

A Prayer for all in Civil Authority. O Lord, our Governor, whose glory is in all the world; we commend this nation to your merciful care, that being guided by your providence, we may dwell secure in your peace. Grant to the President of the United States and to all in authority, wisdom and strength to know and to do your will. Fill them with the love of truth and righteousness; and make them always mindful of their calling to serve this nation in your fear; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

A Prayer for the Clergy and People. Imighty and everlasting God, from whom comes every good and perfect gift: send down upon our Bishops and other Clergy, and upon the congregations committed to their charge, your life-giving Spirit of grace; and, that they may truly please you, pour upon them the continual dew of your blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honor of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

A Prayer for all Conditions of Men. O God, the Creator and Preserver of all mankind, we humbly beseech you for all sorts and conditions of men; that you would be pleased to make your ways know unto them, your saving grace unto all nations. Most especially, we pray for your holy catholic Church; that it may be so guided and governed by your good Spirit, that all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life. Finally, we commend to your fatherly goodness all those who are in any ways afflicted, or distressed, in mind, body, or estate [especially those for whom our prayers are desired]. Be pleased, holy Father, to comfort and relieve them according to their various needs; give them patience under their suffering, and a happy deliverance out of all their afflictions; for Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*

A General Thanksgiving. Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we your unworthy servants give you most humble and heartfelt thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men; We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but, above all, for your inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech you, give us that due sense of all your mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we might declare your praise not only with our lips, but also in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, world without end. *Amen.*

A Prayer of Saint Chrysostom. Almighty God, who has given us grace at this time to bring before you with one mind our common supplications, and who has promised that when two or three are gathered together in your Name you will grant their requests: fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of your servants, as may be most expedient for them, granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the world to come life everlasting. *Amen.*

The Grace (2 Corinthians 13:14). The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. *Amen.*

DAILY BIBLE COMMENTARY

FOR THE SEASON OF ADVENT 2010



WEEKS 1 & 2

NOVEMBER 29-DECEMBER 11

This booklet is offered in the hopes that it will be an aid to the thoughtful reading of Scripture while saying daily Morning Prayer.

The comments herein are restricted to the second lesson appointed for each morning in Advent. On the whole they are not "devotional" in nature, rather I have simply attempted to share some observations or background information about the passage (or some part of the passage) assigned for each day. Following each day's comments is a suggested intention for your prayer in response to the text.

I am grateful to Fr. O'Brien for his willingness to write a preface and to Diane McTigue for all of her editorial help.

J. S. S. Patterson, 2010

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The Apostles' Creed *(all remain standing)*

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth:
And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead and buried.
He descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead:
He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty:
from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit;
the holy Catholic Church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Minister: The Lord be with you.

People: And with your spirit.

Minister: Let us pray.

The People kneel. The Lord's Prayer may here be said.

Minister: O Lord, show us your mercy.

People: And grant us your salvation.

Minister: O God, make clean our hearts within us.

People: And take not your Holy Spirit from us.

The Collect of the Day

A Collect for Peace

O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, whom to know is eternal life and to serve is perfect freedom; Defend us your humble servants against all assaults of our enemies, that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A Collect for Grace

O Lord, our heavenly Father, Almighty and Everlasting God, who has safely brought us to the beginning of this day; Defend us in the same with your mighty power, and grant that this day we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger; but that all our doings, being guided and governed by you, may be righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The following prayers shall be omitted here when the Litany is said, and may be omitted when the Holy Communion is to follow. And NOTE, That the Minister may here end Morning Prayer with such general intercessions taken out of the Book of Common Prayer, as he thinks fit, or with the Grace.

Psalm(s) of the Day

The First Lesson *(all are seated)*

Te Deum laudamus *(all stand)*

We praise you, O God; we acknowledge you to be the Lord.
All creation worships you; the Father everlasting,
To you all angels cry aloud, the Heavens and all the powers therein;
To you Cherubim and Seraphim continually sing,
Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts;
Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of your glory.
The glorious company of the Apostles praise you:
The noble fellowship of the Prophets praise you.
The victorious army of Martyrs praise you.
The holy Church throughout all the world acknowledges you;
The Father, of an infinite Majesty;
Your adorable, true and only Son;
And the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

You are the King of Glory, O Christ.
You are the everlasting Son of the Father.
When you became man to deliver us, you humbled yourself to be born of a Virgin.
When you had overcome the sting of death, you opened the kingdom of heaven to
all believers.
You sit at the right hand of God, in the glory of the Father.
We believe that you will come to be our Judge.
Therefore, we beseech you, help your servants, whom you have redeemed with
your precious blood.
Make them to be numbered with your Saints, in glory everlasting.

O Lord, save your people, and bless your inheritance.
Govern them, and lift them up forever.
Day by day we magnify you;
And we worship your Name ever, world without end.
O Lord, by your grace, keep us this day from all sin.
O Lord, have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us.
O Lord, let your mercy be upon us, as we put our trust in you.
O Lord, in you have I have trusted; let me not be abandoned at the last.

The Second Lesson *(all are seated)*

Jubilate Deo *(Psalm 100) (all stand)*

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! * Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into
his presence with singing!
Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; * we are his people,
and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! * Give thanks to him; bless
his name!
For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, * and his faithfulness to all
generations.

Preface

Prayer is the operation of the Holy Spirit upon humanity, restoring all creation to the Father through Jesus Christ. 'For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body (Romans 8. 22-23).

Thus prayer is neither an esoteric skill to be individually mastered nor a lonely soliloquy to a 'cold and rook-delighting Heaven,' as it is often supposed. Rather prayer is a gift given by God the Father through the Holy Spirit, under the conditions of our humanity, this humanity having first been assumed by the Son (in his incarnation), hallowed through its union with the divine nature and then finally returned to God redeemed under the auspices of the Son's resurrection, ascension and glorification.

When he gave us the template and sum total of prayer, the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to say 'Our Father', not 'My Father.' This is true whether we be in our proverbial closet or among a multitudinous throng of worshippers. By this we learn that prayer is first and foremost, in common. To conceive of the Church as being fundamentally constituted as a company of voices, a community of prayer, before she can be spoken of hierarchically, juridically or politically is the patrimony (the distinctive birthright and contribution) of Anglican/Episcopalian Christianity to the Church Catholic. The Book of Common Prayer is the charter and instrument of this conception.

Looking to The Book of Common Prayer (1928), one notices that among the Sacramental ministrations, rites, ceremonies and the Psalter, to be singled out as an especial vehicle for the Church's constitutive common prayer is the 'Divine Office' or 'Daily Offices' of Morning and Evening Prayer (also called 'Mattins' and 'Evensong' in the first Prayer Book of 1549). 'Office' means duty, and if we consider (as we have) both that prayer is not made on our own initiative but is a gift of God, and that gifts enjoin upon their recipients the response of thanks, than we can see how disposing ourselves both to the gift and the giver is our 'bounden duty and service' each day and every day, morning and evening.

Prayer comes more easily when we come to realize that it is purer and truer, the more we set aside our personal feelings – our ways and techniques and methods – and enter into not only the narrow way that is Jesus, but also the vast company in heaven and earth (the angels and saints and holy dead) that comprise his Body the Church, with whom we join together in common prayer.

It has been said that The Book of Common Prayer is the Bible arranged for prayer. And so it demonstrably is, together with prayers stretching back into the history of the Church made hot by the breath of the saints. The same identical phrases said again and again, meditated upon day in and day out, hollow out within us this great corporate pattern of prayer.

Let us now turn to a brief overview of the pattern of prayer set forth in the daily offices. Whether in a group or by yourself, the Daily Office would have us begin with a sentence from Scripture, which functions as a keynote for the season or holy Day currently being celebrated in the Church or as a preamble to worship (pp. 3-5, 21-22; all pagination refers to The Book of Common Prayer 1928). We next confess our sins,

AN ORDER FOR DAILY MORNING PRAYER

for the Prayer Book insists that we begin where in reality we are, that is, alienated from God by our sin and thus in need of his grace. We must always approach God in humility, preparing ourselves in penitential adoration for restoration through Christ's sacrificial redemption. Though the daily offices are non-sacramental services, they always assume the sacramental drama of our restoration to God through Christ, which all of our prayers and praises adumbrate and seek. So we call to mind our sins and make confession in the General Confession (pp.6, 23). If saying the office alone or in the company of other lay people in the absence of a Priest, you might wish to say the collect on page 218 following the Confession. Having been restored to friendship with God through the benefits of Christ's sacrifice in penance and forgiveness, we begin our praises with the template of all prayer, the Lord's Prayer, here in thanksgiving ('for thine is the kingdom...', pp. 7, 24).

We then turn to the Psalms (that great hymn book and Prayer Book of the Church), which are comprehensive of every emotion and condition of soul known to man, whether it be exaltation or desolation. These songs and prayers were not only on the lips of our Lord himself, but we also find him and his mind in them. We end our reading from the Psalter with the 'Glory be', in token that the God of creation and redemption are one and the same; the God of the Old and New Covenant, as we are also reminded every morning in the recitation of the Invitatory Psalm, Psalm 95 (the Venite). The easiest and most comprehensive way to read the Psalms is by day as apportioned in the Prayer Book for morning and evening (pp. 345-525). If you follow this pattern you will read the entire Psalter each month. There is also a thematic section for each day in the Lectionary (the pattern for reading Scripture with the Church), on pp. x-xl, and the psalms for fixed Holy Days, on pp. xliv-xlv.

Next comes the reading of Holy Scripture. The first lesson appointed by the Lectionary is from the Old Testament. At Morning Prayer we respond to it with the Te Deum or (during some seasons) with the Benedicite. At Evening Prayer our response is the Magnificat, at the opening words of which it is customary to make the sign of the cross. The second lesson is from the New Testament and we respond with the Benedictus at Morning Prayer and the Nunc Dimittis at Evening Prayer. The sign of the cross is likewise used at the beginning of both these canticles, as they are from the Gospel.

At Morning and Evening Prayer the recitation of the second canticle '...leads... fittingly to the recital of the Apostles' Creed which...serves as a memorial of Baptism in which each of us was initiated into the privileges and responsibilities of the Church. The sign of the cross, often made when reciting this creed, is reminiscent also of the solemn signing at Baptism.' (Colin Dunlop, Anglican Public Worship, SCM, 1953, p. 121).

The climax of these services is the second recitation of the Lord's Prayer, summing up all we have heard and prayed, and opening out into further acts of prayer, praise and intercession for the whole Church and world in versicle and response, collects (the first showing the Daily Offices assuming the Eucharist and holy communion), anthem and prayer (pp. 17-20, 31-34).

As we begin another span of 'the Church's year of grace' this Advent, let us exercise our membership in the same, devoutly, inwardly, attentively in the life of common prayer.

Fr. Craig O'Brien SSC St. John's, Savannah

The Opening Sentences

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (St. Matthew 3:2)

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)

A General Confession *(all kneel)*

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. Have mercy on us, most miserable offenders. Spare those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore those who are penitent; According to your promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of your holy Name. Amen.

The Declaration of Absolution, or Remission of Sins

In the absence of a priest, the following prayer may be said:

Grant, we beseech you, merciful Lord, to your faithful people pardon and peace, that they may be cleansed from all their sins, and serve you with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Minister: O Lord, open our lips.

People: And we shall declare your praise.

All stand.

Minister: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:

People: As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be; world without end. Amen.

Minister: Let us praise the Lord.

People: The Lord's Name be praised.

The Venite, exultemus Domino *(Psalm 95)*

O come, let us sing to the Lord; * let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; * let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the Lord is a great God, * and a great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth; * the heights of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it, * and his hands formed the dry land.

Oh come, let us worship and bow down; * let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!

For he is our God, * and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, * as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

When your fathers put me to the test * and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

For forty years I loathed that generation and said, * "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways."

Therefore I swore in my wrath, * "They shall not enter my rest."

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Trust in Jesus. *“And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still! And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.’*” What do we learn here about Jesus? He is more powerful than anything that assails us. He who can tame the wind and the sea can also quiet the chaos of our lives. We can entrust ourselves to him and rely upon him in the midst of hardships.

Expect Hardship. Being a servant of Jesus does not exempt us from having to weather storms. As the British theologian Donald English wrote: “Forms of Christianity which encourage and promise a life of continual success, excitement and growth will not only lead to frustration and despair; they actually point the disciple towards the wrong goal in the Christian pilgrimage.”

Take note of the fact that the disciples are there – being battered with such great waves that experienced fishermen fear for their lives – because Jesus wanted them to be. He it was who invited the disciples into the boat that day and instructed them to make the journey. Though we must never put God to the test, he promises to test us, in order to refine us and conform us into the image of Christ. Consider the way that Peter helps his readers make sense of their sufferings:

. . . you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6b-7)

There are other examples in the Bible of God testing his people, for instance God tested Abraham’s faith by commanding him to sacrifice his only son (see Hebrews 11:17), he tested Joseph by allowing him to be sold into slavery by his own brothers (see Psalm 105:19), and Jesus tested Philip’s faith by asking him where they would find bread to feed the multitudes (John 6:6).

✠God tests us and allows us to endure hardship because the goal of our discipleship to Jesus is that we be formed into the image of Christ and be made ready to be with him in Heaven. – Almighty God, we pray that when you allow us to experience difficulties, trials and afflictions we would have the faith to believe that you are working together all things for our good, preparing us to be with you in heaven. ✠

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

Monday, November 29 • Psalms 1 & 2; Isaiah 1:1-9; Mark 1:1-13

The opening verses of Saint Mark’s Gospel swiftly conduct us through: a brief introduction of Jesus (vv.1-3); a description of the ministry of John the Baptist (vv.4-8); Jesus’ baptism (vv.9-11); and Jesus’ temptation (vv.12-13).

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark begins by telling us why he has written this book. He is passing on what he has seen and heard about the good news of Jesus Christ – who he is, what he has done and what difference it makes.

Mark writes that this is the “beginning” of the gospel of Jesus Christ, meaning that it is the beginning of his account of it. But as he immediately makes clear by quoting the Old Testament book of Isaiah, this good news about Jesus is not the beginning of God’s work to redeem for himself a people. The advent of Jesus is the climatic fulfillment of God’s ancient promises to send a Redeemer.

As it is written . . . Beginning first in Genesis, the Bible speaks about a coming Redeemer who will “crush the serpent’s (i.e. Satan’s) head” (3:15). This promise that God would one day intervene and send a Deliverer is told and retold with increasing clarity as the message of the Old Testament unfolds. As J. C. Ryle wrote: “There was nothing unforeseen and suddenly contrived in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world.” The New Testament writers confirm this by consistently reminding us that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus all took place “as it is written.”

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness . . . John was baptizing on the eastern side of the Jordan River (John 1:28), a highly symbolic location. The Hebrew people had long before entered the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan. When they emerged upon Jordan’s western bank, the wilderness and all that it represented was behind them. Thus the season of their pilgrimage was over and now they were home – residents in the land of their inheritance, the land which long ago God had promised to give Abram (later renamed Abraham) and his descendents (see Genesis 12). John, however, calls his fellow Jews to re-enter the wilderness and submit to a baptism of repentance.

I have baptized you with water . . . Ritual washings in water were common both in the Old Testament and in later Judaism. Modern archeological discoveries have unearthed numerous ritual immersion baths in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine, indicating that ritualistic washing was an established part of Jewish religious life. But John's baptism was different. "He was calling for a single, initiatory baptism, indicating the beginning of a new commitment" (France, 66). This makes his baptism very similar to the ritualistic washing required of a Gentile converting to Judaism. John, however, was calling *Jews* to be baptized – pointing to the fact that being born a Jew was not sufficient to be counted a member of the people of God; it was necessary to undergo "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v.4).

Jesus . . . was baptized by John in the Jordan. Though Jesus was without sin (and thus had nothing for which he needed to repent), he submitted to John's baptism of repentance on behalf of sinners, both sinful Israel and sinful humanity in general.

And when he came up out of the water . . . A great epiphany takes place at Jesus' baptism; in fact most of this passage (vv.9-11) is occupied not with describing his baptism, but with what took place after it.

The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus fulfils the expectation of the prophets that the Messiah would be endowed with God's Spirit. "And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him" (Isaiah 11:2; see also Isaiah 42:1 & 61:1).

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness . . . Jesus was fully man and fully God (a great mystery!). In his humanity he could hunger (Matthew 21:18), thirst (John 19:28), grow tired (Mark 4:38) and weep (John 11:35). Perhaps most significantly, he could experience temptation, (see also Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). But whereas Adam succumbed to temptation and sinned (corrupting all of humanity), Jesus (the "second Adam" through whom God has called forth a new creation/humanity) did not (Hebrews 4:15). The consequences of this are staggering. For, since death is the penalty for sin, by being sinless, Jesus had no need to die. By willingly giving himself over to death for our sake, his death is the atonement for our sins. As we read in the New Testament book Hebrews:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high

tongue confess that Jesus is Lord" (Philippians 2). God's plan is to make the means of salvation known to the world and we are to be his faithful witnesses in that mission.

✠ Jesus said about himself I am the light of the world and to his disciples he said You are the light of the world – we pray that Jesus would so dwell in us that others would see our good works and glorify our heavenly Father. ✠

Saturday, December 11 • Psalm 80; Isaiah 28:1-13; Mark 4:30-41

Until this passage (vv.35-41) in which we read of Jesus' miraculous calming of the storm, chapter 4 has been occupied with parables about the Kingdom of God. But here the wise teacher reminds us that he is also the sovereign Lord. This passage (vv.35-41) demonstrates Jesus' power over nature just as passages soon to follow will demonstrate his power over demons (5:1-20), disease (5:25-34) and death (5:21-24, 35-43).

"Let us go across to the other side." The passage begins with Jesus instructing his disciples to come with him, to the other side (the eastern side) of the lake. As they journey, a great windstorm arises and the waves are so great that their boat begins to take on water to the point that the experienced fishermen in their midst despair of being drowned. To the disciples it seemed that things were spiraling out of control and seeing their leader asleep, they react to their circumstances with a combination of perplexity and annoyance, waking Jesus up and wondering aloud if he cared that they were about to die – "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" As we see later on in the passage, Jesus regards their fearful response as being indicative of a lack of faith in him.

While nothing in the text suggests that Jesus expected them to think that he would perform the miracle of calming the storm, he did expect them to refrain from questioning his care for them "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" Having faith in Jesus entails more than simply entrusting our souls to him. Having faith in Jesus entails trusting him to look after us now as well. Recall Jesus' commandment in the Sermon on the Mount that we entrust our material needs to God, in light of our faith that God (a) knows of our needs and (b) is adequate to meet our needs (see Matthew 6:25-34).

At a very basic level, having faith in God must lead us to affirm that though the circumstances of our lives are very often exceedingly difficult, perilous and overwhelming – he is nevertheless both knowledgeable about and charitably disposed toward us and our lives.

What else can we learn from this passage?

What are we to make of these observations? Observation #2 leads us to suspect that the lamp in question is not really a lamp, rather it metaphorically represents something else. Furthermore, the presence of the definite article (“the lamp”) leads us to suspect that *the* lamp is Jesus himself.

In the Old Testament lamps are sometimes used as metaphors for God (2 Samuel 22:29) or the Messiah (2 Kings 8:19; Psalm 132:17). And the image of Jesus as being light or bringing light is also found in the New Testament (John 1:4ff; 8:12-30; cf. Matt 5:14-16).

If we accept this line of interpretation, Jesus is telling a parable about himself – *he* is the lamp which is not to be concealed but rather must be permitted to bring light.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus was present upon the earth in humility and his identity was hidden from the world. But the lamp has not come among us in order to be permanently hidden away. Even within the span of his earthly ministry, the reality of Jesus’ identity and mission were increasingly becoming known (though most did not have “ears to hear” the meaning of these things). Especially in his death, resurrection, ascension and the witness of the Apostles, the lamp was being placed upon the lampstand, so as to bring light to the world.



If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. And he said to them, ‘Pay attention to what you hear . . . In the span of two short verses, Jesus instructs us three times to be careful to hear. The secret of the Kingdom, which is the revelation of Jesus’ true identity, comes by means of hearing. As J. C. Ryle wrote, if any would be tempted to downplay the importance of the Church’s faithful ministry of preaching and teaching – let him be reminded of the strong emphasis that both Jesus and the Apostles placed upon the proclamation of the word as a means of grace by which men and women become converted to the Faith.

In other words, Christians are called to be active participants in making manifest the light of Christ to others. Thus Jesus not only identifies himself as “the light of the world” but also tells his followers: *You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (Matthew 5:14-16). Thus all Christians are called to bear witness to Jesus in both word and deed, with the intent that others would hear and believe.

One of the central beliefs of the Church is that the present hiddenness of the glory of God in Christ is temporary. One day “every knee will bow and every

priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸
For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:14-18).

✠ We give thanks for “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” set forth by St. Mark - we pray to read his gospel with open ears and open hearts, ready to hear and receive and make our own the good news which Christ brings. ✠

Tuesday, November 30 • Psalm 7; Isaiah 1:21-28; Mark 1:14-28

Now after John was arrested . . . The arrest of St. John the Baptist marks the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. As we read yesterday, John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus and now that his work is complete, Jesus begins his ministry of proclaiming the gospel of God.

The next verse (v.15) contains a summary of Jesus’ preaching, the content of which is as relevant to us today as it was to those to whom it was first spoken.

The time is fulfilled . . . Perhaps one of the most important things for us to affirm about Jesus is that he knew what he was doing. Jesus was not some hapless teacher who got caught up in something bigger than Himself, only to wake up one morning and discover that he had gone a bit too far in his teaching and that to save face he had no choice but to stick to his guns and suffer the consequences (on the Cross).

Jesus knowingly and willingly gave Himself over to suffering and death so as to defeat sin, death and the devil, thereby redeeming all who are united to him through baptism and faith. This work of redemption was not accomplished in secret and then broadcast to the world. He begins his ministry publicly with the announcement “the time is fulfilled,” a phrase which signifies that the mystery hidden for ages and generations was now being revealed to the saints (see Ephesians 3:9 and Colossians 1:26). It also demonstrates that Jesus understood his place in God’s plan, and reassured others that everything was as it needed to be.

. . . the kingdom of God is at hand. . . . The Kingdom of God is a central theme in the preaching of Jesus and most of His parables are about the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is the place where God is King. It is a spiritual Kingdom and all those who bow the knee to King Jesus are its citizens. Jesus taught that those who are in the Kingdom must give him their allegiance and thus live in keeping with his values, not the values of the world.

Jesus contrasts the Kingdom of God with the “kingdom of this world” (John 18:36). The kingdom of this world has (a) its own ruler, the devil (John

12:31, 14:30, 16:11; 2 Corinthians 4:4), (b) its own standard of twisted ethics (Ephesians 2:2; 1 Corinthians 5:10) and (c) its own "wisdom," which God regards as foolishness (1 Corinthians 3:19).

. . . *repent and believe in the gospel.* This is the summary par excellence of the preaching of Jesus (as well as St. John the Baptist before him and the Apostles after him).

Repentance entails admitting that we are not as good and as loving and as obedient as we should be. Christian repentance demands that we not only recognize our imperfections but also admit (confess) that they are wicked in God's sight. The repentance that God requires of us grates against our natural inclination to excuse ourselves at almost any cost. Acknowledging our sins is much easier if our confession is attended by explanations which we feel are appropriate excuses for our failure to love God and neighbor. We would rather receive the benefit of Jesus' sacrifice on behalf of sinners without actually embracing the notion that we ourselves are sinful and guilty of sin.

But Jesus (and indeed the entire Biblical witness) is clear on this point: God alone is perfectly righteous and we are not. To be able to withstand the glory of his presence in heaven, we first must be cleansed of our sins and made righteous.

This is the reason why the Father sent the Son, to become like us so that we might become like him. As St. Paul writes: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.* (2 Corinthians 8:9). This transformation begins with repenting of our sins and believing in the love and the power of God to cleanse us from all our sins, which was made manifest in the Cross.

✠ In his earthly ministry Jesus preached "repent and believe in the gospel" and in his death upon the Cross he secured eternal redemption by his blood for all who trust in him – we pray that by God's Spirit we may ever repent of our sins and be united in faith to Jesus, the Savior of the world. ✠

Wednesday, December 1 • Psalm 9; Isaiah 2:6-19; Mark 1:29-39

In yesterday's gospel text we read a summary of Jesus' preaching (v. 15), followed by his call to some disciples to join him in his mission. The reading ended with a story about his authority, shown in both his authoritative teaching and in his power and authority over the devil (as demonstrated in an exorcism). Jesus' power to heal is again made manifest in today's passage, as he heals first Simon's mother-in-law and then a great number of other people.

the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God' (James 4:4)."

Hearts like fertile soil. . . . *but those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold* (v.20). "These are those who really receive Christ's truth into the bottom of their hearts, believe it implicitly, and obey it thoroughly. In these the fruits of that truth will be seen, - uniform, plain and unmistakable results in heart and life. Sin will be truly hated, mourned over, resisted, and renounced. Christ will be truly loved, trusted in, followed, loved, and obeyed. Holiness will show itself in all their conversation, in humility, spiritual-mindedness, patience, meekness, and charity. There be something that can be seen. The true work of the Holy Ghost cannot be hid."

What do we learn from this parable? **(1) Do not change the gospel message.** Jesus has given an explanation as to why some do not respond positively to the preaching of the Gospel. It is not the seed (the gospel itself) that is somehow defective but rather its reception by the various soils onto which it is cast. An implication of this is that the message itself must not be changed so as obtain "better" results.

(2) Great fruitfulness pleases God. This parable also describes the effect that God desires from those who hear and receive His Word. In short, he desires great fruitfulness. The good soil is not just a little productive, Jesus uses great hyperbole to describe the fruit that God desires to bring forth in the lives of his people.

✠ In this parable Jesus teaches us that God is pleased when we receive his Word and bear great fruit. – O God, we pray that we might increasingly give our lives over to God, allowing Him to be in control and trusting Him through thick and thin, in order that over a lifetime of hearing, believing and obeying God's Word we would bear great fruit to the glory of God's name. ✠

Friday, December 10 • Psalm 73; Isaiah 24:16b-23; Mark 4:21-29

That which is hidden will be made known. What does Jesus mean when he tells this short parable about a lamp? We may be helped by considering the following translation of v.21: "Does *the lamp* come for the purpose of being placed under the measure or under the couch? Does it not rather *come* for the purpose of being placed on the lampstand?" There are two important details about this verse which this translation helps us to notice: (1) the lamp in question is preceded by the definite article; in other words this is not just any lamp but the lamp, and (2) the lamp is said to "come" which is odd, for lamps (being inanimate objects) do not come, they are brought.

Let us first consider the ruminations of Bishop J. C. Ryle about this parable, and then think about some of the ways in which we might respond to this parable's teaching.

Hearts like the wayside of a field. . . . *some seed fell along the path . . . and immediately Satan comes and takes away the words that is sown in them* (v.4a, 13b). There will be some who "hear sermons, but pay no attention to them. They go to a place of worship, for form, or fashion, or to appear respectable before men. But they take no interest whatever in the preaching . . . it produces no more effect on them than water on a stone. And at the end they go away, knowing no more than when they came in. There are myriads of professing Christians in this state of soul. Week after week they live on, without faith, or fear, or knowledge, or grace, - feeling nothing, caring nothing, taking no more interest in religion, than if Christ had never died on the cross at all."

Hearts like rocky ground. . . . *other seed fell on rocky ground . . . and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away* (v.5a, 17b). "These are they on whom preaching produces temporary impressions, but no deep, lasting, and abiding effect. They take pleasure in hearing sermons in which the truth is faithfully set forth. They can speak with apparent joy and enthusiasm about the sweetness of the Gospel, and the happiness which they experience in listening to it. They can be moved to tears by the appeals of preachers, and talk with apparent earnestness of their own inward conflicts, hopes, struggles, desires and fears. But unhappily there is no stability about their religion. 'They have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time.' Their religion has no more life in it than the cut flower. It has no root, and soon withers away."

Hearts like thorny ground. . . . *other seed fell among thorns . . . but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful* (v.7a, 19). "These are they who attend to the preaching of Christ's truth, and to a certain extent obey it. Their understanding assents to it. Their judgment approves of it. Their conscience is affected by it. Their affections are in favour of it. They acknowledge that it is all right, and good, and worthy of reception. They even abstain from many things which the Gospel condemns, and adopt many habits which the Gospel requires. But here unhappily they stop short. Something appears to chain them fast, and they never get beyond a certain point in their religion. And the grand secret of their condition is the world. 'The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things' prevent the word having its full effect on their souls. They never come up to the full standard of New Testament Christianity. Without a decided change they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Christ will have all our hearts. 'Do you not know that friendship with

These texts show that Jesus has both a unique teaching authority and a universal power to heal, irrespective of whether the infirmity is spiritual or physical, "natural" or demonic. His power is summarized in vv. 32-34 where we see him healing "all who were sick or oppressed by demons."

These demonstrations of power and authority reveal who Jesus really is. They are living parables that communicate meaning beyond the acts themselves. Although Mark does not refer to them as such, they are "signs" pointing to Jesus and his mission.

Consider the things that Jesus says to his disciples about how his deeds serve to illuminate his identity and mission:

But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. (John 5:36)

If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father. (John 10:37-38)

Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. (John 14:11)

The people took note of these signs, whether or not they understood their full importance: *And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.* (John 6:2)

Interestingly enough, though his disciples are slow to fully realize his identity, numerous demonic voices catch on more quickly. For instance: in Mark 1:24 a demon recognizes him as "the Holy One of God"; in 3:11 he is hailed as "the Son of God" and in 5:7 as "the Son of the Most High." These titles, though coming from the father of lies, are quite true in their estimation of Jesus' identity. The same titles are used elsewhere by:

St. Peter – *Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."* (John 6:68-69)

Jesus' disciples – *And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."* (Matthew 14:33)

The Archangel – *And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy- the Son of God.* (Luke 1:35)

St. John the Baptist – *And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.* (John 1:34)

Nathanael – *"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"* (John 1:49)

Jesus, speaking about himself – *But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* (John 11:4)

The demons were able to speak about Jesus in a way that was formally accurate and true and yet they did not believe in him, entrust themselves to him or love him. This should serve as a sobering reminder that there might be a lot that we can “get right” about who Jesus is without being a true member of his Church. God desires not simply that we affirm who he is (which we might do only on a cognitive level) or recognize his power (which we might do with faithless fear), but that we entrust our souls and bodies to his loving and wise care.

✠ Just as Simon’s mother-in-law experienced Jesus’ power (*And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her*) and then began to serve him – we pray that we too may respond to Jesus by giving ourselves into his service, for He would have us not only know who he is, but entrust ourselves to his care and honor him with our lives. ✠

Thursday, December 2 • Psalm 10; Isaiah 4:2; Mark 1:40-45

We saw in the lessons earlier this week that Mark 1 contains numerous examples of Jesus’ healing power. Reflecting on the miracles one cannot help but notice that his miraculous acts have been especially oriented towards the demonic, highlighting his power over the unseen spiritual realm as well as the physical world. These mighty acts not only pointed to and confirmed Jesus’ identity as God incarnate to those who witnessed them in the first century, but they continue to remind us even today that there is nothing that the risen Lord Jesus is not competent to handle.

And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, *"If you will, you can make me clean."* In distinction to the miraculous healings, here we witness a miracle that Mark is careful not to label as a “healing,” but rather four times tells us that it was a cleansing.

What is the significance of this nomenclature? Why does the text consistently say that the sick and oppressed are healed but the leper is *cleansed*? To answer this question, we must first recall that in keeping with the teaching of the Old Testament, leprosy was far more than simply an ailment of the body.

to us what it means to die to self when one’s character is attacked or unjust assumptions are made about one’s motives (recall his teaching in Matthew 5:38-42). This demonstration of charity is in keeping with his mission – “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). By telling them this parable, Jesus offers his opponents the wisdom that can save their souls.

The scribes, however, cannot accept his teaching because they believe that they are already wise. Their pride has deafened their ears and closed their minds. Furthermore, they believe themselves to be gifted to see what others cannot. From their perspective, though the senseless crowd may have been tricked and thus flock to be near him (v.20), they think themselves able to see through his charade – “He is possessed by Beelzebul and by the prince of demons he casts out demons” (v.22). The irony, of course, is that it is the scribes who have missed the true significance of the events about which they are speaking. Though they are the “wise” of the world, they repeatedly demonstrate their lack of true wisdom.

In numerous places in the Bible, the “wisdom of this world” is contrasted with the wisdom of God. Jesus’ death upon the Cross (the means by which Jesus’ prophecy in v.28 is made possible) is the most significant instance of the wisdom of God being despised as foolishness by the worldly wise. Interestingly, elsewhere in the New Testament when Paul contrasts the wisdom of God with that of the world, he makes reference to both the scribes and the Cross.

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world. ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Corinthians 1:20-25).

✠ The scribes could not accept Jesus’ teaching because they thought themselves already wise – we pray for the humility to be able to hear God correct, encourage and instruct us and for the wisdom to live in light of his word. ✠

Thursday, December 9 • Psalm 62, 63; Isaiah 13:1-22; Mark 4:1-20

In this chapter Jesus teaches the meaning of true conversion and discipleship through the Parable of the Sower. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? This parable both describes true discipleship and warns us about its counterfeits.

But neither spiritual insight about Jesus nor an appropriate form of piety before him is adequate for the salvation of one's soul. In this case, neither their knowledge nor their kneeling is evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Apostles. *And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired and they came to him.* The Apostles (or eleven of them at least) stand in contrast to the two groups already mentioned.

That being said, however, we cannot but notice that at times even the Apostles demonstrate that they are not yet perfected. Between the time of their calling and the day of Pentecost they will make mistakes similar to those of the crowd and the demonic. For instance, they act like the fickle crowd and abandon Jesus when he is crucified (except for John). And at other times they make true pronouncements about Jesus' identity, but don't know the significance of what they have said (this was the case when Peter quite rightly identified Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the Living God" but then almost immediately shows us that at that time he understood nothing of Jesus' mission (by opposing Jesus' passion and cross, see Matthew 16:16)).

Thankfully, however, the Apostles act less like the crowds or the unclean spirits over time, as the Holy Spirit progressively sanctifies them and illumines their minds about the significance of Jesus' teachings.

And thus they do not remain like the crowds, always on the outside, watching and observing but never committing themselves to Jesus and his mission. Rather they take up his teaching and his message and are given authority by Jesus to preach (3:14). Neither do they continue in the way of the unclean spirits who know how to act before Jesus (falling down before him) and know true things about him, but who do not themselves believe and willingly submit themselves to him.

✠The Apostles give us a virtuous example, in their willingness to share Jesus' message with others, to persevere in the Faith and to live lives consecrated to God – O Heavenly Father, we pray for the grace to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of your heavenly kingdom. ✠

Wednesday, December 8 • Psalm 50; Isaiah 11:1-10; Mark 3:20-35

In today's readings we witness another example of the love of God toward sinners, as manifested in Jesus' willingness to endure rejection and misunderstanding. When a group of scribes cast aspersions upon him (suggesting that he has power over the demons because he himself is demonic), Jesus responds to their unjust accusations by inviting them to come to him, so that he might speak with them (v.23a). By so doing, Jesus is putting his own teaching into action, modeling

According to Old Testament law, a person with leprosy was ritually unclean. A leper had to contend not merely with the sometimes awful physical ramifications of his disease (serious though they may be) but also with its devastating social, familial and religious fallout. Leviticus 13:45-46 proscribes the manner in which the leper was expected to cut himself off from contact with all other people:

The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' ⁴⁶He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

The leper was required to keep a span of 50 feet between himself and the rest of the population because his uncleanness was contagious. That is, it was communicable to others via his presence and most especially his touch. Passages from the Mishnah indicate that if a leper entered a house, the entire house became unclean. And if he deigned to pass by a tree, all those who afterwards passed by that tree likewise became polluted with uncleanness.

To make matters far worse, because of his uncleanness he was also cut off from God. Leprosy was understood to be a sign of God's punishment that man was powerless to stop, control or cure (Numbers 12:9-13). Only God Himself could cure the leper (recall the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5).



We all have heard the popular saying "there are no atheists in foxholes." That is, in the heat of battle and in the fear of death, men who all their lives showed no interest in God find themselves begging for His help. And, in keeping with His abundant grace, sometimes God grants those requests. But if this is the only way in which we relate to God, that is, if we simply regard Him as a useful means of avoiding undesirable ends and acquiring what we want (which would include thinking of him simply as being a means of evading Hell and obtaining Heaven) we might be guilty of the worse kind of self-centered religious pragmatism.

The leper did not need God more because he was a leper; rather, his leprous condition enlightened him to that which was true irrespective of his leprosy, namely that he needed to be made clean by Jesus. In a sense we do not really need God more when we are suffering, rather our suffering schools us in the reality of our ever present need for Him.

The danger lies in looking to God only when we feel that we need him, but continuing on with business as usual whenever we do not.

✠Just as God, in his grace, gave the leper enough faith to implore Jesus for mercy, saying If you will, you can make me clean - we pray for the grace to turn to Jesus in faith, both when we feel our need and when we do not. ✠

Friday, December 3 • Psalm 22; Isaiah 5:8-29; Mark 2:1-12

The miracles that Jesus performed in chapter 1 point to the fact that through his life and ministry the Kingdom of God was beginning to be established on earth. This was also a signal that the “last days” of which the prophets had written had arrived.

And when he returned to Capernaum. . . Jesus’ temporary relocation into Capernaum begins a new section in Mark’s gospel, which focuses on the opposition that Jesus encountered from the established religious authorities. The arrival of the kingdom would neither be seen nor welcomed by all. As St. John writes: “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” (John 1:11). Mark 2:1-12 is the first of five short narratives, each of which might be regarded as an elaboration and commentary upon John 1:11.

Each of these five narratives contains a pronouncement statement by Jesus, made in response to a specific conflict between him and the religious authorities. We shall consider the first of these narratives today and then treat the 2nd and 3rd tomorrow, followed by the 4th and 5th on Monday.

The Authority to Forgive Sins

Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” . . . the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” The fact that this passage begins with a miracle helps to link 2:1-3:6 with the miracle rich chapter that precedes it. The main focus of the story of the paralytic’s miraculous healing, however, is not the miracle itself, but the question of Jesus’ authority which is occasioned when he forgives the man’s sins.

And there were many gathered together . . . and he was preaching the word to them . . . The scene is set by mention of the crowds clamoring to hear Jesus teach (v.2). Mark mentions the crowds on a number of occasions in his gospel. They are a fickle bunch, at times interested in the phenomena of Jesus’ spectacular teaching and amazing healings but as their later actions will make clear, they are without any real understanding as to who he is.

In 2:2 the crowds press in around Jesus in such numbers that the paralytic’s friends cannot reach him through the door. With an extraordinary act of faith (which Jesus validates in v.5) the paralytic’s friends lower him down through the ceiling to where Jesus is teaching (the roof would have been flat and accessed by a staircase on the exterior of the house), thereby giving us an

✠In the book of Hebrews we read “there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God . . . strive to enter that rest.” The good news of the gospel is that those who are united by faith to Jesus may enter into God’s eternal rest – let us pray that we would have the faith to rest in Jesus. ✠

Tuesday, December 7 • Psalm 48; Isaiah 9:18-10:4; Mark 3:7-19

As you read this text consider the different ways in which people reacted to Jesus and his ministry. I see three main types of reactions in these verses, as represented by: the crowds, the unclean spirits and the apostles.

The Crowds . . . *a great crowd followed (him) . . . when the great crowd heard . . . they came to him . . . (the) crowd (threatened to) crush him . . . (they) pressed around him to touch him.* The “crowd” or the “multitude” are a fickle bunch throughout the gospels. At times exuberant in their enthusiastic reception of Jesus, they turn back when his teaching becomes too challenging. Ultimately they will turn on him and call for his death. In this passage the crowd is “great” (meaning very large) and eagerly flocks to Jesus, to observe (and potentially benefit from) his mighty deeds.

The crowds loved Jesus when he met their expectations (or exceeded them) but not when he challenged their presuppositions. But as their later behavior will demonstrate, they do not know him and they do not love him. The crowds exhibit the desire of those who only want to use Jesus to feed their own appetites (for spectacular entertainment or their own physical betterment).

They loved the interesting Teacher, the excitement of the Wonderworker and the practical applicability of the Healer but lost interest in the Judge, the King and the Saviour. Their fickleness towards him is emblematic of the potential wanderings of any of our hearts.

The Unclean Spirits. St. Mark’s unblushing inclusion of such verses as 3:11 is an embarrassment for those of us who have made our peace with modernity’s materialistic worldview. We believe that we have evolved beyond what we regard as the archaic perspective that looks for spiritual explanations for that which may be explained by more reasonable methods.

The “unclean spirits” are those who in a very undesirable way are “spiritual.” They are individuals who have given themselves over to demonic spirituality and as a consequence they apparently have the ability to see certain realities which are unseen by others. They are able to rightly identify Jesus as “the Son of God” and they had a certain degree of respect for or fear of him, which was manifest by prostrating themselves before him.

Monday, December 6 • Psalm 33; Isaiah 8:5-20; Mark 2:23-3:6

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields The fourth of the Ten Commandments is the longest commandment in the Decalogue.

Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all that thou hast to do; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt do no manner of work; thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, thy man-servant, thy cattle, and the stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it.

Because God rested on the seventh day of creation, his people were to abstain from all labor on that day. Sabbath observance (along with circumcision) functioned to distinguish Israel from the nations and was a weekly reminder to them to trust God to provide for their needs.

. . . *as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.* The disciples' actions were unlawful because though the plucking of grain from someone else's field was considered lawful (see Deuteronomy 23:25), such activity was designated as "work" and thus an infraction of Sabbath regulations (see Exodus 34:21).

. . . *why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?* Jesus responds to the Pharisees with an argument from the Old Testament, 1 Samuel 21:1-6. During the days in which David and his followers were outlaws from King Saul, David entered the tabernacle and took some of the bread (twelve loaves laid out in two rows) that would have been placed upon the altar on the Sabbath, to be eaten later by the priests.

. . . *the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.* In preceding passages we have seen more and more of the identity of Jesus revealed. Let us review what we have learned of Jesus thus far in Mark's gospel: he may declare sins forgiven (2:7-11), eat with the unclean (2:16-17) and turn fasting and mourning into feasting and celebration (2:19-22). Elsewhere in the Gospels: Jesus is greater than Abraham (John 8:53), Jacob (John 4:12), Jonah and Solomon (Matthew 12:38-41) and the temple (Matthew 12:6). As in other parts of Mark's gospel, the climax of the passage comes in its final statements, in which we see another important teaching about Jesus' identity and authority. He is "the lord of the Sabbath," greater even than Israel's greatest king, David. When we bear in mind the fact that in the Old Testament God is repeatedly called the Lord of the Sabbath, we have some context in which to observe the very high claim being made here by Jesus about his identity and authority.

excellent illustration of faith leading to action. Commentator James Edwards writes: "Being a part of the crowd around Jesus is not the same as being a disciple of Jesus. The crowd stands and observes; disciples must commit themselves to action, as illustrated by the plucky squad of four. If an opening to Jesus cannot be found, one must be made. That is a description of faith: it will remove any obstacle – even a roof, if necessary – to get to Jesus."

It is worth noting that this first mention of faith in Mark's gospel (2:5) is in reference to action, rather than knowing or feeling. "Faith is first and foremost not knowledge about Jesus but active trust that Jesus is sufficient for one's deepest and most heartfelt needs" (Edwards, 76).

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Jesus scandalizes the scribes by forgiving sins by his own authority. Consider, for example, the contrast between Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness and that which the prophet Nathan said to King David: "The Lord also has put away your sin" (2 Samuel 12:13). Nathan spoke as a man to a man, but the Lord Jesus speaks as God to men.

He is able to forgive the sins of the paralytic for he himself is God in the flesh, the one against whom the paralytic had sinned. Ultimately all sin is sin against God and it is he alone to whom we must turn for forgiveness. This is not to discount the calling of our clergy to hear confession and pronounce absolution, but as the Book of Common Prayer (see pgs. 7, 24 & 76) makes clear – there is just one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ. The absolution given by a priest is ultimately the absolution of Jesus himself. St. Ambrose comments: "In their ministry of the forgiveness of sin, pastors do not exercise the right of some independent power. For not in their own name but in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit do they forgive sins. They ask, the Godhead forgives."

✠ True repentance is a great gift from a loving God. – O Lord, we pray both for true and heartfelt repentance as well as faith to believe Jesus when he says ". . . your sins are forgiven . . . the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." ✠

Saturday, December 4 • Psalm 28, 29; Isaiah 7:1-9; Mark 2:13-22

The Pharisees were widely regarded as the most righteous individuals in Israel. They were both devout and devoted. Experts in the law of God, it was their ambition to follow every precept, every "jot and tittle" that God had commanded. Part of their program for righteousness included complete abstinence from any activity that would have rendered them ceremonially unclean in the eyes of the law. They were so serious about not transgressing

God's law and becoming unclean that they build "a hedge" around the law, adding other commandments that were meant to aid them in keeping the law perfectly. It goes without saying that the Pharisees were an elite class within Israel – in other words, most Israelites were not Pharisees. In fact, some people were so far from having embraced the regulations of the law that they were dubbed simply "the sinners." Tax collectors, Gentiles and prostitutes are prime examples of "the sinners." As we read the gospel accounts we see that this group is mentioned again and again. Usually, they are mentioned because Jesus is interacting with them in some way that the Pharisees find incomprehensible and scandalous. They cannot understand Jesus' interactions with the sinners because they recognize in him (especially early on) some measure of godly wisdom and authority, leading them to assume that surely he will agree with them about the law and what they think it commands. They regarded Jesus as scandalous because as his ministry progressed they had more opportunity to observe that his words and deeds are utterly out of keeping with the manner in which they believed God desires for his people to live.

With those introductory comments behind us, the stage is now set for us to reflect upon the two passages from Mark appointed for our consideration this morning. In both passages we see that Jesus' words and actions further contributed to the tension that was building between him and the Pharisees. And as is the case in each of the five narratives which comprise 2:1-3:6, today's passages also include a pronouncement from Jesus in which he defends and explains himself. In what follows we shall first notice the cause of the conflict and then reflect upon the significance of the pronouncement statement.

The Authority to Bring Outcasts into His Fellowship

From the Pharisees' perspective, when Jesus sat at the table and ate with sinners and tax collectors, he was putting his imprimatur upon ungodliness. They perceived his actions as being a radical and unprecedented redefinition of holiness, completely against everything which they believed that the Scriptures taught.

But as he says elsewhere, Jesus was not setting aside or abolishing the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17), rather he was fulfilling them. As he fulfilled them he gives new light and depth as to (1) our understanding of what constitutes holiness and (2) how God's people are to relate to sinners.

Jesus shows us how to become holy and it is most certainly not by separating ourselves off from those we regard as "unholy." As has often been said, the Christian Church is called to be in the world but not of the world. As members of that Church, we must not cordon ourselves off from those in our families and communities who do not consider themselves Christians. Instead,

we are called to be like salt and light, proclaiming the excellencies of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. To do this will require pursuing authentic (and God honoring) relationships with those who are outside the Church (see Matthew 3:13-16; 1 Peter 2:9).

Jesus' action of sitting at the table with the unrighteous reminds us that one need not first obtain righteousness to be loved and redeemed by Jesus. He does not say "go and heal yourself and then we shall have fellowship with each other." Jesus receives sinners and by the blood of his cross cleanses us of our sin. He then sends us back into the world as those who are progressively being made holy, tasked with the mission of bearing witness to his redemption and inviting others to receive the same from him.

✠Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Let us pray for the grace to follow Jesus' example and have compassion upon those who do not know him.✠

THE SECOND WEEK IN ADVENT



BLESSED LORD, WHO HAST CAUSED ALL HOLY SCRIPTURES TO BE WRITTEN FOR OUR LEARNING; GRANT THAT WE MAY IN SUCH WISE HEAR THEM, READ, MARK, LEARN, AND INWARDLY DIGEST THEM, THAT BY PATIENCE AND COMFORT OF THY HOLY WORD, WE MAY EMBRACE, AND EVER HOLD FAST, THE BLESSED HOPE OF EVERLASTING LIFE, WHICH THOU HAST GIVEN US IN OUR SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.