

Sunday, Nov 7, 2021: 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

"Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."

For the last several weeks we have been travelling with Jesus and his disciples, each week a little closer to Jerusalem, as he made his way from Judea across the Jordan through Jericho to the holy city. And now we sit with him at the temple treasury, as he watches the faithful come forward to bring their offerings. We are told that there are very many generous offerings – “Many rich people put in large sums” – but it is not until the poor widow makes her meager gift of a few cents that Jesus calls us over, together with his disciples, to teach us how God sees such things. It is the subjective quality of the offering, he explains, not the gross amount or relative splendor that matters. One could command a vast wealth of riches and offer a gift that would make an emperor blush, but the widow’s mite would be worth more than it all, because she held nothing back. It would have been easy and understandable – prudent, even – to hold back one of those two little coins. A tithe of half of one’s life savings is no small thing! But in giving over everything that she had, “her whole livelihood”, she made a beautiful and tremendous act of faith, entrusting herself completely into God’s care.

Here at the temple treasury, Jesus teaches us a lesson about the value of trust by using money as an example, but it’s a lesson that goes far beyond the financial “best practices” of the Kingdom of God. This lesson extends all the way to the core of our relationship with Christ and to the heart of our vocation to follow him as his disciples. When he called Simon and Andrew on the shore of the sea of Galilee, St. Mark tells us that “they abandoned their nets and followed him” (Mk 1:18). Likewise with James and his brother John. In response to the invitation of Jesus, they did not hold back, but they even “left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him” (Mk 1:20). Like the widow in our Gospel, they have given everything to follow Jesus. By dropping their nets, they have done something which requires trust but also elicits trust. Like the apostles, like the widow, we grow in faith by making acts of faith.

This dynamic of self-gift and trust is fundamental to the life of any disciple of Christ, but it is also the way that we gain greater clarity in our particular vocation. Whether we are called to marriage or to the priesthood or to the consecrated life, we cannot understand it other than as a way to live out the universal vocation to holiness, that is, to grow in intimacy with Jesus. One of the signs of a good and authentic discernment is if we can describe our vocation in terms of a desire for self-gift in response to an encounter with God’s love. Does my entering into seminary or the convent look like taking a step deeper into relationship with Jesus? Can I see my preparation for marriage to my fiancée through the lens of preparing to lay down my life as Christ has laid down his life for me? Whether we are still discerning our own vocation or are accompanying someone else in their discernment, the first and most frequently recurring step forward in moments of unclarity is to seek to grow even closer to Christ, to spend more or better

time with him, and to examine our hearts to see if there is anything that we are holding back, some small coin that we have not yet put into the treasury.

An easy but frequently neglected way to draw closer to Christ and to learn to listen to his voice is to develop a habit of reading Scripture daily and prayerfully, expecting that his inspired Word is going to change our hearts when we approach it with faith. They say it takes twenty-one days of deliberate and repeated action to form a new habit. If we make a resolution today to read Scripture every day in this way for the next twenty-one days, we will have allowed this habit to take root precisely on the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the new liturgical year. This proximity to Christ through a living contact with his Word will surely give us greater clarity as we enter the new year, both in what coin of the heart we might still need to offer to him, and in what form his specific invitation to follow him might take.

Monday, November 8th, 2021: 32nd Week in Ordinary Time

“Increase our faith!” cry the apostles today. “I believe, help my unbelief” the father prays begging Jesus to heal his son. “Where is your faith?” Christ asks his water-logged, storm-shaken, apostles. “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail” Jesus reassures Peter before His passion. And to Thomas after the resurrection, “do not be faithless, but believing”. Again and again throughout the Gospels we find Our Lord desiring to build-up His disciples’ faith, and delighting when they desire that grace for themselves.

Juxtaposed next to this work of His grace, we find throughout the Gospels that Jesus is just as constant in encouraging His disciples: acknowledging the littleness of their faith, but then reminding them that even the smallest of faith – the littlest of seeds of His Word – is enough to do great things, and bear abundant divine fruit. Jesus looks at His disciples in today’s Gospel, and us gathered here today, and like then, He knows the fears and inadequacies and uncertainties that attack our hearts; He knows the sins and temptations and attacks that face us, and to us Our *LORD* says “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” Notice that at precisely the moment when the apostles succumb to discouragement and feel inadequate to the call Christ places before them, He intervenes to reassure them that His grace is enough.

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me!” These comforting words from our psalm today are true! Christ knows our hearts far better than we do ourselves, and the moment when we look within ourselves and begin to question if we have what it takes to follow Him, He *immediately* offers us the comforting word that no matter how small we think our faith to be, it is enough for the greatest of works to be done in His name.

The image Jesus gives is unforgettable: not only the uprooting of a mulberry tree, but the planting of it in the ocean. For anyone who has tried to pull up even a small bush with only a few roots, the task we know is an arduous one. For a larger tree, as was the mulberry that Our Lord references (a type of tree prevalent around Jerusalem, and notorious for their substantial root-systems), this transplanting would be well-nigh impossible. Furthermore, the impossibility of the task is amplified when we recall that Jesus proposes this tree being *planted in the sea*. Not just thrown into the sea, not just relocated to the coast, it is to be *planted* within the ocean. No amount of human effort or ingenuity in Jesus’ time, or our own, is capable of this task! *But* this is because the task that Jesus offers each and every one of us, His disciples, is *not* a human one, it is a divine one!

Through the Old Testament, the planting of trees is often used to describe God’s work of cultivating and restoring His people, Israel. Recall His promise through Isaiah: “I will plant in the wilderness the cedar”, and Ezekiel: “I the LORD have ... made the dry tree flourish.” The prophets point us back further, to the very beginning, when God brings forth from the sterile ground “every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food”. There, as God created the heavens and the earth, *He* was able to plant trees where the seas had previously covered. *God*, and only God, can plant trees in

oceans, and bear fruit in deserts. And God, *and only God*, can do so in our feeble hearts: bringing perfection forth from weakness, fruitfulness from a timid fiat, and fidelity despite our own feeling of insufficiency.

This week, Catholics around the world reflect on Christ's call to all of us – the *vocation* He has given particularly to you and me – and today His words are a gentle reminder to each of us that fear or timidity has no place in a heart which relies on Him, and the task that He has crafted for us, no matter how impossible based on our own capacities or readiness, is one that He, the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, can make possible in us by His grace.

Our task is twofold: to humbly place our hearts before Him as they are – choosing to “seek him with sincerity of heart” as our reading from Wisdom reminds us, not hiding our weaknesses or closing off our fears from God's grace – but also placing our hearts, broken as they are, in Christ's secure grasp. He opens His own heart to each of us at this Mass, entrusting to us His Body and Blood, let us not fear to boldly open our hearts to Him, and to His ever-sufficient love.

Tuesday, November 9th, 2021: Feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John Lateran

Today we celebrate the feast of the dedication of the Basilica of Saint John Lateran in Rome. The purpose of this feast is not just to remember a particular church—even though that church is an important one. In fact, this basilica is the cathedral of the Pope. On the facade of this church there is an inscription that states that this church is the mother and head of all the churches in the city and in the whole world. As the see of the Vicar of Christ who is the earthly head of the universal Church, St. John's can claim to be the most important church in the whole world. Even still, the purpose of this feast is not to remember just one church. This feast calls to mind what Church means.

In the first reading we see Ezekiel's vision of water flowing out of the temple. Now for the Jews the temple was the one place in the entire world where they could come into God's presence. And that is precisely what the Lord intends for the Church to be today, a place where we can encounter God. But here is where the vision would be striking to the people who first heard it: Ezekiel sees water flowing out of the side of the temple. If it comes out of the temple it must be a pure, sacred water. This water gives life to the whole countryside around it. In God there is life, and he wants to share this life with all around him and not only with those who were allowed to enter the temple. This water flows into the driest parts of Israel and turns them into a garden, a garden like the garden of Eden, a garden like what God had planned the world to be. It even turns the waters of the Dead Sea fresh! Already in this Old Testament prophecy we see the beginning of what God is planning to do in the Church. No longer are a select few ritually pure people the only ones who are able to come into contact with God. God's presence is beginning to flow out from the temple and give life to all who come into contact with it. So, the Church shouldn't be just a place for people to come to see God, but it should be a dynamic reality that expands and comes to meet every person wherever they may be.

The second reading adds another layer of meaning to what it means to be a Church. Saint Paul says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and God's spirit dwells within you?" For Saint Paul, the Church is not just a building. Instead, church, which means "assembly" in Greek, is the whole of the new people of God. And it's important to note that this temple—God's people—is a holy temple. If the Church is God's temple and the temple is the place of God's presence, then every member of the Church is called to make God present in the world. We are that dynamic reality we reflected on before; we are made to be that place out of which God's life-giving water flows.

In the gospel we hear how Christ purifies the temple. As he reminds us, his Father's house is meant to be a house of prayer. And so, he must come in and throw out everything that would get in the way of our relationship with his Father. We, the Church, are in constant need of purification. But Christ adds something even more interesting when he speaks to the Pharisees about his actions; he speaks of destroying the temple and raising it up in three days. It was the

apostle John who understood later that he was speaking of the temple of his body. God's temple is the body of Christ. Christ was the embodiment of the presence of God in the world. Christ's body *is* the embodiment of God's presence in the world. And we celebrate this every time we come to Mass: the presence of Christ's body in his Church. When we receive the body of Christ in Mass, we become more fully the Church. We become that place of God's presence in the world. We become the source of lifegiving grace that is offered to the whole world. We become that new people of God that Saint Paul worked so hard to build up and that all priests and bishops have worked to continually construct under the guide of the one architect, Jesus Christ. When we receive the Eucharist, we become that true body of Christ, the mystical body of Christ united perfectly to Christ the head. This is what it means to be the Church.

This week is National Vocations Awareness Week when we reflect more deeply on the need to promote and pray for vocations in our church. In a special way we pray for those who are discerning the call to priestly life. Without priests to give us the sacraments we would not be able to fulfill our mission, our calling, the gift we have received in our baptism: to be the Church. Let us follow what Christ asked us in the gospel: "pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers to his harvest".

Wednesday, November 10, 2021: Memorial of Saint Leo the Great

Today's Gospel presents us with the memorable scene of the healing of ten lepers. When they hear the news that the great healer would be passing through their village, they plan their encounter. Just at the proper moment, they go out to meet him and raise their voices, crying, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!" As the story continues, the Lord works his miracle, and the lepers are healed. It is at this moment that the hidden difference between one leper and his companions begins to appear. One alone returns to give thanks to the Lord.

It is worth spending a while in prayer today examining the difference between this leper and his companions. Each of them approached the Lord as his master. They all begged for the Lord's mercy, but this one approached in a different way. This one, although also asking for a physical healing like all the others, had a heart that was searching for something deeper.

It is clear that the other nine obtained all that they sought for in their encounter with Christ in the healing they received. Once cured of their illness, they needed nothing more from Jesus. This one, however, was driven to return to the source once he had encountered its power. Yes, he wanted to be healed, but, more than that, he wanted to know the healer. His gratitude reveals this deeper longing.

The same dynamic can often arise while attempting to discern God's will in our lives, especially when it comes to our vocation. For us as Christians we know that the Lord is the one with the "answer". Only Christ can reveal his plan for us. When we hear that he is "passing by" in moments of prayer, in times of adoration, or in spiritual direction we run to him and call out, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on me! Show me my vocation. Reveal your will to me."

It is a good question to ask, and we are certainly asking the right person in these moments. However, our Gospel today would have us examine the sincerity and motivation of our plea. What is it that we are truly seeking? Is it merely a sense of security or self-satisfaction? "If I know that the Lord is calling me to X then I can stop worrying." "If I can just discover my vocation then I can finally get on with my life." There is a way to discern one's vocation that never truly departs from the self-seeking witnessed by the other nine lepers in today's Gospel, and we must always be on our guard against this temptation. In discernment the Lord himself always comes first. If all we want from the Lord is an "answer" then once we receive it, we need nothing more from him.

At all times Christ is the one we must seek. It is He for whom we long. Obviously, there is no opposition between this and seeking our vocation, just as there was no opposition between the healing of the leper and his gratitude. On the contrary, the two go hand in hand. Nevertheless, our vocation must always be about seeking God's will before it is about seeking our own.

The difference between these approaches is not to be taken lightly. It was this proper interior disposition of the one leper that made all the difference in his life. Interestingly, it did not affect the healing that he received. All ten were healed. However, only the one heard the most important words of our Lord in today's Gospel, "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you." Ten lepers received a physical healing. One received salvation.

As we attempt to discover God's will for our lives, at all times but especially in vocational discernment, we should examine our own sincerity and motivations, being careful to keep this important difference in mind. Just as the nine lepers left their encounter with Jesus with a healed body and an empty soul, so too it is possible for each one of us to discover our true vocation and at the same time lose our own salvation. A vocation not sought and lived for the Lord, even when it is the "right" one for us, loses its proper meaning.

What is it, then, that we truly seek? If all we seek is an answer, we may find it, but it will be useless to us at best. If we truly seek Christ above all else, however, we can be sure that he will guide us along the path of his will, a path that includes the discovering of our vocation but ultimately ends with the attainment of eternal salvation.

Thursday, November 11, 2021: Memorial of St. Martin of Tours, Bishop

In our Gospel today, our Lord first appears quite evasive in answering the Pharisees' question about the coming of the Kingdom of God. It cannot be observed. It will not be announced. But all of this seems contrary to the prevailing sense of what the Messiah would fulfill. It would be the Messiah who would unite the scattered tribes of Israel, cleanse the temple, defeat the enemies of Israel and reign as the Lord of all nations. It would seem fitting to presume that such a victory would be a visible reality; throughout salvation history, God used signs and wonders to communicate His power. Why, then, can it not be observed?

As Christians, we often find ourselves looking for these same signs and wonders. "Just show me your presence, Lord," we plead. In the quiet of our hearts, we remain utterly convinced that if Jesus would just show Himself to us and speak to us plainly, then surely, we would follow. Furthermore, we know from Scripture that our Lord loves us and desires our belief in Him. Famously, we see Jesus reveal Himself to the disciples after His resurrection to help their unbelief. Why would he not show Himself to us?

These questions strike at the heart of the true identity of Jesus Christ. He is not merely interested in some blithe belief in His existence. Rather, He longs for an authentic, loving relationship with each one of us. This is something not merely centered upon rote assent to His existence. That sense of relationship over and above mere belief is necessarily ordered by divine providence which well understands the hearts of men and knows the best manner and method of communicating Himself to us. In a similar vein, while each one of us knows of the existence of our own parents, that mere fact of existence does not communicate love. Instead, that love is found and forged in the crucible of encounter wherein each person, parent and child, grows in their sense of the other and love shared between them.

As to the coming of the Kingdom, we are reminded of the insight from the great theologian Origen. In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Origen notes with interest that Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to "a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants". He notes that Jesus compares the kingdom to a king and, in turn, looks to describe our Lord as the *autobasileia*, the "kingdom in person". The kingdom is Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ is the kingdom of God. In Him, we experience the reordering of our fallen nature, a nature once divided. It was this division that remains the hallmark of Original Sin, namely, that mankind remains so separated from the divine life. Rightly, the kingdom of God now denotes the coming together of God and humanity, perfectly so in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

So, where is the kingdom of God? When will it come? It has come in the person of Jesus Christ, it remains in His Mystical Body the Church, and it remains yet to come at the end of the age. The kingdom of God remains that which spans the history of all time. It is a kingdom, which we pray in our Creed, that is "in one Lord Jesus Christ" and is "begotten from the Father before all ages".

Our invitation into this deep mystery necessitates a response from each one of us. It is not something that can be passively observed; rather, the kingdom of God imposes upon each one of

us an invitation to encounter, to reside in the heart of the kingdom, His own Sacred Heart. We need not look for the coming of the Lord or the sign of the Kingdom. Rather, we need only look for Him, the one our hearts truly long for.

This week, the universal Church celebrates National Vocation Awareness Week. We are invited, especially our young men and women, to begin to cultivate a deep relationship with Jesus Christ. For men, Christ's call to enter into a relationship with Him may be through a vocation to priesthood or consecrated life. For women, Jesus may be inviting you to consider one of the many forms of consecrated life, including apostolic religious life, consecrated virginity, or life in a secular institute. Jesus' call to each of us is wholly unique. May we allow His voice to penetrate our hearts and may He grant us the grace to respond to Him in love.

Friday, November 12, 2021: Memorial of St. Josaphat

Around the world every single day, countless people step out into nature to take in its beauty and grandeur. Whether its seeing the leaves change color during autumn, or the trees bud forth new life in the spring, or the breath-taking majesty of a snow-capped mountain in the winter, or the quiet of a peaceful lake as the sun goes down during the long days of summer, all these can leave us with a sense of awe. This isn't reserved to the beauty we see on the earth itself, as the sky exhibits its own magnificence as well. I'm sure all of us can remember at some point in our lives looking up at the night sky counting the stars or seeing the clouds roll through the blue sky. It's amazing to behold, and it's all around us.

The First Reading today from the Book of Wisdom recalls some of these natural themes. The passage mentions such powerful elements as "fire, or wind, or the swift air, or the circuit of the stars, or the mighty water, or the luminaries of heaven." They certainly are much to behold. The author, however, doesn't leave us there, but then points us to the logical conclusion that comes from all this; that God is the artisan. God is the One who made all of creation. It was Him alone that fashioned this world for us to live in and enjoy. The problem is that we can miss this all important reality. The beauty and awe that comes from nature should point us in the direction of the beauty and awe that is God Himself. The author makes this point clear, "Now if out of joy in their beauty they thought them gods, let them know how far more excellent is the Lord than these." We can never fully comprehend the glory of God, but seeing His reflection in nature can certainly point us in the right direction.

Despite all this, however, what is far more beautiful, far more awe-inspiring than all of creation combined, is the creation that God can do in each of us. We know that we are made by God to be in relationship in Him. This isn't something we willed, but solely out of His own goodness, we exist and live on this earth. For all of us, our first vocation in life is to allow Jesus to recreate us to become more like Him, or put another way, to become holy. It is up to us whether we allow Him to do so or not, but what beauty comes when that happens. I'm certain that many of us can point to someone in our lives that truly knows Jesus and strives to live a holy life. The sight of them alone can stir our own hearts to joy and make it seem like there is a magnet pulling us to that person. We hopefully experience that desire to have what they have, which is ultimately a closeness to Jesus. This should be the desire of all of us and what we should strive to pursue every day of our lives.

We know this is not easy however. It is one thing to speak about the vocation to holiness, and it's quite another thing to live it out. Every particular vocation brings with it its own unique challenges and struggles. For the married person, there may be the temptation to lose one's patience with their spouse or with their children. For the priest, there may be the temptation to make one's work their prayer. For the religious, there may be the temptation to not want to forgive a brother or sister from their community that has harmed them in some way. For the single person, there may be the temptation to be jealous of what someone else has that they do not. Thanks be to God, however, that He is constantly giving us His grace to avoid succumbing to these temptations. Yes, He doesn't eliminate the temptations from our lives, but He does give us the means to rise above them. And when He does, and when we cooperate with it, that is when true holiness appears. That is the greatest work of creation because it is man cooperating

with God in becoming more like God, which is what it is to be a saint. That is a beauty that even the heavens can't compare with!

From there, there is no telling what God will be able to accomplish in our life. A beautiful case in point is the saint that we celebrate today. Maybe not a well-known saint, but St. Josaphat was an outstanding example of what can happen when we allow ourselves to be recreated by God. Moved by fraternal charity, he deeply desired that his fellow Ruthenians in present day Ukraine who clung to the Orthodox faith would enter into communion with the Catholic Church. He desired reconciliation, and he spent his ministry as a bishop trying to bring that about. Because of this, those who were against him ultimately rose up leading to a brutal martyrdom. However, as what normally accompanies one laying down their life for the Church, these schismatics later sought union with Rome. Because of this, he is commonly known as the patron saint of unity. All of us might not be called to live this particular path of holiness, but we should nonetheless be inspired to imitate it in our daily lives.

In the end, the Lord has a plan for each of our lives. That plan, no matter who we are, involves that we become holy, that we become a saint. This is possible if we cooperate with His grace so as to be recreated in His own image and likeness. We pray that this happens in each of our lives. We pray that just as God created the heavens and the earth to reflect His splendor, our own lives might do the same and then some.

Saturday, November 13, 2021: 32nd Week in Ordinary Time

*The Lord said, "Pay attention to what the dishonest judge says.
Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones
who call out to him day and night?
Will he be slow to answer them?"*

We know the original intention of this parable, to turn to God persistently, constantly calling out to him in our need and in our struggles. The widow receives what she wants because she is persistent, even from an unjust and an evil judge, who "neither fears God nor respect any human being." If that is true for someone who is opposed to the petitioner, how much more so is it for us? How much more will God respond to our cries out of love for us?

Sometimes we think when we are trying to get an answer from God about a particular area of discernment that we have to say the right magic words or figure out the puzzle he has put before us. We envision him more on the side of the unjust judge, perhaps not unjust but certainly aloof. He needs me to figure this out, or he is withholding the answer from me. The reality is of course much different, he is invested in us because he is our Father! Life is not a puzzle that he has put before us and he will check back in a couple years to see if we have solved it. Life is not an exam that he has written to weed out the weak and the insufficiently spiritual. He is intimately a part of every decision of our lives and every aspect of our being. He is more desirous of our good and our flourishing than we are. He is not aloof or absent, he is present, in our hearts and in our minds.

We are the ones who are aloof and unjust, unable to see him or hear him. We are so caught up in ourselves and in the noisiness of the world around us that we have made ourselves deaf to his speaking in our hearts. We drown out the sound of his voice and then complain that he is absent. The reality is that his presence goes deeper in our souls than we could possibly imagine.

Discerning a vocation is something we do *with God*, and not something we do apart from him. The first stage then is learning how to hear his voice, to experience the intimacy he has with our hearts, and to trust that he truly is a loving Father and not a capricious and unscrupulous judge. Sometimes that means putting aside thoughts of a vocation for a time, to allow our hearts to learn how to listen. This can be a challenge for us, we can be afraid that time spent in simple prayer trying to learn how to listen to the Father's voice will be wasted time. We can be afraid that we will miss our vocation, either the person we are called to marry or the religious community we were called to enter. But again we have to remind ourselves that God is a loving, provident Father. Putting our trust in Him will always be repaid with generosity.

The call to a vocation is something persistent in our hearts, not something fleeting. Indeed, the parable in this case could be reversed. We are the unjust judges, His is the voice of the widow. We are the ones who care more about worldly things, care more about ourselves alone in our selfishness. We are the ones who ignore the voice of goodness when it comes to us, who reject God again and again and again, who sin deliberately against Him. How does he respond? Does

he give up and walk away from us and allow us to stew in the misery of our self-conceit? No, he responds with persistence, just like the widow. He will not stop knocking on the door of our hearts until we finally give in and open to him. He will not stop calling to us until his voice finally is heard and we finally give in. He will not stop loving us, deeply in our hearts, until we finally realize that in our selfishness and our ignorance we are His children.

Discerning a vocation is something that requires persistence. A persistent trust on our part that God is our Father and leading us to goodness, even if we can't see in the moment what that goodness is. But more importantly a persistent call from God. If you have a call in your heart which has not gone away, even when you want it to, maybe its time to listen.