?
- What can all this tell us concerning our relationships in the family and in the community?

Concluding Prayer

Clap your hands, all peoples, acclaim God with shouts of joy.

For Yahweh, the Most High, is glorious, the great king over all the earth. (Ps 47: 1-2)

Sunday, January 21, 2024

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Shaddai, God of the mountain, who make of our fragile life the rock of Your dwelling, direct our minds to strike the rock of the desert, so that water may gush out to quench our thirst.

May our poor feelings cover us as with a mantle in the darkness of the night and open our hearts to hear the echo of the Silence, so that the dawn, which enfolds us with the light of a new day, may lead us to taste the holy memory, together with the remnant ashes of the fire of the pastors of the Absolute who on our behalf have kept watch near the divine Master.

Lectio – Mark 1: 14-20

After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Then they abandoned their nets and followed him. He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

A Moment of Silent Prayer

so that the voice of the Word may echo in our hearts.

Meditatio

Some questions to assist us in our meditation and prayer.

- The time has come, the Realm is close at hand. Do we believe that we are in Galilee and that the Gospel of God is being preached to us?
- Jesus walks along. In which sea are we casting our nets?
- Follow Me...and immediately they followed Him. Is there urgency in our daily life, or do we go on saying, "Wait a minute"?
- In their boat they were mending their nets. How many rips are there in our nets? In which boat are we dwelling? Is it our boat or is it that of our roots of the past?
- He called them: our name is on the lips of our Lord Jesus. Does His voice echo as the voice of one who leads us away from our sea?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper into the text.

This is a literary genre of vocation stories where the condition of life of the person addressed by God is first described, then the call is expressed in symbolic words or actions, and finally comes the abandoning of the activity first described. The call in our text reminds us of the call of Elisha by Elijah (1 Kings 19: 19-21) and that of Amos (Am 7: 15). The dependence on a typical biblical model does not exclude the substantial historical reality of the Gospel story. The similarity of the calls underscores a clear theological meaning in Mark's Gospel, which is the missionary practice of the disciples who will be sent in pairs (Mk 6: 7). The dynamic of this is in line with the original plan of creation when the Lord, thinking of Adam, said, "It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate" (Gen 2: 18). In their preaching mission, one will witness to the other, as Scripture says, "...the evidence of two or three witnesses is required" (cf Mt 18: 16; Dt 19: 15).

Jesus went to Galilee. There He proclaimed the Gospel from God. Jesus' preaching begins in Galilee and proclaims the Gospel, "the Good News" of God's initiative towards His people, and the establishment of the Realm. The Apostles' preaching will go from Galilee to the ends of the earth and will proclaim the Gospel, "the Good News" of the Christ Word, who has conquered death to make God's glory shine.

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Gospel. The time of waiting (*kairòs*) is over. The decisive moment has come: God is about to begin His reign. John the Baptist belonged to the time of preparation and completed his mission. He was apprehended and put to silence. Jesus belongs to the time of the establishment of the reign. It is the present that demands from human beings their collaboration by repenting. The coming of the reign points to this place of freedom where whoever listens to the proclamation can come to Christ or turn from it by refusing the good news. A Realm that is close to all and present to all who desire it. Conversion, faith, and following are three aspects of the same thing, which is the call to all to follow Jesus and the Good News.

As He was walking along by the Lake of Galilee He saw Simon and Simon's brother Andrew ... The Lake of Galilee is the background for the first phase of Jesus' ministry: a lake that is surrounded by mountains, 208 meters above sea level, 21 km long and 11 km wide. This body of water, in the shape of a cither, was a source of life because of the abundance of fish in it. On the shore of this lake Jesus chooses a life different from the daily life seen on these shores made up of fishermen, boats, nets and fish. Simon and Andrew are two brothers. The solidarity of this affective bond serves as a basis for the

new bond of faith that makes brothers of them beyond the ties of family. Two brothers who bear one name.

Come after Me and I will make you into fishers of people. This following is determined by a clear order. It is not an invitation; it is a command. The creative Word of God that called the light and the other creatures into being now calls His image to take part in the new creation. This act of following does not come from a mere personal decision, but from a meeting with the Person of Jesus who calls. It is an action of grace which allows these disciples to respond to His call. Jesus calls with divine authority as God called the prophets in the Old Testament. It is not the disciples who choose their master as was the custom with rabbis in those days, but the Master who chooses His disciples as repositories, not of a doctrine or teaching, but of God's inheritance. The call means abandoning one's family, profession, a complete change of life in order to adhere to a life that does not allow for personal space. The disciples are men of the Realm. The call to become disciples of Jesus is an "eschatological call."

At once they left their nets and followed Him. The response is immediate. A response that tears even the strongest ties. The verb used to indicate the following is *akolouthèin*, a biblical term to indicate the action of a servant who goes with his master to render him a service. It is a material following, a literal "going after." When it refers to the disciples, it expresses full participation in the life of Jesus and His cause.

Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. He called them. The verb to call, *kalein*, is another term typical of following. There is an added element compared to the call of the first two: the figure of the father and of the workers. The father also has a name. The fact that he is deprived of his two sons gives him a unique dignity. He remains alone with the workers who will take the place of the sons. The solitude of those left behind is never a senseless solitude.

Reflection

John had been apprehended and Jesus walks in Galilee: two paths at the service of the one Lord. The time has come. That time that humankind cannot seize and possess is fulfilled and demands a change of direction. The time for a sea and nets to fish elsewhere. Men and women are called so that nothing of who they are may be lost. Their identity remains, what changes is only the object of their actions. No more fish, but men. No more relationship with inferior creatures, but a relationship of equality with creatures of equal dignity. New nets to be mended, the nets of a demanding kind of fishing: they are the nets of preaching that will be cast into the hearts of people during the night of pain and lack of feeling. The words "Follow Me," like a key, opens up new horizons. One does not embark on this venture alone. Bonds are not broken. The brothers become more so. They still share the bitter experience of earning a living, but now they are not seeking for themselves but giving to others. The sea, symbol of everything that cannot be controlled, is there with the familiar and calm movement of the waters that break on the shore and say, "Go." Jesus, a man among so many, is the God who approaches the shores of the sea, a God who walks into the life of human beings, a God who sees with human eyes, a God who speaks with new authority, saying "Follow Me." And those men who were fishermen at once left and followed Him. They leave for another sea, the sea of firm land, the sea of villages, the sea of the temple, the sea of the streets. They leave at the call of a gaze that beckons, a gaze capable of convincing them to leave everything, not just their boats, the sea, the nets, but even their father, their history, their affections, to the very origin of their being. Friends who at night entrusted themselves to the waves of the Sea of Galilee, leave their zone of safety for far away seas. It is an old friendship that leaves not knowing for where, but with hearts bearing the warmth of a voice and a look: "Follow Me."

Oratio – Psalm 86 (85)

All the nations You have made shall come to bow before You, Lord,
and give honor to Your name.

For You are great and do wondrous deeds;
and You alone are God. Teach me, Lord, Your way that I may walk in Your truth,
single-hearted and revering Your name.

I will praise You with all my heart, glorify Your name forever, Lord my God.

Contemplatio

Lord, my expectations are fulfilled in Your temple. You, the Living One, who continue to go to the shores of human life, that like a lake in the shape of a cither silently marks the scanning of its hours, pass and see, call... I shall know You when You call me by name and I shall follow You like a wayfarer who picks up his walking stick to go to paths of friendship and of meeting, where the heart crosses into the Absolute of God, to be a living flame in the darkness of human desire, a warmth that spreads where the cold wind of evil destroys and diverts from the horizons of truth and beauty. I know that without You I shall catch nothing in the night of my solitude and delusion. My nets will rip when You tear me away from the bitter waters of my exertions and You will give me to myself, transformed with pardon, received and given with full hands. I shall then proclaim Your name to my brothers and sisters. Amen.

Monday, January 22, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct Your love that is within us,
that our efforts in the name of Your Son may bring the human race to unity and peace.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 22-30

The scribes who had come from Jerusalem said of Jesus, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "By the prince of demons he drives out demons." Summoning them, he began to speak to them in parables, "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand; that is the end of him. But no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house. Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin." For they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

Reflection

- *The conflict grows.* In the Gospel of Mark there is a progressive sequence. By the measure in which the Good News advances and people accept it, in the same measure it grows resistance on the part of the religious authority. The conflict began to grow and to influence all groups of people. For example, the relatives of Jesus thought that He was out of His mind. (Mk 3: 20-21), and the scribes who had come from Jerusalem thought that He was possessed, that Beelzebul was in Him (Mk 3: 22).
- *The conflict with authority.* The scribes slandered against Him. They said that Beelzebul was in Him and that it was through the prince of devils that He drove out the devils. They had come from Jerusalem, about 120 kilometers away, to keep an eye on Jesus' behavior. They wanted to defend tradition against the new ideas that Jesus taught to the people (Mk 7:1). They thought that His teaching was against good doctrine. The response given by Jesus had three parts.
 - First Part: The comparison with a divided family. Jesus uses the comparison of the divided family and the divided kingdom to denounce the absurdity of the slander. To say that Jesus casts out or drives out the devils with the help of the prince of the devils is to deny what is evident. It is like saying that water is dry, and that the sun is darkness. The doctors of Jerusalem slandered because they did not know how to explain the benefits worked by Jesus on behalf of the people. They were afraid to lose their power.
 - Second Part: The comparison of the strong man. Jesus compares the devil to a strong man. Nobody, unless he is a strong person, will be able to take away the house from a strong man to rob it. Jesus is the strongest of all. And this is why He succeeds in entering the house and in dominating and overcoming the strong man. He succeeds in driving out the devils. Jesus wins over the strong man and robs his house. He liberates the people who were under the power of the evil one. The Prophet Isaiah had already used the same comparison to describe the coming of the Messiah (Is 49: 24-25). Luke adds that the expulsion of the devil is the evidence of the coming of the Kingdom (Lk 11: 20).
 - Third part: The sin against the Holy Spirit. All sins are forgiven, except the sin against the Holy Spirit. Which is the sin against the Holy Spirit? It is to say, "The spirit which impels Jesus to cast out or drive out the devil, comes precisely from the devil!" The one who speaks in this way is incapable of receiving pardon. Why? Can the one who covers his eyes guess? He cannot! The one who closes his mouth, can he eat? He cannot. The one who does not close the umbrella of slander, can he receive the rain of pardon? He cannot! Pardon would pass by his side but would not reach him. It is not that God does not want to forgive. God always wants to forgive. But it is the sinner who refuses to receive pardon!

Personal Questions

- The religious authorities close themselves up in themselves and deny the evidence. Has this ever happened to me, that I close myself off before the evidence or facts?
- Slander is the arm or weapon of the weak. Have you experienced this?

Concluding Prayer

The whole wide world has seen the saving power of our God. Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth, burst into shouts of joy! (Ps 98: 3-4)

Tuesday, January 23, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct Your love that is within us, that our efforts in the name of Your Son may bring the human race to unity and peace.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 3: 31-35

The mother of Jesus and his brothers arrived at the house. Standing outside, they sent word to Jesus and called him. A crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside asking for you." But he said to them in reply, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Reflection

- The family of Jesus. The relatives reached the house where Jesus was. They have probably come from Nazareth. From there to Capernaum there is a distance of forty kilometers. His mother also comes with them. They do not enter, but they send a messenger: "Look, Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside asking for You!"
- Jesus' reaction is clear: "Who are My mother and My brothers?" And He Himself responds by turning to look toward the crowd who is there around Him: "Here are My mother and My brothers! Anyone who does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother!" To understand the meaning of this response it is necessary to look at the situation of the family at the time of Jesus.
- In old Israel, the clan (the large family, the community), was the basis of living together. It was protection for families and people, the guarantee of possession of the land, the principle vehicle of tradition, and the defense of identity. It was the concrete way on the part of the people of that time to incarnate the love of God and the love toward neighbor. To defend the clan was the same as to defend the Covenant.
- In Galilee at the time of Jesus, because of the system established during the long periods of government of Herod the Great (37 BC to 4 BC) and his son Herod Antipas (4 BC to 39 AD), the clan (the community), was becoming weaker. The taxes to be paid, both to the government and to the Temple, the debts which were increasing, the individualistic mentality of Hellenism, the frequent threats of violent repression on the part of the Romans and the obligation to accept the soldiers and give them

hospitality, and the ever-growing problem of survival, impelled families to close themselves in on themselves and to think only of their own needs. This closing up was strengthened by the religion of the time. For example, one who gave his inheritance to the Temple could leave his parents without any help. This weakened the fourth commandment which was the backbone of the clan (Mk 7: 8-13). The observance of the norms of purity was a factor in the marginalization of many people too, such as women, children, Samaritans, foreigners, lepers, possessed people, tax collectors or publicans, the sick, mutilated people and paraplegics.

- The concern over the problems of one's own family prevented people from meeting in community. Now, in order that the Kingdom of God could manifest itself in community living, people had to overcome the narrow limits of the small family and open themselves to the larger family, and the community. Jesus gave the example. When His own family tried to take control of Him, He reacted and extended the family: "Who are My mother and My brothers?" And He Himself gave the answer, turning His look toward the crowd, "Here are My mother and My brothers! Anyone who does the will of God is My brother, sister and mother!" (Mk 3: 33-35). He created a community.
- Jesus asked the same thing from all those who wanted to follow Him. Families should not close themselves in on themselves. The excluded and the marginalized had to be accepted in life with others and feel accepted by God (Lk 14: 12-14). This was the path to attaining the objective of the Law, which said, "There must, then, be no poor among you" (Dt 15: 4). Like the great prophets of the past, Jesus tries to consolidate community life in the villages of Galilee. He takes back the profound sense of the clan, the family, and the community as an expression of the incarnation of the love toward God and toward neighbor.

Personal Questions

- What place and what influence does the community have in my way of living the faith?
- Today, in the large city, overcrowding promotes individualism which is at odds with life in community. What am I doing to counteract this? How does one reconcile personal physical safety with community involvement in these urban areas?

Concluding Prayer

I waited, I waited for Yahweh, then He stooped to me and heard my cry for help.

He put a fresh song in my mouth, praise of our God. (Ps 40: 1, 3)

Wednesday, January 24, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct Your love that is within us, that our efforts in the name of Your Son may bring the human race to unity and peace.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 4: 1-20

On another occasion, Jesus began to teach by the sea. A very large crowd gathered around him so that he got into a boat on the sea and sat down. And the whole crowd was beside the sea on land. And he taught them at length in parables, and in the course of his instruction he said to them, "Hear this! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep. And when the sun rose, it was scorched and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it and it produced no grain. And some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit. It came up and grew and yielded thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." He added, "Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear."

And when he was alone, those present along with the Twelve questioned him about the parables. He answered them, "The mystery of the Kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables, so that they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, in order that they may not be converted and be forgiven." Jesus said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables?"

The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear, Satan comes at once and takes away the word sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground who, when they hear the word, receive it at once with joy. But they have no roots; they last only for a time. Then when tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Those sown among thorns are another sort. They are the people who hear the word, but worldly anxiety, the lure of riches, and the craving for other things intrude and choke the word, and it bears no fruit. But those sown on rich soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

Reflection

- Sitting in the boat, Jesus taught the crowds. In these verses, Mark describes the way in which Jesus teaches the crowd: on the seaside, sitting in the boat, with many people around listening to Him. Jesus was not a cultured person (Jn 7: 15). He had not frequented the superior school of Jerusalem. He had come from the country side, from Nazareth. He was someone who was unknown. He was a craftsman and a country man. Without asking permission from the authorities, He began to teach the people. He spoke in a very different way. People liked to listen to Him.
- Jesus helped people perceive the mysterious presence of the Kingdom in the things of life by means of parables. A parable is a comparison. He uses the known and visible things of life to explain the invisible and unknown things of the Kingdom of God. For example, the people from Galilee understood when He spoke of seeds, soil, rain, the sun, salt, flowers, fish, harvest, etc. His parable uses these things which were known to the people to explain the mysteries of the Kingdom.
- The parable of the sower is a picture of the life of the farmer. At that time it was not easy to get a livelihood from agriculture. The land was full of stones. There were many bushes, little rain and much sun. Many times people, in order to take a shortcut, passed through the fields and stepped on the plants. (Mk 2: 23). But in spite of that,

every year, the farmer sowed and planted, trusting in the force of the seed, in the generosity of nature.

- He who has ears to listen, let him listen! Jesus begins the parable saying, "Listen!" (Mk 4: 3). Now, at the end, He says, "He who has ears to listen, let him listen!" The way to understand the parable is by listening and thinking, "trying to understand!" The parable does not give us everything ready-made, but induces those who listen to think and discover, based on the lived experience that they have of the seed. It induces creativity and participation. It is not a doctrine that arrives ready-made to be taught and decorated. The parable does not give bottled water, but rather, leads one to the fountain or source. The farmer who listens, says, "Seed in the ground, I know what that is!" But Jesus says that this has something to do with the Kingdom of God. What would this be? One can already guess the long conversations of the crowd. The parable affects the people and moves them to listen to nature and to think about life.
- Jesus explains the parable to His disciples. At home, alone with Jesus, the disciples want to know the meaning of the parable. They do not understand it. Jesus is surprised at their ignorance (Mk 4: 13) and responds with a difficult and mysterious phrase. He tells His disciples, "To you is granted the secret of the Kingdom of God; but to those who are outside everything comes in parables, so that they may look and not perceive, listen but not understand, to avoid changing their ways and being healed!" This phrase leads people to ask themselves "then what good is the parable? To clarify or to hide?" Perhaps Jesus uses parables in order for people to continue to live in ignorance and not reach conversion? Certainly not! Because at another point Mark says that Jesus used parables "according to what they could understand" (Mk 4: 33).
- The parable reveals and hides at the same time! It reveals to "those who are inside," who accept Jesus, the Messiah, the Servant. It hides for those who insist on considering Him the glorious king. They understand the images of the parable, but they do not grasp the significance.
- The explanation of the parable in its different parts. One after another, Jesus explains the parts of the parable, seed and soil, up to the harvest time. Some scholars hold that this explanation was added later and would have been given to some communities. This is quite possible, because in the bud of the parable there is already the flower of the explanation. Bud and flower, both have the same origin which is Jesus. For this reason, we can continue to reflect and discover other beautiful things in the parable. Once a person asked in community, "Jesus has said that we should be salt. For what does salt serve?" This was discussed and at the end more than ten different purposes for salt were discovered! These meanings were applied to the life of the community and it was discovered that to be salt is something difficult and demanding. The parable functioned! Salt not only has uses, but in Jesus' time it had high value. The Romans used it as money and in the difficult hot climate it was needed by the human body to survive. Salt was valuable and gave life! The same for the seed. Everybody has some experience of the seed.

Personal Questions

- What experience do you have with seeds? How does this help you understand the Good News better?
- What type of soil are you?

Concluding Prayer

Fix your gaze on Yahweh and your face will grow bright, you will never hang your head in shame. (Ps 34: 5)

Thursday, January 25, 2024

The Conversion of St. Paul, Apostle

Opening Prayer

Father of heaven and earth, hear our prayers, and show us the way to Your peace in the world.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 16: 15-18

Jesus appeared to the Eleven and said to them: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

Reflection

- *The signs which accompany the proclamation or announcement of the Good News.* Jesus appears to the eleven disciples and reproaches them because they had not believed the people who had seen Him risen. Once again, Mark refers to the resistance of the disciples to believe in the witness of those men and women who had had an experience of the resurrection of Jesus. Why would this be? Probably to teach two things. *In the first place*, that faith in Jesus goes through the faith of people who give witness. *Second*, that nobody should get discouraged when incredulity comes from the heart. Even the eleven disciples had doubts!
- Then Jesus gives them the mission of announcing the Good News to all creatures. The requirement which He gives is the following: *to believe and to be baptized*. To those who have the courage to believe in the Good News and who are baptized, He promises the followings signs: they will cast out devils, they will have the gift of tongues, they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison, and they will lay their hands on the sick who will recover. This happens even in our own day.
- *To cast out devils* is to fight against the force of evil which destroys life. The life of many people has improved for having entered a community and for having begun to live the Good News of the presence of God in their life.
- *To have the gift of tongues* is to begin to communicate with others in a new form. Sometimes, we find a person whom we never have seen before, but it seems to us

that we have known her for a long time. This happens because we speak the same language, the language of love.

- *They will be unharmed if they take deadly poison:* there are many things which poison living together, e.g. gossip, which destroys the relationship between people. The one who lives in the presence of God goes beyond this and succeeds in not being bothered by this terrible poison.
- *To cure the sick:* wherever there is a clearer consciousness of the presence of God, there is also a special attention toward oppressed and marginalized people, especially the sick. What helps the person to heal is to feel accepted and loved.
- *Through the community, Jesus continues His mission:* Jesus himself, who lived in Palestine where He accepted the poor of His time, revealed the love of the Father, this same Jesus continues alive in our midst, in the same way in our communities. Through us He continues His mission, revealing the Good News of the Love of God for the poor. Even today, the Resurrection takes place which urges us to sing, "Who will separate us, who will separate us from the love of Christ, who will separate us?" (cf. Rm 8: 38-39). No power of this world can counteract the force which comes from faith in the Resurrection (Rm 8: 35-39). A community which wants to witness to the Resurrection has to be a sign of life, should fight against the forces of death in a way that the world will be a favorable place for life, and should believe that a different world is possible. Above all in Latin America, where the life of the people is in danger because of the system of death which has been imposed, the communities have to be a living proof of the hope which overcomes the world without the fear of being happy!

Personal Questions

- To cast out devils, to have the gift of new tongues, to be unharmed by deadly poison and by snakes, to impose the hands on the sick: Have you fulfilled any of these signs?
- Does Jesus continue His mission through us and through our community? Is He able to fulfill this mission in our community? In what way?

Concluding Prayer

Praise Yahweh, all nations, extol Him, all peoples, for His faithful love is strong and His constancy never-ending. (Ps 117: 1-2)

Friday, January 26, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct Your love that is within us, that our efforts in the name of Your Son may bring the human race to unity and peace.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 4: 26-34

Jesus said to the crowds: "This is how it is with the Kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come." He said, "To what shall we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade." With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

Reflection

- It is always beautiful to see Jesus, who sought in life and in events new elements and images which could help people to see and experience the presence of the Kingdom. In today's Gospel, once again, He narrates two brief stories which take place every day in the life of all of us: the story of "the seed that grows by itself" and the story of "the small mustard seed which grows into the biggest shrub."
- The story of the seed which grows alone. The farmer who plants knows the process: seed, the green sprout, leaf, spike, grain. The farmer knows how to wait. He does not cut down the grain before it is time. But he does not know how the soil, the rain, the sun and the seed have this force or strength to make the plant grow from nothing until it bears fruit. This is how the Kingdom of God is. It is a process. There are stages and moments of growth. It takes place in time. It produces fruit at just the right moment, but nobody knows how to explain its mysterious force - nobody, not even the landlord. Only God!
- The story of the small mustard seed which grows and becomes big. The mustard seed is small, but it grows, and at the end the birds make their nests in its branches. This is how the Kingdom is. It begins very small, it grows, and it extends its branches. The parable leaves an open question which will receive a response later on in the Gospel: Who are the birds? The text suggests that it is the pagans, who will not be able to enter the community and participate in the Kingdom.
- Because Jesus teaches by means of parables. Jesus tells many parables. All are taken from the life of the people! In this way He helped people discover the things of God in daily life, a life which becomes transparent because what is extraordinary from God is hidden in the ordinary and common things of daily life. People understood the things of life. In the parables they received the key to open them and to find the signs of God in them.

Personal Questions

- Jesus does not explain the parables. He tells the stories and awakens in others the imagination to reflect on the discovery. What have you discovered in these two parables?
- The purpose of these words is to render life transparent. Has your life become more transparent throughout the years, or has the contrary taken place?

Concluding Prayer

Have mercy on me, O God, in Your faithful love, in Your great tenderness wipe away my offenses; wash me clean from my guilt, purify me from my sin. (Ps 51: 1-2)

Saturday, January 27, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

All-powerful and ever-living God, direct Your love that is within us, that our efforts in the name of Your Son may bring the human race to unity and peace.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel reading - Mark 4: 35-41

On that day, as evening drew on, Jesus said to his disciples: "Let us cross to the other side." Leaving the crowd, they took Jesus with them in the boat just as he was. And other boats were with him. A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up. Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind ceased and there was great calm. Then he asked them, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?" They were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?"

Reflection

The Gospel describes the storm on the lake and Jesus who sleeps in the boat. Sometimes our communities feel like a small boat lost in the sea of life, without much hope of arriving at the port. Jesus seems to be sleeping in our boat, since no divine power seems to appear to save us from difficulties and persecution. In view of this desperate situation, Mark puts together several episodes which reveal how Jesus is present in the midst of the community. In these parables, the mystery of the Kingdom is revealed, which is present in the things of daily life (Mk 4: 1-34). Now He begins to reveal the mystery of the Kingdom present in the power which Jesus exercises in favor of the disciples, in favor of the people, and above all, in favor of the excluded and marginalized. Jesus overcomes, dominates the sea, a symbol of chaos (Mk 4: 35-41) and something man cannot control by himself. A creative power acts in Him! Jesus conquers and drives out the devil (Mk 5: 1-20). The power of life acts in Him! He is the victorious Jesus! There is no reason for the communities to have fear (Mk 5: 21-43). This is the reason for this passage about the storm being calmed by Jesus, which we are meditating on in today's Gospel.

- Mark 4: 35-36: The starting point: "Let us cross over to the other side." It had been a heavy day with much work. Once the discourse on the parables was finished (Mk 4: 1-34), Jesus said, "Let us cross over to the other side!" They take Him on the boat just as He is in the boat in which He had made the discourse on the parables. Because He was extremely tired, He went to sleep in the stern with His head on a cushion.

This is the first picture or image which Mark presents: a beautiful painting, but very human!

Jesus asks *us* to “cross to the other side” too. He asks us to separate from the crowd who is preoccupied with consumerism and gossip and earthly desires.

- Mark 4: 37-38: The desperate situation: “Do You not care? We are lost!” The Lake of Galilee is surrounded by mountains. Sometimes, through the cracks in the rocks, the wind blows on top of the lake and provokes sudden storms. The disciples were experienced fishermen. If they think that they are going to sink, then the situation is really dangerous. Jesus does not even wake up. He continues to sleep. This profound sleep is not only a sign of great fatigue, it is also the expression of a calm peaceful trust which He has in God. The contrast between the attitude of Jesus and that of the disciples is very great!

Today, mankind has a belief that it has mastered everything, and when things go wrong, people blame God for not caring. Faith provides the calm peaceful trust Jesus had rather than the anxiety that the disciples had.

- Mark 4: 39-40: The reaction of Jesus: “Have you still no faith?” Jesus wakes up, not because of the waves, but because of the desperate cries of the disciples. First, He addresses Himself to the sea and says, “Quiet now!” And the wind dropped and there followed a great calm. Then He spoke to the disciples and said, “Why are you so frightened? Have you still no faith?” The impression that one has is that it is not necessary to calm down the sea, since there is no danger. It is like going to a house and seeing the dog at the side of his master, who begins to bark. One should not be afraid because the dog is with the master who controls the situation. The episode of the storm which was calmed recalls Exodus, when the people, without fear, passed through the water of the sea (Ex 14: 22). It recalls the Prophet Isaiah who told the people, “If you go across the water I will be with you!” (Is 43: 2) Jesus does the exodus again and carries out the prophecy announced by Psalm 107(106): 25-30.
- Mark 4: 41: The disciples did not know. “Who can this be?” Jesus calms the sea and says, “Have you still have no faith?” The disciples do not know what to respond and they ask themselves, “Who can this be? Even the wind and the sea obey Him.” Jesus appears as a stranger to them! In spite of having been with Him for such a long time, they do not really know who He is. “Who can this be?” With this question in mind, the communities follow the reading of the Gospel. Even today, the same question leads us to continue reading the Gospel. It is the desire to better know the significance of Jesus in our life.

Knowing and trusting Jesus more moves us from being like the disciples at this point. Greater faith brings greater peace in the presence of storms in our life.

- Who is Jesus? Mark begins his Gospel saying, “The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1: 1). At the moment of His death, the soldier declared, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15: 39). At the beginning and at the end of the Gospel, Jesus is called the Son of God. Between the beginning and the end, there are many other names of Jesus which appear. The following is the list: Messiah or Christ (Mk 1: 1; 8: 29; 14: 61; 15: 32); Lord (Mk 1: 3; 5: 19; 11: 3); Beloved Son (Mk 1: 11; 9: 7); the Holy One of God (Mk 1: 24); Nazarene (Mk 1: 24; 10: 47; 14: 67; 16: 6); Son of Man (Mk 2: 10, 28; 8: 31, 38; 9: 9, 12, 31; 10: 33, 45; 13: 26; 14: 21, 41, 62); bridegroom (Mk 2: 19); Son of God (Mk 3: 11); Son of the Highest God (Mk 5: 7); carpenter (Mk 6: 3); Son of Mary (Mk 6: 3); Prophet (Mk 6: 4, 15; 8: 28); Teacher (frequent); Son of David (Mk 10: 47-48; 12: 35-37); Blessed (Mk 11: 9); Son (Mk 13: 32); Shepherd (Mk 14: 27); Son of

the Blessed One (Mk 14: 61); King of the Jews (Mk 15: 2, 9, 18, 26); King of Israel (Mk 15: 32),

- Each name, title, or attribute is an attempt to express what Jesus signifies for people. But a name, no matter how beautiful it is, never reveals the mystery of a person, much less the person of Jesus. Some of these names given to Jesus, including the more important ones and the more traditional, are questioned by Mark the Evangelist as being satisfactory. Thus, as we advance in the reading of the Gospel, Mark obliges us to revise our ideas and to ask ourselves, once again, "In last instance, who is Jesus for me and for us?" The more we advance in the reading of the Gospel of Mark, the more these titles and criteria fall. Jesus does not fit into any one of these names, or schema, or titles. He is the greatest! Little by little, the reader gives up and ceases to want to frame Jesus in a known concept or in an idea made up beforehand and accepts Him as He is presented.

Personal Questions

- Have the waters of the sea of life threatened you sometimes? Who saved you?
- What was the agitated sea (of the community) at the time of Jesus? What was the agitated sea (for the community) at the time when Mark wrote his Gospel? What is the agitated sea for us today?

Concluding Prayer

God, create in me a clean heart, renew within me a resolute spirit, do not thrust me away from Your presence, do not take away from me Your spirit of holiness. (Ps 51: 10-11)

Sunday, January 28, 2024

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send Your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that You read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, You helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of Your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to Your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May Your word guide us so that we, too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of Your resurrection and witness to others that You are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice and peace. We ask this of You, Jesus, Who revealed to us the Father and sent us Your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 1: 21-28

A Key to the Reading:

The Gospel text of this fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time speaks of the amazement of the people who see Jesus passing on His teaching (Mk 1: 21-22), then presents the first miracle of the casting out of a devil (Mk 1: 23-26) and finally speaks again of the amazement of the people who hear the teaching of Jesus about His power to cast out devils (Mk 1: 27-28).

In the 70's, the time when Mark is writing, the community of Rome needed some guidance as to how to proclaim the Good News of God to people who lived under the oppression of the fear of evil spirits because of the arbitrary imposition of religious laws by the Roman Empire. In describing Jesus' activity, Mark showed how the communities were to proclaim the Good News. The Evangelists catechized by telling the facts and events of Jesus' life.

The text on which we are to meditate shows the impact of the Good News of Jesus on the people of His time. As we read, let us try to pay attention to the following: *Which activities of Jesus most gave rise to the amazement of the people?*

A Division of the Text to Help with the Reading:

- Mark 1: 21-22: The people, in amazement at the teaching of Jesus, begin to develop a critical awareness.
- Mark 1: 23-24: The reaction of a man possessed by the devil in the presence of Jesus in the Synagogue.
- Mark 1: 25-26: Jesus conquers and drives the devil away.
- Mark 1: 27-28: Again, the impact of the Good News of Jesus on the people.

Text:

Then they came to Capernaum, and on the sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit; he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Jesus rebuked him and said, "Quiet! Come out of him!" The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. All were amazed and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What part of the text did you like best?
- What caused most amazement on the part of the people in Jesus' time?
- What drove the people to see the difference between Jesus and the doctors of the time?
- Devils have no power over Jesus. What impression does this make on the people?

- Does the reality of our community produce amazement among people? How?

To Go Deeper into the Theme

The Context of the Times and of Today:

This Sunday we meditate on the description in Mark's Gospel of the first miracle of Jesus. Not all the Evangelists tell the facts of Jesus' life in the same way. Each of them took into account the communities for whom he was writing, each stressed some points and aspects of the life, activities, and teachings of Jesus that could help their readers more. Matthew's readers lived in the north of Palestine and in Syria, Luke's lived in Greece, John's in Asia Minor, and Mark's probably in Italy. A concrete example of this diversity is the way each of the four represents Jesus' first miracle. In John's Gospel the first miracle is at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, where Jesus transforms the water into wine (Jn 2: 1-11). For Luke, the first miracle is the tranquility with which Jesus frees himself from the threat of death on the part of the people of Nazareth (Lk 4: 29-30). For Matthew, it is the healing of a large number of sick and possessed (Mt 4: 23) or, more specifically, the healing of a leper (Mt 8: 1-4). For Mark, the first miracle is the casting out of a devil (Mk 1: 23-26). Thus, each Evangelist, in his own way of telling the facts, stresses what are, according to him, the most important points in the activities and teachings of Jesus. Each one of them has a concern that he tries to transmit to his readers and to the communities. Today we live in a place and an era quite different from those of Jesus and the Evangelists. What for us is the greatest concern today in living out the Gospel? It is worthwhile that each of us should ask him or herself, "What, for me is the greatest concern?"

A Commentary on the Text:

- Mark 1: 21-22: Amazed at Jesus' teaching, the people form a critical conscience in themselves.

The first thing that Jesus did at the beginning of His missionary activities was to call four people to form a community together with Him (Mk 1: 16-20). The first thing the people see in Jesus is the different way He teaches and speaks of the Kingdom of God. It is not so much the content, but rather His way of teaching that is striking. The effect of this different way of teaching was the critical conscience formed in the people in relation to the religious authorities of the time. The people saw, compared, and said, "He teaches with authority, unlike the scribes." The scribes taught the people by quoting from the doctors and the authorities. Jesus did not quote any doctor, but spoke from His experience of God and of life. His authority came from inside of Him. His word was rooted in the heart and in the witness of His life and his divinity.

- Mark 1: 23-26: Jesus fights the power of evil

In Mark, the first miracle is the casting out of a devil. The power of evil took hold of people and alienated them from themselves. People were crushed by fear of devils and by the action of unclean spirits. Today, the fear of devils is great and on the increase. We see it in the interest in films on the exorcism of devils. As in the times of the Roman Empire, many people live alienated from themselves because of the power of mass communication, advertising and commerce. People are slaves to consumerism, oppressed by bills to pay by a certain date, and the threat of creditors. Many think that they are not worthy of respect if they do not buy what advertisements tell them to buy. In Mark, the first sign of Jesus is that of fighting evil. Jesus restores people to themselves. He restores their conscience and freedom.

Could our faith in Jesus succeed in fighting these devils that alienate us from ourselves and from the reality of God?

- Mark 1: 27-28: People's reaction: the first impression.

The first two signs of the Good News of God that people see in Jesus are: His different way of teaching the things of God and His power over unclean spirits. Jesus opens a new way of purity for people. In those days anyone declared impure could not come before God to pray or receive the blessing of God promised to Abraham. He had to purify himself first. There were many laws concerning the purification of people and ritual norms that made life difficult for people. These marginalized many people who were considered impure. For instance, washing one's arm to the elbow, sprinkling oneself, washing metal glasses, cups, jars, etc. (cf. Mk 7: 1-5). Now, purified by faith in Jesus, the impure could once more prostrate themselves in the presence of God and no longer needed to observe the ritual norms. The Good News of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus must have been a relief for people and a cause of great joy and tranquility.

Further information: Casting Out Devils and the Fear of People

The Explanation of the Evils of Life

In Jesus' days, many people spoke of Satan and the casting out of devils. There was much fear and some took advantage of this fear in others. The power of evil had many names: demon, devil, Beelzebub, prince of devils, Satan, Dragon, Dominations, Powers, Authority, Sovereignty, etc. (cf. Mk 3: 22-23; Mt 4: 1; Rev 12: 9; Rom 8: 38; Eph 1: 21).

Today, when people cannot explain a phenomenon, problem, or pain, they sometimes take recourse in explanations and remedies from tradition or ancient cultures and they say, "It is the evil eye, it is the punishment of God, it is some evil spirit." There are those who seek to silence these devils through magic and loud prayers. Others seek an exorcist to cast out the impure spirit. Others still, urged by the new and sadistic culture of today, fight the power of evil in other ways. They seek to understand the cause of evil.

In Jesus' day, the manner of explaining and solving the evils in life was similar to the explanations given by our ancient traditions and culture. In those days, as we read in the Bible, the word devil or Satan often pointed to the power of evil that led people astray from the right path. For instance, during the forty days in the desert, Jesus was tempted by Satan who tried to lead Him by a different path (1: 12; cf. Lk 4: 1-13). On other occasions, the same word pointed to a person who led another by a wrong path. Thus, when Peter sought to divert Jesus' path, he was *Satan* for Jesus: "Get behind Me Satan! Because the way you think is not God's way but man's." (Mk 8: 33). At other times, these same words were used to indicate the political power of the Roman Empire that oppressed and exploited people. For instance, in the Apocalypse, the Roman Empire is identified with "the great dragon, the primeval serpent, known as the devil or Satan, who had deceived the whole world" (Rev 12: 9). In Mark's Gospel, this same Roman Empire is given the name of *Legion*, a name given to the devil who ill-treated people (Mk 5: 9). At other times, the people used the words devil or spirit to indicate aches and pains. Thus people talked about the devil of the dumb spirit (Mk 9: 17), of the deaf spirit (Mk 9: 25), the devil of the impure spirit (Mk 1: 23; 3: 11), etc. And there were exorcists who cast out these devils (cf. Mk 9: 38; Mt 12: 27).

All this shows the great fear people had of the power of evil, which they called devil or Satan. When Mark was writing his Gospel, this fear was on the increase. Some Eastern

religions were spreading the cult of spirits, who acted as intermediaries between God and humanity, considered as devils, demiurges or demigods. These cults taught that some of our gestures could irritate the spirits, and they, to wreak vengeance, could prevent our access to God, and thus deprive us of divine benefits. So, through magic rites, loud prayers and complicated ceremonies, people tried to invoke and calm these spirits or demons, so that they would not bring harm to human life. This was the form that some religions had devised in order to defend themselves from the influence of the spirits of evil. And this way of living one's relationship with God, rather than freeing people, bred in them fear and anxiety.

Faith in the Resurrection and the Victory Over Fear

Now, one of the objectives of the Good News of Jesus was to help people free themselves of this fear. The coming of the Kingdom of God meant the coming of a *superior* power. Mark's Gospel says, "But no one can make his way into a strong man's house and take his property unless he has tied up the strong man first. Only then can he rob his house." (Mk 3: 27). The strong man is a figure of the power of evil that keeps people chained to fear. Jesus is *the stronger man* who comes to chain Satan, the power of evil, and to snatch from him this humanity chained to fear. "If it is through the finger of God that I cast out devils, then know that the kingdom of God has overtaken you!" (Lk 11: 20) This is what the writings of the New Testament insist on, especially the Gospel of Mark: the victory of Jesus over the power of evil, over the demon, over Satan, over sin and death.

As we have seen, in this Sunday's reading in Mark's Gospel, the first miracle of Jesus is that of the casting out the devil: "Be quiet! Come out of him!" (Mk 1: 25). The first impression Jesus makes on the people is produced by the casting out of the devils: "He gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey Him!" (Mk 1: 27). One of the main reasons for the discussion between Jesus and the scribes is the casting out of devils. They accused Him saying: "Beelzebub is in Him...It is through the prince of devils that He casts devils out!" (Mk 3: 22). The first power given to the apostles when they were sent on a mission was the power to cast out devils: "...giving them the authority over unclean spirits" (Mk 6: 7). The first sign that goes with the proclamation of the resurrection is that of casting out devils: "These are the signs that will be associated with believers: in My name they will cast out devils" (Mk 16: 17).

The casting out of devils was what impressed people most (Mk 1: 27). It went to the very heart of the Good News of the Kingdom. By means of it, Jesus restored people to themselves. He gave them back common sense and a conscience (Mk 5: 15). From beginning to end, in almost the same words, the Gospel of Mark repeats unceasingly the same message: "Jesus casts out devils!" (Mk 1: 26, 34, 39; 3: 11-12, 30; 5: 1-20; 6: 7, 13; 7: 25-29; 9: 25-27, 38; 16: 17). It seems to be an endless refrain. Today, however, rather than use the same words all the time, we use *different* words to send out the *same* message. We would say, "Jesus conquered, chained, dominated, destroyed, beat, eliminated, exterminated annihilated and killed the power of evil, Satan who frightens so many people!" What Mark wants to say to us is this: "Christians are not allowed to be afraid of Satan!" By His resurrection and by His liberating action present among us, Jesus chains the fear of Satan and gives birth to freedom of heart, determination, and hope on the horizon! We must *walk along the Path of Jesus* with the taste of victory over the power of evil!

A Prayer with Psalm 46 (45)

God, Revealed in Jesus, is Our Strength!

God is both refuge and strength for us, a help always ready in trouble;
so we shall not be afraid though the earth be in turmoil, though mountains tumble into
the depths of the sea, and its waters roar and seethe,
and the mountains totter as it heaves.

There is a river whose streams bring joy to God's city; it sanctifies the dwelling of the
Most High.

God is in the city, it cannot fall;

at break of day God comes to its rescue. Nations are in uproar,
kingdoms are tumbling,

when He raises His voice the earth crumbles away.

Yahweh Sabaoth is with us, our citadel, the God of Jacob.

Come, consider the wonders of Yahweh,

the astounding deeds He has done on the earth;

He puts an end to wars over the whole wide world, He breaks the bow, He snaps the
spear,

shields He burns in the fire.

“Be still and acknowledge that I am God,

supreme over nations, supreme over the world.” Yahweh Sabaoth is with us,

our citadel, the God of Jacob.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank You for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will
of the Father. May Your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice
that which Your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, Your mother, not only
listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity
of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, January 29, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

help us to love You with all our hearts and to love all people as You love them.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and
the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 5: 1-20

Jesus and his disciples came to the other side of the sea, to the territory of the Gerasenes. When he got out of the boat, at once a man from the tombs who had an unclean spirit met him. The man had been dwelling among the tombs, and no one could restrain him any longer, even with a chain. In fact, he had frequently been bound with shackles and chains, but the chains had been pulled apart by him and the shackles smashed, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the hillsides he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones.

Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and prostrated himself before him, crying out in a loud voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me!" (He had been saying to him, "Unclean spirit, come out of the man!") He asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "Legion is my name. There are many of us." And he pleaded earnestly with him not to drive them away from that territory. Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside. And they pleaded with him, "Send us into the swine. Let us enter them." And he let them, and the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine. The herd of about two thousand rushed down a steep bank into the sea, where they were drowned. The swineherds ran away and reported the incident in the town and throughout the countryside. And people came out to see what had happened. As they approached Jesus, they caught sight of the man who had been possessed by Legion, sitting there clothed and in his right mind. And they were seized with fear. Those who witnessed the incident explained to them what had happened to the possessed man and to the swine. Then they began to beg him to leave their district. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed pleaded to remain with him. But Jesus would not permit him but told him instead, "Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you." Then the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him; and all were amazed.

Reflection

- In today's Gospel, we meditate on a long text on the expulsion of a devil which was called *Legion* which oppressed and tortured a person. Today there are many people who use the texts of the Gospel which speak of the expulsion of the devils or impure spirits in order to frighten others. This is a sin! Mark does the opposite. As we will see, he associates the action of power of evil to four things:
 - With the *cemetery*, the place of the dead. Death which kills life!
 - With the *pork* which was considered an unclean animal. The impurity which separates from God.
 - With the *sea*, which was considered a symbol of the chaos which existed before creation, and a chaos which destroys nature.
 - With the word *Legion*, a name given to the army of the Roman Empire - the empire which oppressed and exploited people.

Jesus overcomes the power of evil in these four points. The victory of Jesus had a very great outreach for the community of the years 70's, the time in which Mark wrote his Gospel. These communities lived under persecution by the *Roman Legions*, with an ideology which manipulated the popular beliefs concerning the devils in order to frighten people and to obtain their submission.

- *The power of evil oppresses, ill-treats and alienates people.* The initial verses describe the situation of the people before the arrival of Jesus. In the way of describing the behavior of the possessed person, Mark associates the power of evil to the cemetery

and to death. It is a power without any purpose, threatening, without control, and destructive, which makes everybody afraid. It deprives the person of conscience, of self-control, and of autonomy.

- *In the presence of Jesus the power of evil disintegrates itself and breaks into fragments.* In his description of the first contact between Jesus and the possessed man, Mark stresses the total lack of proportion that exists! The power, which at the beginning seemed to be very strong, melts and is broken. It is fragmented before Jesus. The man falls on his knees, asks not to be expelled from that district and finally says its name is *Legion*. With this name, Mark associates the power of evil with the political and military power of the Roman Empire which dominated the world through its *Legions*.
- *The power of evil is impure and has neither autonomy nor consistency.* The devil has no power in its movements. He only manages to enter into the pigs with the permission of Jesus! Once he had entered into the pigs, they charged down the cliff into the sea. There were 2000! According to the people the pig was a symbol of impurity, the impurity which prevented the human being from entering into relationship with God and from feeling accepted by Him. The sea was the symbol of chaos which existed before creation and which, according to the belief of the time, threatened life. This episode of the pigs which threw themselves into the sea is strange and difficult to understand, but the message is sufficiently clear: before Jesus the power of evil has no autonomy nor consistency. The one who believes in Jesus has already overcome the power of evil and should not be afraid, should have no fear!
- *The reaction of the local people.* On the advice of the herdsman who took care of the pigs, the people of the place ran to see the man who had been liberated from the power of evil, now "*in his full senses.*" But the Legion had entered the pigs! And for this reason they ask Jesus to leave. For them, in fact, the pigs were more important than the human person who had just returned to his normal self. Those pigs also had a large economic value to the local people. The same thing happens today: we often give very little importance to people. It frightens people to be given the choice to give up wealth for the peace of Christ.
- *To announce the Good News means to announce "what the Lord has done for you!"* The man who was liberated wanted to "follow Jesus," but Jesus tells him, "Go home to your people and tell them all that the Lord in His mercy has done for you." Mark addressed this phrase of Jesus to the communities and to all of us. For the majority of us "to follow Jesus" means, "Go to your house, to your people, and announce to them what the Lord has done for you!"

Personal Questions

- Which point of this text pleased or struck you the most? Why?
- The man who was cured wanted to follow Jesus. But he should remain at home and tell everybody what Jesus has done for him. What has Jesus done for you? Do you want to share this with others?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh, what quantities of good things You have in store for those who fear You, and bestow on those who make You their refuge, for all humanity to see. (Ps 31: 19)

Tuesday, January 30, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, help us to love You with all our hearts and to love all people as You love them.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 5: 21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around him, and he stayed close to the sea. One of the synagogue officials, named Jairus, came forward. Seeing him he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, saying, "My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hands on her that she may get well and live." He went off with him and a large crowd followed him. There was a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years. She had suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors and had spent all that she had. Yet she was not helped but only grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. She said, "If I but touch his clothes, I shall be cured." Immediately her flow of blood dried up. She felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who has touched my clothes?" But his disciples said to him, "You see how the crowd is pressing upon you, and yet you ask, Who touched me?" And he looked around to see who had done it.

The woman, realizing what had happened to her, approached in fear and trembling. She fell down before Jesus and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction." While he was still speaking, people from the synagogue official's house arrived and said, "Your daughter has died; why trouble the teacher any longer?" Disregarding the message that was reported, Jesus said to the synagogue official, "Do not be afraid; just have faith." He did not allow anyone to accompany him inside except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.

When they arrived at the house of the synagogue official, he caught sight of a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. So he went in and said to them, "Why this commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but asleep." And they ridiculed him. Then he put them all out. He took along the child's father and mother and those who were with him and entered the room where the child was. He took the child by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" The girl, a child of twelve, arose immediately and walked around. At that they were utterly astounded. He gave strict orders that no one should know this and said that she should be given something to eat.

Reflection

In today's Gospel, we meditate on two miracles which Jesus worked in favor of two women: the first one for a woman who was considered impure because of the hemorrhage which she was suffering from for the past 12 years; the other one for a twelve-year-old girl, who had died a short time before. According to the mentality of

the time, anybody who would touch blood or a corpse was considered impure. Blood and death were factors for exclusion! Because of this, those two women were marginalized people and excluded from participation in the community.

- *The starting point. Jesus arrives in the boat.* The people join Him. Jairus, the head of the synagogue, asks help for his daughter, who is dying. Jesus goes with him and the people accompany Him, pushing on all sides. This is the starting point of the two cases of healing which follow: the cure of the woman and the resurrection of the twelve year- old girl.
- *The situation of the woman.* Twelve years of suffering from hemorrhage! For this reason she lived excluded, because at that time blood rendered people impure, and the one who touched them became impure also. Mark says that the woman had spent all she had with doctors. And instead of becoming better, she got worse. A situation without a solution!
- *The attitude of the woman.* She heard people speak about Jesus. Hope sprang up in her. She told herself, "If I can just touch His clothes, I will be saved." The catechism of the time said, "If I touch His cloak, He will become impure." The woman thinks exactly the contrary! This is a sign that women did not agree with all that religious authority taught. The woman gets in through the crowd, in the midst of the people, and without being noticed, she touches Jesus, because everybody was touching Him and pushing Him. At that same moment she noticed in her body that she had been cured.
- *The reaction of Jesus and that of the disciples.* Jesus, aware of the power that had gone out from Him, asked, "Who touched My clothes?" The disciples said to Him, "You see how the crowd is pressing round You; how can You ask, 'Who touched Me?'" So now comes the clash between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus had a sensitivity which the disciples did not perceive. The disciples reacted like everybody else; they did not understand the different reaction of Jesus. But Jesus did not pay attention and continued to investigate.
- *Healing through faith.* The woman became aware that she had been discovered. It was a difficult and dangerous moment for her, because according to the belief of the time, an impure person like herself got in among the people and contaminated everyone who touched her. All would become impure before God (Lev 15: 19-30). For this reason, the punishment could be stoning. But the woman had the courage to accept the consequences of what she had done. The woman "*frightened and trembling*" fell at Jesus' feet and told Him the whole truth. Jesus has the last word: "*My daughter, your faith has restored you to health, go in peace and be free of your complaint.*"
 - (a) "Daughter," with this word Jesus accepts the woman into the new family, into the community which was gathering together around Him.
 - (b) What she thought through faith became a reality.
 - (c) Jesus acknowledges that, without that woman's faith, He would not have been able to work the miracle.
- *The news of the death of the little girl.* At that moment some people arrived from the house of Jairus to inform him that his daughter had died. It was no longer necessary to disturb Jesus. For them, death was the great barrier. Jesus will not be able to overcome death! Jesus listens, looks at Jairus, and applies what He had just seen, that faith is capable of realizing what the person believes. And He says, "*Do not be afraid, only have faith!*"

- *In Jairus' house.* Jesus allows only three of His disciples to go with Him. Seeing the commotion of the people weeping and wailing because of the death of the child, He said, "The child is not dead; she sleeps!" The people laughed. They know how to distinguish between a person who is sleeping and when the person is dead. It is the same laughter of Abraham and of Sarah, of those who are unable to believe that nothing is impossible for God (Gn 17: 17; 18: 12-14; Lk 1: 37). For them, death was a barrier which nobody could overcome or go beyond! The words of Jesus had a very profound meaning. The situation of the persecuted communities at the time of Mark seemed to be a situation of death. They needed to hear, "She is not dead! You are sleeping! Wake up!" Jesus does not pay attention to the laughter and enters into the room where the child is, alone, and with the three disciples and the parents of the child.
- *The resurrection of the child.* Jesus takes the child by the hand and says: "*Talitha kum!*" She rises. There is a great commotion! Jesus keeps calm and asks that they give her something to eat. Two women are cured! One is twelve years old, the other one twelve years of hemorrhage, twelve years of exclusion! The exclusion of the child begins at twelve years of age, because her menstruation begins; she begins to die! Jesus has the greatest power and resurrects: "Get up!"

Personal Questions

- What is the point in this text which pleased you or struck you the most? Why?
- One of the women was cured and once again integrated so that she could live in the community. A child was raised from her death bed. What does this action of Jesus teach us for our life in the family and for our community today?

Concluding Prayer

From You comes my praise in the thronged assembly; I will perform my vows before all who fear Him.

The poor will eat and be filled; those who seek Yahweh will praise Him. May your heart live forever. (Ps 22: 25-26)

Wednesday, January 31, 2024

Ordinary Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

help us to love You with all our hearts and to love all people as You love them.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Mark 6: 1-6

Jesus departed from there and came to his native place, accompanied by his disciples. When the sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands! Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house." So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Reflection

The Gospel today speaks of the visit of Jesus to Nazareth and describes the obstinacy of the people of Nazareth who do not want to accept Him. (Mk 6: 1-6). Tomorrow the Gospel describes the openness of Jesus toward the people of Galilee, shown through the sending out of His disciples on mission (Mk 6: 7-13).

- Mark 6: 1-2a: Jesus returns to Nazareth. At that time Jesus went to His hometown, and His disciples accompanied Him. "With the coming of the Sabbath, He began teaching in the synagogue." It is always good to return to one's hometown and to reunite with friends. After a long absence, Jesus also returns, and as usual, on Saturday, He goes to the synagogue to participate in the meeting of the community. Jesus was not the coordinator of the community, but even though He was not, He takes the floor and begins to teach. This is a sign that people could participate and express their own opinion.
- Mark 6: 2b-3: Reaction of the people of Nazareth before Jesus. The people of Capernaum had accepted the teaching of Jesus (Mk 1: 22), but the people of Nazareth did not like the words of Jesus and were scandalized. For what reason? Jesus, the boy whom they had known since He was born, how is it that now He is so different? They do not accept God's mystery present in Jesus, a human being and common as they are and known by all! They think that to be able to speak of God, He should be different from them! As we can see, not everything went well for Jesus. The people who should have been the first ones to accept the Good News were precisely those who had the greatest difficulty accepting it. The conflict was not only with foreigners, but especially with His relatives and with the people of Nazareth. They refused to believe in Jesus, because they could not understand the mystery of God embracing the person of Jesus. "From where do all these things come to Him? And what wisdom is this which has been given to Him? And these miracles which are worked by Him? This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Jude and Simon? His sisters too, are they not here with us?" And they would not accept Him. They do not believe in Jesus!
- The brothers and the sisters of Jesus. The expression "brothers of Jesus" causes polemics among Catholics and Protestants. Based on this text and on others, the Protestants say that Jesus had more brothers and sisters and that Mary had more sons! The Catholics say that Mary had no other sons. What should we think about all this? In the first place, the two positions, that of Catholics and that of the Protestants, both have arguments taken from the Bible and from the tradition of their respective communities. Therefore, it is not proper to discuss this question with arguments drawn only from reason. This is a question of profound convictions, which have something to do with the faith sentiments both of Catholics and Protestants. An argument taken only from reason cannot succeed in changing the conviction of the

heart! On the contrary, it irritates and draws others away! Even when I do not agree with the opinion of another, I should always respect it! We, both Catholics and Protestants, instead of discussing texts, should unite to struggle in defense of life, created by God, a life which has been so disfigured by poverty and injustice, by the lack of faith. We should remember other phrases of Jesus: "I have come in order that they may have life and life in abundance" (Jn 10: 10). "That all may be one, so that the world may believe that You, Father, have sent Me" (Jn 17: 21). "Who is not against us is for us" (Mk 10: 39-40).

- Mark 6: 4-6. Jesus' reaction before the attitude of the people of Nazareth. Jesus knows very well that "nobody is a prophet in his own country." He says, "A prophet is despised only in his own country, among his own relations and in his own house." In fact, where there is no acceptance or faith, people can do nothing. The preconception prevents this. Even if Jesus wanted to do something, He cannot, and He is amazed at their lack of faith. For this reason, before the closed door of His community "He began to make a tour around the villages, teaching." The experience of this rejection led Jesus to change His practice. He goes to the other villages and, as we shall see in tomorrow's Gospel, He gets the disciples involved in the mission instructing them on how they have to continue the mission.

Personal Questions

- Jesus had problems with His relatives and with His community. From the time when you began to live the Gospel better, has something changed in your relationship with your family and with your relatives?
- Jesus cannot work many miracles in Nazareth because faith is lacking. Today, does He find faith in us, in me?
- Does the debate over Mary and Jesus' brothers and sisters precipitate a change in our behavior or how we put faith into action? Should this change how we treat the poor and marginalized?

Concluding Prayer

How blessed are those whose offense is forgiven, whose sin blotted out.

How blessed are those to whom Yahweh imputes no guilt, whose spirit harbors no deceit. (Ps 32: 1-2)