

# Social Justice Reflections on the Sunday and Daily Lectionary Readings for the Season of Lent 2012.

A person attending Mass every day for the 40 days and six Sundays of Lent will hear 146 readings from Holy Scripture -- first & second readings, Gospels, and responsorial psalms. This wealth of biblical material provides ample food for reflection about the works of mercy, justice, and peace. It is my prayer that these reflections will assist the clergy in the preparation of their sermons for this important time of the year, and will benefit the prayers and meditations of the laity. May the God of peace, who hears the cries of the poor for justice, help us all to keep a just and holy Lent this year and every year to come. – *Robert Waldrop*, Oscar Romero Catholic Worker House, Oklahoma City

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*NB: The reflections for Holy Week which concludes Lent and begins Easter will be published as a separate document.*



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## **Now is the time!**

### **Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2012**

Joel 2:12-18, Psalm 51, 2 Corinthians 5:20 - 6:2, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

What power is commanded by the words of the prophet Joel today -- even now, says the Lord, even after all that has happened, still I call out to you, return to Me with your whole entire heart and being.

Times were tough in Joel's day (about 400 BC). A plague of locusts was causing economic upheaval and famine. Greeks were selling Jews into slavery. The rich were getting richer and the poor were starving. There wasn't much justice or peace and as always, these burdens fell hardest on those least able to protect themselves. Sound familiar?

2400 years later, children are still starving, nations are enslaved to ruthless politics, millions of unborn children have been murdered by abortion, additional tens of millions of people have died during war in this century. The primary structures of sin of this era, identified by Blessed John Paul II as the overwhelming thirst for power at any price, and the overwhelming thirst for profit at any price, are rampant everywhere.

The concept of "structures of sin" is an important development that Blessed John Paul II contributed to the Church's social teachings. Structures of sin can be governments, laws, rules, customs, habits – anything that makes it easier to sin and harder to do good. Every structure of sin begins and is strengthened and propagated by the individual acts of human beings. When we

sin, we strengthen the structures of sin in our society. When we refrain from sin and do good, we strengthen the structures of beauty, wisdom, and justice that make it easier for people to do good, and harder for people to commit sin. During Lent, we should pay closer attention to how our own actions and behaviors are influenced by structures of sin. As we understand more about them, they lose power over us, because we can cease to cooperate with them.

The point of today's readings is that *it's not too late to turn back to God*. It's never over until it's over. We do not have to keep re-inventing the flat tire. We can learn from our mistakes, change our ways, and disrupt the on-rushing process of history, right here, right now. Today Paul the Apostle begs us to be *reconciled to God*. Today is in fact the day of salvation. All who are in Christ become New Creations.

So we sing with the Psalmist, "Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness, in the greatness of your compassion, wipe out my offense." The Church now calls us, in love and obedience, to fast, pray, give alms, practice abstinence, and examine our conscience.

Now is the time to question our uncritical embrace of the materialistic consumer cultures that foster instant gratification, moral indifference, dehumanization, marginalization, alienation and despair.

Now is the time to repent of our support for unjust war that is driven by emotional political allegiances that we hold as more important than the words of Jesus. Now is the time to consider how the choices we make affect the lives of those around us.

Now is the time to examine our personal sins of omission and commission and our willing personal participation in the structures of sin that are eating away at the foundations of family, culture, civilization, and community everywhere in the world. And as a result of this examination of conscience, now is the time to change our ways and manners of living.

Now is the time when we find our hunger for God as we fast and abstain. These interruptions in our established patterns of living help us to learn new habits of virtue and goodness. Now is the time that we reduce our consumption, that there may be more for everybody. Now is the time to sow peace wherever there is hatred, by our words, and perhaps more importantly, by our actions.

If we do these things, the promise of the Lord is clear – **Then the Lord was stirred to concern for his land and took pity on his people.**

### **Our Daily Cross.**

**Thursday, February 23**

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 1, Luke 9:22-25

Today Moses lays the facts on the people. Life and prosperity or death and doom. Those are your choices. There is no column "C". There is no "all of the above are acceptable". We don't have a problem understanding this when it comes to some things, like sex or idolatry for example. But justice and peace? Quick, thump that Bible and rattle that Catechism and find us an "out" to

affirm our dissent from the Church's teaching. And today, all across the world, we are paying the price for ignoring God's principles of justice and peace. But our refusal to understand God's will in such matters does not give us an exemption from our obedience to God's will.

The message of Moses, and of Lent, is that it is not too late to turn things around. We can choose life and reject death. Jesus says his followers must take up the cross every day! Most of us don't mind doing this -- as long as the crosses are small and pretty, preferably of gold or silver. But what about those big, grubby, wooden crosses that are heavy to bear and fraught with trouble? Often we go to great pains to avoid them. We put on our special Invisibility Spectacles that allow us to evade sights we really don't want to see. We define away to nothingness unpleasant truths, unwanted sights, unwelcome sounds. Yet, we are called to pick up those big and grubby crosses every day.

Today the Psalm sings of hope, the hope we have in the Lord, hope that is rooted in God and in our response of faith. When we reject the counsel of sinners – who are those who call us to follow them into ways of greed, violence, war, and lust – we are blessed. We are like trees that regularly bear fruit – a sign of great blessing in the subsistence agriculture community which first heard this psalm. The wicked, on the other hand, are like chaff blown away in the wind, in other words, it disappears into nothingness.

Jesus is calling us today to become more *intentional* about life, the universe, and everything. It's living as though your life has purpose and meaning, because it does -- we are children of the most high God. So the question is – Life or death? Blessing or cursing? You choose. For the LORD watches over the way of the just, but the way of the wicked vanishes

### **Some Advice from God**

#### **Friday, February 24**

Isaiah 58:1-9, Psalm 51, Matthew 9:14-15

What fasting and penance does God desire during this Lent? It's not complicated. Set free the oppressed! Break every yoke of slavery! Share your bread! Shelter the oppressed and the homeless! Clothe the naked!! Don't turn your back on your neighbor! Think of it as God trying to give the human race a clue.

We certainly need it. Throughout this land are structures of sin -- every one of them built by individual acts of sin -- that are causing trouble and destroying our community. It's not an accident there are so many homeless people – over the last 30 years, we have systematically destroyed much of the affordable housing for the poorest of the poor has been destroyed. We call it urban renewal, and it always results in converting land from the use of the poor to the use of the not-poor. In modern America, the homes and neighborhoods of the poor are always at risk of the greed and covetous of the powerful. Right here in Oklahoma City, we “celebrate” this year the completion of the new I-40 Crosstown Freeway, and we forget that the price of that freeway was the destruction of the Walnut Grove neighborhood, and part of the Riverside neighborhood. But we don't care about that, because poor people lived there. That is how structures of sin work. Actual responsibility is diffused, the collateral damages are hidden from public view,

everything is done for some allegedly noble purpose. We often forget that it is immoral to attempt to achieve a good end by evil means.

We need to examine our consciences: Do we come before God with a contrite heart? Do we help to smash yokes of slavery -- or do we build yokes to politically and economically oppress the poor? Do we feed the hungry, or do we steal money from the food stamp program to give to corporate welfare programs? How often do we benefit from the political persecution of the poor? What do you think God's thinks about the demonization of the poor for political gain, which is so popular during our election years?

It is against God and our neighbor that we have sinned. Is today the day of our repentance and salvation?

**And leaving everything behind. . .**

**Saturday, February 25**

Isaiah 58:9-14, Psalm 86, Luke 5:27-32

Isaiah's words continue yesterday's readings: Remove the oppression! Stop the false accusations! No more malicious speeches! (Are the politicians and newspaper editors listening?) Give bread to the hungry! Satisfy the afflicted! It's a message that is not difficult, obscure, nor hard to understand. The words are rather plain and obvious. Closing our eyes, ears, and hearts doesn't make them go away.

From this journey-ministry of solidarity and service, our strength will be renewed. We will be like a spring whose water never fails. We will not be forsaken or lost or forgotten. There is Someone who remembers His covenant of old.

Today Jesus is again doing the unpopular thing. He's calling a tax collector as an apostle! He even goes to dinner with the man and his friends. Look who Jesus is visiting with, *they* said. Doesn't he know *those* kind of people are scum? Jesus' response is to continue to go directly to those most in need, to the ones who were marginalized and rejected, pushed or chased to the very edge.

When Jesus called, Matthew may have been a scum tax collector sinner, but even so he left everything behind and followed Him. What is our answer to the calls of Isaiah and Jesus today? Can we leave behind our lives of sin and wickedness and embrace journeys of peace and justice?

Where could we possibly get the strength for such commitment?

I'll tell you where: From the spring that flows and never fails, from the one who rebuilds the ruined homesteads and restores the people. As we encounter and serve, when we call, the Lord will surely answer. Teach us your way O Lord, that we may walk in your truth.

## **The World, the Flesh, the Devil!** **The First Sunday of Lent, February 26<sup>th</sup>**

Genesis 9, 8-15, Psalm 25, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:12-15

The temptations of Christ encompass the sins of all humanity.

- "Turn these stones into bread" -- yield to those fleshly desires.
- "Accept the glory of these kingdoms" -- enjoy those overwhelming desires for power and profit at any price.
- "Throw yourself" -- use your power and authority unjustly – you shall be as gods!

The world, the flesh, and the devil, that ancient unholy trinity which remains a plague upon all humanity to this very day.

One of the themes of the preaching of Blessed John Paul II was a warning against the "overwhelming lusts for power and profit". He identifies them as two of the primary structures of sin that oppress the poor and destroy community. The Gospel accounts of the Temptation of Jesus describe the individual acts of sin (such as idolatry, lust, greed, the desire to cut moral corners, justifying the means by the end) which create and sustain such structures of sin that create so much trouble in the world..

Where do the temptations of Christ afflict you? What fleshly desires tempt you? How does power and profit affect you? How just are you in the exercise of whatever power you may have in family, church, business, society, government? These are questions are our daily examination of conscience.

Christ suffered for our sins, Peter reminds us, not for sake of earthly glory, but rather to lead us to God. How often, as in the days of Noah, we repay that gift of grace with greed, idolatry, lust, and the unjust exercise of power. That's why the Church gives us Lent, so that we can be reminded of our need to not only repent, but to change our ways and manners of living. The overwhelming lusts for power and profit lead to destruction. The rainbow of God's hope leads to life. That is the choice before us, each and every day. Which do you choose?

## **More Clues from God.** **Monday, February 27**

Leviticus 19:1-2,11-18; Psalm 19, Matthew 25:31-46

Don't lie, steal, or cheat your workers. Do show solidarity and come to the aid of your neighbor when he or she is in trouble. Don't take advantage of people. Do render true and impartial judgment. Don't spread slander. Do be holy, because God is holy. Don't hate, seek revenge or nurse grudges. Do love your neighbor as yourself. That's what Moses said, repeating what God had told him.

In the Gospel today, Jesus says: Feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the illegal

alien, clothe the naked, visit the sick and don't forget those in prison. As if that wasn't enough, he goes on to say that if you do these things for the least among us, you are doing them to Jesus himself. Or. . . **not** doing it, as the case may be. Mother Teresa used to speak of the "distressing disguises" that Jesus wears when He is among us. These are all important clues from God. Even I can understand this language.

Who can be against feeding the hungry. . . as long as it's not with **my** tax dollars. . . welcoming the stranger. . . as long as it's not in **my** neighborhood. . . visiting the sick. . . as long as they aren't on Medicaid. . . or so the conversation goes these days. According to some people running for political office, if you feed the hungry you encourage hunger. If you shelter the homeless, you encourage irresponsibility. But that's not what Jesus said in today's Gospel or what Moses wrote in Leviticus.

When you hear a politician demonizing the poor in order to get elected, you are listening to a demon that prowls about the world seeking the ruin of souls.

The question then becomes: who are you gonna believe? A politician fanning the flames of public hysteria in order to get elected? Or the Lord Jesus Christ, Creator and Ruler of the Universe? Which is more trustworthy -- a newspaper editorial citing questionable research, or the Holy Bible, which is God's word? You know what they say around here -- "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."

**On Earth as it is in Heaven. . .**

**Tuesday, February 28**

Isaiah 55:10-11, Psalm 34; Matthew 6:7-15

Christ today teaches us to pray that our sins are forgiven -- *as we forgive the sins of others*.

Do you suppose he was serious about this?

It's not hard to find ourselves in a position where we don't want to even **try** to forgive someone. You can't go through life without coming into situations where someone gravely harms you. It is only human nature to resist forgiveness.

And so it comes to pass that God meets us at the place we are, wherever that may be, even if it be in anger, sorrow, despair, or even hatred. His presence is a healing power that breaks open barriers and allows love and freedom to flow.

We can start with the prayer -- "Oh Lord, I do not want to forgive, help me to want to forgive."

When by God's grace we pass to the place where there is the beginning of a desire for reconciliation, we can pray, "Oh Lord, now give me the strength to do what is necessary for reconciliation. Bless and heal my enemy."

Today's psalm sings that the Lord is close to the broken-hearted. He reaches out his hand to those

who are crushed in their spirits. So God never asks more of us than we can give, but God will always ask of us what we can give.

No human being has enough inner strength for these kinds of challenges by himself or herself. We are dependent on the grace of God to cultivate a "poverty of spirit," an orientation which begins in the utter reliance on God as the source of life and strength.

Without reconciliation, there is no justice and peace. Just as the road to war begins with the sins of individual human beings, the road to justice and peace begins with the righteous and reconciling acts of individual human beings. Thus the will of God is done on earth, as it is in heaven. When we are in distress, the Lord will rescue us.

### **Turn away from violence!**

**Wednesday, February 29**

Jonah 3:1-10, Psalm 51, Luke 11:29-32

The story thus far: God tells Jonah to go to the Nineveh and Jonah doesn't want to go. 3 days and nights in the belly of a large fish convinces Jonah to follow God's instructions. So he goes to Nineveh, preaches the Gospel, and behold – the people repented, the king proclaimed a fast, and everybody started running around in sack-cloth and ashes. Nineveh is not the Bible Belt, it's the cosmopolitan world capital of a wealthy and cruel military empire.

Comes now Jesus, who sorrowfully announces that even though One who is greater than Jonah has come among the people – unlike the Assyrians, few are listening and the Roman Procurator has certainly not called for public fasting. Christ prophesies of his coming death, showing us the path of servant leadership, reconciling humanity to God through the Blood of the Cross. He condemns the cynicism and unbelief of the powerful.

Who knows when the Judgment of the Lord may come upon us! And what will be our reactions? Are we like Jonah, running away from God's call? Are we like the Ninevites, who upon hearing God's word, turn from their wickedness and repent of their sins, putting away violence? If the seeds of war and hate and violence planted by Nineveh were to be its downfall, what does this suggest about putting our faith in the policies of war, hate, and violence practiced by politicians today? Yesterday's dictator is today's friend of democracy and tomorrow's threat. Where is the justice and peace in that kind of foreign policy?

A million Iraqi's, half of them children, died between the first and second Iraq wars due to our embargo of the Iraqi civilian embargo. At the time, Madeline Albright, the Secretary of State during the reign of Clinton/Gore, publicly proclaimed that the price was "worth it". Then, we declared an unjust war on the people of Iraq, and proceeded on to kill hundreds of thousands more civilians, both directly and indirectly. What kind of moral monsters seek political and economic profit in the deaths of innocent children?

In response to the Word of God brought to them by a foreigner, the Ninevites repented and changed their behavior. How can we bring the Word of God to the great urban cities and empires

of our own day? What violence do we have in our hands that we need to put aside? How many more children must we kill before our own national bloodlust is satiated? Will we turn away from bloodlust in time to avert the complete destruction of our own nation?

The answer to these really big questions begins with you. You can't repent for someone else. You have only yourself before God. So what you do with your relationship with God counts. Becoming reconciled with God and your neighbor is your own first step towards a better world of hope and joy for all people.

## **Righteous Prayer, Righteous Action**

### **Thursday, March 1**

Esther C: 12, 14-16, 23-25; Psalm 138, Matthew 7:7-12

A wicked councilor persuades the king of Persia to decree death to the Jewish community. Queen Esther and all Israel fasted and prayed for salvation. Esther called upon God as the "Ruler of Every Power" for assistance in this time of extreme need. Then, after prayer and fasting, Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia, takes action. She risks her life to save her people by speaking to King Ahasuerus without his invitation. God heard the prayers, and the Jewish community was saved from destruction. Righteous prayer plus courageous action saved the day.

Jesus teaches us in today's Gospel about prayer. "Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." The reading concludes with the Golden Rule, "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you," perhaps the most succinct justice and peace statement in all of the Bible or the justice teaching of the Church.

The work of justice and peace calls for holiness, spirituality, and courage. Our temporal liberation from unjust tyranny is closely interwoven with our spiritual salvation. As we work out our salvation, we are drawn closer in solidarity and love to others, and are called to reach out to them through individual and corporate actions of justice and peace. This is how nations -- and souls -- are saved.

## **Change your ways.**

### **Friday, March 2**

Ezekiel 18:21-28, Psalm 130, Matthew 5:20-26

Sin harms our relationships with God and our neighbor. Sometimes it even destroys them. Many sins, committed by many people, over long periods of time, create structures of sin that hurts the entire community by making it easy to sin and hard to do good.

Even in this, however, there is always a message of hope. The Lord rejoices when the wicked repent and change their ways of living. What you did yesterday cannot be undone, what you might do tomorrow is yet to be determined. What you are doing right now, however, is where your free will cooperates with God's grace to produce repentance and metanoia -- a fundamental change in the way you live.

Jesus talks to us about violence and as usual he goes directly to the heart of the problem. Don't kill -- and beware of your interior anger, because that's where murder -- and also the mass murder of war -- begins. We are told -- Go and be reconciled. Active verbs are used here, this is not a message suggesting "be a couch potato". The life of conversion in Christ Jesus goes on forever, it does not stop.

Ever since Jesus said "do not kill," an ocean of ink and a hurricane of wind has been expended to explain that he really did not mean what he said. Here in America, we are pretty well convinced that whatever Jesus meant by this, it doesn't apply to us. We like to think there is an "American Exception" to the demands of the Gospel. Whether we are talking abortion or war, we are quick to demonize and depersonalize the victims, and thus we feel good about the evil we do in the world. Ezekiel points out, without any ambiguity, that the way of the wicked is death, and that applies to nations as much as it does to individuals. Indeed, the acts of a nation are the acts of its citizens writ large. A government, such as ours, which wages wars across the world, does so only because We the People of these united States demand these wars.

If we want to stop the violence, we must begin with the violence in our own hearts. Peace between nations begins with peace in my heart and your heart.

### **Covenant, Law, Happiness**

**Saturday, March 3**

Deuteronomy 26:16-19, Psalm 119, Matthew 5:43-48

Today Moses calls Israel to obedience to its covenant with God and teaches the importance of following God's laws. Matthew continues to report Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and challenges us -- again -- regarding our relationships with problem people, especially our enemies.

The wisdom of this world is that the best thing to do to your enemies is drop bombs on them and make sure you kill their children. Then poison their wells and plow salt in their fields. The "Shock and Awe" tactics of the Iraq and Afghan wars are but the latest evolution of this ancient tactic.

This isn't the first time we have heard these themes during Lent. It's almost monotonous in its repetition. Repent and follow God's commandments -- feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned, pray for your enemies, do good to your enemies, denounce oppression and exploitation, be reconciled with your neighbor.

If we read the Bible as salvation history, and if we study secular history, it is very clear that ignoring God's laws has no good long-term outcomes for individuals or societies. The popular madness and delusions of crowds, often whipped into a frenzy by corrupt politicians, makes it seem as if this isn't so, that somehow we have an "Escape the Consequences of Your Actions" card just because we are the Americans. But this is part of the delusions fostered by those demons who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. There is no American Exception to the demands of the gospel. There is no Escape the Consequences of Your Actions card that we can use to get us out of trouble. There is only one way out, and it is a way up.

By selecting these readings for Lent, the Church is teaching us that our "vertical" relationship with God is greatly affected by our "horizontal" relationships with our neighbors. Those relationships should be framed with justice, peace, and reconciliation.

There is no getting away from this. The Word of God is clear, and the will of the Church, as evidenced by the readings for these days, is no less so. That these are not easy sayings to hear is obvious – that we are constantly falling short of these standards is reality. What's the bottom line for Jesus? "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Not much room to maneuver on that one.

Justice and peace are not a marginal issues in Scripture nor are they optional choices from a buffet of doctrines and practices up for grabs. Rather, these principles -- and our response as witnessed by our actions -- are central to God's concern for all humanity. Our survival as a nation is dependent upon our ability as individuals, families, parishes, communities of care and concern, to learn these lessons and put them into daily practice in our lives. If we do this, we will live. If we continue to follow the siren calls of the demons who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls, our nation will surely fall onto the ash heap of history, as the well-deserved judgment of God falls upon us.

### **Covenant, Example, Transfiguration** **The Second Sunday of Lent, March 4**

Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18, Psalm 116, Romans 8:31b-34, Mark 9:2-10

If God be for us, who can be against us! God has already proven his love. He kept his promise to Abraham and He gave up His own Son for us, even though we have many times rejected the Lord and his commandments.

From these readings we can learn 3 important things about justice and peace.

First, we are reminded that God will keep all of his promises to us.

Second, we are promised God's help. And this world has plenty of troubles. Three billion people in this world live on less than \$2 a day. The poor are scorned, "***Their*** needs are endless and ***they*** are undeserving. It's ***their*** own fault that ***they*** are poor. ***They*** are lazy, demented, and ignorant." It can seem overwhelming, yet we must remember that are not alone, God is with us.

Third, the material world is not all of reality. Generally invisible to our temporal eyes is the spiritual reality, which can instantly transform a humble Jewish carpenter into a triumphant Lord of the Universe. And who was it that Jesus was speaking with? Moses -- the hero of the spiritual and temporal liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt -- and Elijah, the fearless prophet of God who did not shrink from bringing God's word to the rich, the powerful, and the mighty.

There are three calls within these lessons for us.

First, we are called to keep our promises to God. We must do a better job of keeping God's

commandments, all of them, even those that are inconvenient, or that go against our political, social, and economic allegiances.

Second, we are called to trust in God's help, to be open to the miracles of grace in all that we do.

Third, we are called to remember that the world that we see is not all that there is. There is a numinous spiritual reality that pervades all of Creation, that has its source in the Holy Trinity. This should give us a certain amount of humility when we are tempted to trust in the material goods of this world..

My prayer is that the Transfiguration will live today in the lives of each one of us so that we may see all that is around us with new vision, hear with new ears, understand with a new mind, and believe with a new heart.

### **A prayer of national repentance.**

**Monday, March 5**

Daniel 9:4-10, Psalm 79, Luke 6:36-38

The prayer of Daniel in today's first reading is not a confession of individual sin, but an acknowledgment of the guilt of an entire nation and the justice of God's judgment, which involved the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the Judean kingdom, and the taking into captivity in Babylon of much of the population. Decades later, Daniel laments the sins of his people that brought divine judgment upon the land. He pleads for forgiveness for their sins.

The Gospel today is from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Stop judging. Stop condemning. Forgive. Give! Why? So that we are not judged, we are not condemned. If we do these things, we are forgiven, and good gifts are given to us. What goes around, comes around, as they say, and that seems abundantly clear from this snippet of Jesus' teachings.

The antiphon for the responsorial psalm is "Do not deal with us according to our sins." Our sins are our own condemnation, as individuals, and as a nation. This brings full circle the pleading of Daniel into the modern era. The question before us, as citizens of the richest and most powerful nation on earth – will we learn the lessons of the empires who have gone before us? Will we humble ourselves? Or will we be humbled by others? Must we fall upon the ash heap of history to once again learn the truth that peoples and nations who reject God will be judged by God?

### **Princes of Sodom, People of Gomorrah**

**Tuesday, March 6**

Isaiah 1:10, 16-20, Psalm 50, Matthew 23:1-12

Isaiah really knows how to win friends and influence people: "Hear the word of the lord, Princes of Sodom!" Where can you go from there? He heads right on over to "Listen to the instruction of our God, people of Gomorrah!" When we hear "Sodom and Gomorrah," we immediately think of sex, but there was more to their crimes than that. The prophet Ezekiel wrote --"And look at the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were proud, sated with food, complacent in

their prosperity, and they gave no help to the poor and needy. Rather, they became haughty and committed abominable crimes in my presence; then, as you have seen, I removed them." (Ezekiel 16:49-50). "Gave no help to the poor and needy."

Isaiah says: "Put away your misdeeds! Cease doing evil! Learn to do good! Make justice your aim! Redress the wronged! Hear the orphan's plea! Defend the widow!" Here we should note that the Hebrew word *almana*, typically translated as the English word "widow" in the Old Testament, refers to any woman with children, but without a husband. *Yatom*, translated as "orphan," refers to any child without a father. Thus we see that the Lord, through Isaiah, is talking about single mothers with children, who happen to be one of America's favorite political scapegoats, convenient for kicking around whenever points need to be made with the voters.

God help us if we are to be judged in the same way that we judge single mothers on welfare.

Jesus tells us that the greatest among us must be the servant of all. He warns of the dangers of religious and political hypocrisy -- of the tendency of those who rule to do so unrighteously. "They preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them." Then as now, authenticity is critical to religious authority. Religious leaders who do not practice what they preach run the risk of becoming the objects of indifference. Religious leaders who want to be heard must walk their talk.

## **Schemes and Conspiracies of Evil**

**Wednesday, March 7**

Jeremiah 18:18-20, Psalm 31, Matthew 20:17-28

The world can sometimes be a dark place, especially in the face of organized evil. Today's readings bring us face to face with the starkness of this all-too-frequent reality. Jeremiah is not a popular man. He was an affliction to the Powers That Be. He held the rulers accountable for their actions. Since he won't shut up and get with the program, he must be destroyed. It is, after all, usually much easier to kill the prophet than to understand and obey his or her message. It rocks fewer boats and upsets fewer apple carts. People may squawk for a bit, but this too shall pass.

Jesus plainly tells his disciples -- for the third time -- "we are going to Jerusalem and I will be condemned and put to death." It's enough to make anyone want to turn around and go home in the face of this dark portent. But Matthew continues his narrative, and jumps the topic of discussion to who will sit beside Jesus in places of honor and power, and how authority is justly exercised. He teaches about servant leadership in its deepest and most spiritual sense. The connection between servant leadership, and the willingness to continue the journey to Jerusalem, even knowing what will happen, is obvious and critical to the meaning of the passage.

The plots of organized evil, and the unjust exercise of authority are problems that plague humanity to this day. They are best countered with prayer, servant leadership, and a refusal to cooperate. The Catechism says that we share in the sins of others when we "cooperate in them by

participating directly and voluntarily in them; by ordering, advising, praising, or approving them; by not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so; by protecting evil-doers."

Structures of sin endure because people cooperate with them and keep them going. Lent is a good time to examine our conscience regarding our willing participation in, and profiting from, structures of sin that may be causing grave harm to the common good.

**There was a rich man. . .**

**Thursday, March 8**

Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 16:19-31

There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments. . . and lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores. . . barren bush in the desert. . . tree planted beside the waters . . . dogs even used to come and lick his sores-- these are vivid pictures of human reality.

The rich man put his trust in man. Lazarus had nobody but God and the dogs. But who turns out to be the fertile tree by the water, and who is the barren bush in an obviously hot spot? By giving us this reading during Lent, the Church is warning us against trust in material security. And who can disagree? But who can fully live up to this vocation?

The place to begin is where you are, there is no point in starting at any other place. This is one of the reasons of the Lenten disciplines of fasting, abstinence, and alms giving. We need to give a portion of our money away more than we need to keep all of it. Food is a pressing daily need and the temptation to eat more of it than we need is always there. By avoiding certain foods, and by not eating for periods of time, we *practice* our "detachment" from material security. By voluntarily experiencing hunger we show our solidarity with those for whom hunger is a daily reality. And often, if you practice something long enough, you get good at it (or at least, better).

Put your trust in material security, ignore the poor man Lazarus at your front door with the dogs licking at his sores, and you end up a brittle old bush in a dry rocky volcanic desert waste. Trust in God, open your heart to justice, and your life becomes "a tree planted by waters" -- fruitful, generative, and redemptive. Here's a free news byte: donations by US Catholics to Operation Rice Bowl typically average about twenty-five cents per Catholic.

**Kill the Prophets!**

**Friday, March 9**

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28; Psalm 105; Matthew 21:33-34, 45-46

Slavery is a dark blot that stains the history of many societies and cultures. Today we read of Joseph, who in the calamity of being sold into slavery by his own brothers who were envious of him, echoes the fate of too many people throughout human history. What we decry in history, however, remains a deadly reality today. In southeast Asia, children are sold to supply the popular sex tourism trade. Wherever there are desperate people in the third and fourth worlds, unscrupulous first world transnational corporations pay substandard wages and use violence and

threats of intimidation as management tools, all for the sake of the Almighty Dollar.

Nor have we improved much on our treatment of prophets who are among us today. Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador was murdered while celebrating Mass, as he elevated the Chalice after the Consecration. Fr. Stanley Rother of Oklahoma was murdered in Guatemala. Seven nuns of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ order witnessed of their Faith and solidarity with the poor with their own lives in Liberia. The Four Churchwomen were murdered in El Salvador the same year Romero was assassinated.

Many of the powerful hated Jesus, but the "crowds" -- that is, the poor -- loved him. In today's Gospel, the rulers' know that Jesus is presenting an indictment of them and their stewardship, and they don't like that. Powerful people rarely welcome calls to accountability given by "little people". All too often, leaders of powerful institutions feel they are above law, custom, and morality.

Thus, the call to justice is a critique of the stewardship of those who wield power in human society. Nobody is above God's law -- not any individual, even if he or she be the most powerful and wealthy person on earth, and not any collective, even if it be the most powerful government, or the wealthiest corporation, on the face of the earth.

**Once lost, now found.**

**Saturday March 10**

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20; Psalm 103; Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

Look at that Jesus! He goes to CRACK HOUSES! He eats with PROSTITUTES! The chattering classes were not amused. The commentariat updated their blogs. But where else would Jesus go? Those who are sick need a physician, not those who are well.

Today we hear the parable of the prodigal son, one of the most beloved stories from the Bible. We see in it our own stories of loss and redemption.

Meanwhile, Micah opens our readings with a tender reminder that God pardons our guilt. The prophet uses vivid images of the geography of the Middle East, pointing his readers' attention to areas known for their fertile abundance. If we repent, God will cast our sins into the bottom of the sea. God is faithful, he always keeps his promises, to the furthestmost generation.

The father in today's Gospel reading is a figure of God. He is worried about his absent son. In his adulthood, he understands the dangers of the world, the lack of security of those separated from their families. This was a time where there was no social safety net as we know it, your family was your only security. In his worry, he kept watch for his son, for he had faith that his son would return. He watched so carefully that when "he was a long way off", he saw his son coming home and ran to meet him.

That's good for all of us, especially those of us who have gone "a long way off" from our Father. So he who was lost, has now been found. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.

## **I have witnessed the affliction of my people.**

### **Third Sunday of Lent, March 11**

Exodus 20:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; John 2:13-25

Paul is in rare form, even for him. He shows deep insight into human nature in writing these words. The Gospel indeed is foolishness to those who do not believe. All that talk about loving your enemies and defending the widows and fatherless children. The wisdom of the world is that Jesus is the Easter Bunny – and all those Christians who follow him should get real and get with the modern globalizing corporate program which has no room for ancient foolishness like “Jesus is God”.

But Jesus is real, and as Paul writes, we preach Him crucified which the world says is foolishness, but to those who believe, this is the power and wisdom of God. This brings a predictable reaction, but as the Gospel today says, Jesus did not need anybody to tell him about human nature, "he himself understood it well." The foolishness of God is truly wiser than all our human wisdoms.

Today we see Jesus as the righteous judge – condemning those who cheat and oppress the people, who had turned sacred into a merchandise market. He overturns the tables of the international bankers, and drives the globalizing corporations from the holy Temple, casts down the proud on Wall Street. He knows the penalty for such questioning of secular and religious authority is death, but He also knows something His enemies do not. Kill him and 3 days later He will rise again, triumphant over death and all structures of evil and wickedness in the world. You can't keep a good man down, as they say, and Jesus was Goodness personified as a humble carpenter, a rural rabbi who loved the poor and all who were rejected, and who also opened his heart to those who were not poor, for surely his tent is big enough for all who love him and do justice and mercy, walking humbly before their God and neighbor.

## **Go and wash yourself seven times in the Jordan.**

### **Monday, March 12**

2 Kings 5:1-15; Luke 4:24-30

Jesus today again shows a certain ability to get to the consciences of people, who reacted in typical human style by attempting to kill him. He reminds those listening of two stories from their history in which persons typically despised in the polite societies of their days (i.e. foreigners and single mothers) receive special tokens of God's favor.

Naaman is a powerful army commander, but he is a leper. Through the agency of a nameless child slave he learns that Elisha the prophet can cure his disease. So he gets a letter from his king to the king of Israel (who suspects some kind of plot), and Naaman takes along gifts to (presumably) impress the prophet and encourage the healing processes.

Elisha doesn't even come to the door when Naaman arrives. He sends a message, "Go wash seven times in the Jordan and you will be clean". But this isn't what Naaman was looking for. He wanted some impressive magic suitable to his dignity to cure his leprosy. And so he heads off

back to his country, still a leper. His nameless servants, however, save the day by telling their master the facts of life. Look, you came all this way, and if this guy had said "do something extraordinary", you would have been happy to do it. Instead, he has asked you to do something simple. Since it is so easy, what can it hurt to do it and see what happens?

So it comes to pass that Naaman learns a lesson in humility and obedience, and we should learn from his example. When we ask God for something, do we ignore his often plain and simple answer? What do we think prophets should look and talk like? Would we recognize a prophet if we saw one? Notice that even though Naaman had all the social status and power, it is the ones who are nameless -- the slave, the servant, the wife -- who have the answers to his dilemma and are the heroes of this story.

## **Humility and Reconciliation**

**Tuesday, March 13**

Daniel 3:25, 34-43; Psalm 25; Matthew 18:21-35

From the midst of the fiery furnace, surrounded by flames yet protected by an angel of the Lord, comes a cry of repentance. Once mighty and powerful Israel has been brought into slavery, captivity, and powerlessness. In this state of physical and spiritual poverty, they begin to understand and reflect on the true nature of service to God, which is more than religious practice – God calls us to a humble heart and a contrite spirit. This was the fiery crucible, from which Israel emerges with renewed faith and obedience to covenant.

From Jesus comes teaching regarding reconciliation and a parable fraught with contradiction for the modern world. Forgive? "Hah," the world says, "revenge is better. We wouldn't want anyone to think we are weak and can't protect ourselves." The demons who prowl about the world whisper in our ears – "It's a world of predators out there – those who don't protect themselves are eaten alive."

So we think it's OK to give some kind of respect to this as a pious platitude, but implement it as a daily reality? "Get real" is perhaps the mildest thing people would say to you these days. Jesus however doesn't seem to be interested in leaving us an "out", some way to escape from this dilemma. He says, "Well, the way you deal with those who sin against you is the way God is going to deal with you."

The literary form may be "parable", but there doesn't seem to be anything very ambiguous about its conclusion. We've all known people like the unjust debtor of this parable, a person who has received great mercy, but who refuses to extend such mercy to others. It's true of individuals, and it's true of large structures and systems such as corporations and governments. We need to learn that if we expect mercy, we must be willing extend our own hands in mercy to others. Revenge is one of the most ancient human emotions, but it is a dead end quest that brings no satisfaction, only violence, death, and more tragedy. America ignores this eternal lesson to its mortal peril.

## Obedience to Just Law

Wednesday, March 14

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9; Psalm 147; Matthew 5:17-19

What is a just nation? One that follows God's word – *carefully*, Moses says. It is a place whose laws are just. Moses spoke these words to a people whose laws included strict protections of the economic rights of the poor -- single mothers with children, illegal aliens, orphans. The Law of Moses contained provisions that juridically limited the centralization of wealth and power. The lesson is clear: Nations that protect the poor from oppression are blessed, those who do not are cursed.

We “hear” these words, but I think we don’t really *hear* them unless we ourselves are poor or have long experience with the poor. We ignore the ways that our society oppresses the poor. So let us count the ways that we oppress the poor:

-- Urban renewal is effectively a due process pogrom that steals the property of the poor at cheap prices so that it can be converted to the uses of the non-poor at bargain prices. No one wants to pay the poor market value for their properties, so they get the government to steal it via urban renewal and pay the property owners pennies on the dollar for their property.

– We tell the poor to work for their money, but then we make nearly all of the traditional occupations of the poor illegal. We don’t let them cook food and sell it to the public. We don’t let them peddle on the sidewalks. We don’t let them sell at interstate highway rest stops. Flea markets are seen as nuisances. Cutting hair, hair braiding, and etc out of your own home is illegal. Occupational licensing laws limit the economic opportunities of poor people.

– We take their kids away if they lose electric service. It is illegal to be homeless. It is illegal to sell burritos and tamales in parking lots. Sleeping in public is illegal. It’s against the law for four or more unrelated poor people to live together (and thus share expenses so it is easier for them to make it.) It’s illegal for poor people to build their own dwellings.

When God condemns the rich for oppressing the poor, He is speaking directly to the United States of America, the states of Oklahoma and Arkansas, and the cities of Tulsa, Little Rock, and Oklahoma City (among many many other governments that could be cited).

We should remember these things, Moses says. We should not forget them, we must teach them to our children and grandchildren. Humans -- as individuals, and as communities -- like to forget our inconvenient truths and embarrassing episodes. God wouldn't let Israel do this, over the centuries prophets and scribes wrote their history down and taught it to their children and although people often wanted to forget the good things the Lord had done for them and the bad things they had done to each other and to God, this wasn't an option in the history of salvation.

Our own era has the same problem. History is captive to ideology, and is often re-written to disguise historical crimes and evade accountability and justice. This is why one of the "works of justice and peace" is to "make injustice visible -- witness, remember, teach, proclaim, tell."

The obedience God is calling us to is being made clear through these Lenten readings: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, work for justice and be just in your personal relationships, live in peace, be reconciled with our neighbors, beware of religious and political hypocrisy, obey God's commandments, repent of our sin, change our ways, do not oppress the poor. Do better. Practice virtue. Examine our consciences. Are you getting the basics of this message?

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

### **Giving voice to those who cannot speak.**

**Thursday, March 15**

Jeremiah 7:23-28, Psalm 95, Luke 11:14-23

Beware of giving voice to those who cannot speak. People will say you are filled with the devil and up to no good. They will try to distract attention from the good fruits of your works by casting aspersions on your motivations and backers.

This has happened over and over again throughout human history. Give power to those who are rejected and those who benefit from exploitation will fabricate lies and slanders against you.

Consider what happened right here at home with the Oklahoma Sponsoring Committee and its relationship with some Catholic parishes. Outrageous lies were told about the motives and purpose of the organization and many Catholic parishes turned their backs on this important local organizing effort to put Catholic social teachings into praxis on issues of concern to Oklahoma families. Why did this happen? Because people – Catholics! – valued their secular partisan political allegiances more than their Catholic faith.

The Lord recaps to Jeremiah the tragic history of his people. Again and again prophets have been sent to preach justice and repentance and again and again the people have turned their backs on the Lord. "Faithfulness has disappeared." In the Newspeak of the Israelite elite, "faith" was not even in the dictionary. God's concerns are evident in the extensive prophetic denunciations of the exploitation of the weak by the strong throughout all of the prophetic writings.

In response to the slanders of those who profited from corruption, Jesus preaches that all who are not with him are against him. If we are not gathering with him, we are scattering. There is no middle ground here. There is no "we will do something else" option. If we are not building the Reign of God, we are destroying the Reign of God. By giving voice to those who cannot speak, Jesus shows his credentials as the agent of the Reign of God which has come upon them, when they were least expecting it.

## **Return to God** **Friday, March 16**

Hosea 14:2-10, Mark 12:28-34

Today's message is simple: Turn away from idolatry and worship the one true God. Hosea calls us to put our trust in God, not in the work of human hands, not in the military might of the superpowers of the era, but rather in the God who gives compassion to the fatherless. As we do this, our "defection" is healed, wrath is turned away, the desert blossoms and becomes fruitful.

Have you noticed how often the Bible uses agricultural fruitfulness as a symbol of God's love? Many of us don't have any experience with chronic hunger, but in the communities which first received these texts, chronic hunger was a daily reality. There was no such thing as out-of-season fruit. The only food they had was what they and their neighbors could grow and harvest, or pasture and harvest in the case of flocks and herds. A crop failure meant famine and famine was death, especially for the poor. Then as now, during a time of scarcity, food prices go up and those with the least suffer the most.

Jesus teaches us that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. We can't be in love with God if we aren't in love with our neighbor because the second greatest commandment is solidarity – "love your neighbor as yourself"

We do well to ask ourselves -- where is the solidarity in our communities today? Do we see the poor, the "illegal aliens", the homeless, the Muslims, as our neighbors? Do we love them as we love our own lives?

If so, why do we snatch the food stamps from their hands and give them over to the rich? (The shift of local, state, and federal spending from means-tested poverty programs to corporate welfare and pork-barrel appropriations is well documented.)

Feeding the hungry creates more hunger – that's the message of politicians and editorial writers who listen to the whispers of the demons who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls.

We certainly don't see unborn children as our neighbor, we kill them by the millions. Americans feel little solidarity with the Afghan and Iraqi peoples, who have died by the hundreds of thousands in our unjust wars on their nations.

Where is our solidarity with the poor and desperate workers making pennies an hour under unsafe conditions working for transnational corporations making cheap trashy toys for our kids?

These are not comfortable thoughts, but Jesus is the one who says we must love our neighbor as we love ourselves. He explains what we need to know -- clearly and without ambiguity. When we understand this, like the scribe who questioned Jesus, we are not far from the Reign of God.

**The Dangers of Religious Hypocrisy**  
**Saturday, March 17, the Feast of St. Patrick**  
Hosea 6:1-6, Luke 18:9-14

Oh the pretentiousness of the religious hypocrites. See how we love all people! (As long as they belong to *our* socioeconomic class and look and dress like we do.) How wonderful it is that we aren't like *those* kinds of people. (Who are obviously lazy, if they would be more industrious, they wouldn't be so poor.)

Christ presents today two people -- on one hand is the self-righteous leader of the community -- on the other hand is a despised tax collector who collaborates with the Romans.

Whose prayer is heard? Not the one who has status, but rather the marginalized, the rejected, and humble. *All* who exalt themselves are rejected; *all* who humble themselves are accepted.

Hosea reminds us that in our affliction, we look to God, and we are promised that if we do return to the Lord, he will hear our prayers, he will be to us like rain on a dry desert -- a rain in the springtime, that brings forth fruit in abundance.

Today the readings warn us of the dangers of piety that is only "skin deep", that vanishes like the morning dew or the early cloud. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." Not exactly the best advice from a public relations specialist, but remember that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men.

Today the Irish everywhere celebrate the feast of St. Patrick. Before he was a bishop or a saint, Patrick was a slave. His example of perseverance through grave trouble has been a message of hope for the oppressed of every land, but of particular importance to the Irish and their 900 year struggle against tyranny. Patrick was kidnapped and sold into slavery, a grievous crime. But he did not seek revenge on those who oppressed him; rather he returned love for hate, evangelizing those who had oppressed and enslaved him. May Patrick's example guide us in the way of Truth, the true source of freedom and justice.

**Actions have consequences.**

**The Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 18**

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Psalm 137; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

A stern warning is coupled with a promise of redemption in today's first reading.

Judah -- its people, priests, and princes -- turned away from the Lord, gave their lives to false gods, and did not follow God's commandments. They rejected the prophets that were sent to them over the centuries, mocking and despising them. And so it came to pass that the beautiful Temple of Solomon and the entire city of Jerusalem were conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians. The proud rulers and the aristocrats who had oppressed the poor themselves became servants and slaves of the Babylonian king. Actions have consequences, for individuals and for nations. Much of the biblical material regarding the actions of the rulers and peoples of Israel and Judah has an

eerie contemporary feel to it. When we read the sacred text, it's like we're reading our own newspapers. Lest people think there is some ambiguity, let me be clear. America is at risk of the same destruction and misfortune that befell ancient Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah, and for the exact same reasons.

Within the warning is also the promise of redemption. God has not forgotten his people. In their turn, the Babylonians are conquered by the Persians, who were in their turn an instrument of judgment on the Babylonians iniquities. The Persian King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return and rebuild Jerusalem and its holy Temple.

The story does not end with the Babylonians and the Persians however. It continues into the time of Jesus and beyond. Salvation comes from God, who sends His only Son into the world -- not to condemn it, but rather to save it. By his grave we are saved, Paul writes. But when light came into the world, it wasn't what we were looking for. Light illuminates dark corners, brings secret deeds to light, stops injustice, and brings reconciliation. No modern globalizing economy can stand this, thus the calls for "darkness, more darkness, let us hide our works from the Lord and from each other" continue in our own time.

But as Paul reminds us, we are God's handiwork, "created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them." By grace we have been saved through our faith in the One who is sent by God, and this change of heart – conversion – has an effect on the way that we live. Thus we are "raised up with Christ", seated with him in the heavens.

## **Faith, Hope, Covenant**

### **The Solemnity of St. Joseph, Monday, March 19**

2 Samuel 7:4-5, 12-14, 16; Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22, Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24

From Abraham and Sarah, to David and Bathsheba, and thence to Joseph and Mary, perhaps two thousand years of covenant history -- an angel calls Joseph to faithfulness to his betrothal covenant with Mary, an unwed mother, and Joseph not the father. This is a thread of love and obedience, not by perfect artificial constructs but by all-too-human persons, in diverse times, places, and situations. Joseph is a carpenter, a skilled worker. He stands by Mary, brings her to Bethlehem, flees with her and the Child into Egypt, and returns later with them to Nazareth, where the Child Jesus grew "in wisdom and stature and in favor before God and man," as Luke records.

His voice in the Gospels is not extensive, but his influence passes through all time to the present day -- father, worker, intercessor, protector, and patron. Today let us call upon St. Joseph, and in his name remember all workers and the poor. Let us recall his example of fatherhood -- how he stood by his covenant of betrothal with Mary, how he protected her and cared for her, how he worked with his hands to provide for his family. Let us ask for his intercession on the part of fathers and families everywhere, workers and the poor. Let us remind ourselves of his protection when we are in need. And let us commit ourselves to him as our patron and protector. May we share his faith in God's covenant, and may this be for us a strong source of hope.

## **How to get in trouble with the authorities.**

**Tuesday, March 20**

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12; John 5:1-16

Jesus is in trouble again. He healed a man on the Sabbath, a day of rest. Then he told him to pick up his bedroll and walk! The man had been paralyzed for 38 years. He was at a traditional place where sick people came to be healed, but he had no one to place him in the waters. Meanwhile, Ezekiel has given us a vision of healing waters, flowing from the Temple, restoring fertility to the deserts, symbolizing a return to the primeval paradise, looking forward to the Reign of God here on Earth.

Once again Jesus shows his concern for the marginalized, in this case, a man who was paralyzed. Such people had no status in Roman or Israelite society, they were at the mercy of others. Jesus does not shrink from the sight before him, he does not have on his Invisibility Spectacles that allow him to ignore the poor and weak. He not only notices the man, but He helps him by bringing him healing and health.

The rulers are furious, which historically is the typical political reaction to anybody who works to bring justice and peace to the poor and marginalized. Structures of sin always vigorously defend themselves against those who would bring them redemption. Once again that wretched rabbi has defied convention and done something unprecedented. Healing on the Sabbath indeed, who does this man think he is? Who indeed, that is the question, then and now. We can ask, who do these rulers think they are to stand in opposition to those who would help the poor?

## **Building a culture of life**

**Wednesday, March 21**

Isaiah 49:8-15, John 5:17-30

By God's grace and our faith in Jesus, manifested in the works that we do, we pass from death into life, we leave behind the culture of death and become part of the culture of life. Isaiah sings a song of that culture of life. Those who are invisible -- the ones we have pushed to the edges of our societies, who hide in the alleys and under freeway overpasses, who live down by rivers and in the other hidden places of our communities, the civilians population of Afghanistan and Iraq -- come out from alienation into healing. Those who are captive in prisons are liberated. No longer will people die of starvation. Their way will be made easy, and the Lord will be their guide. As the days of waiting for our redemption lengthen, we may wonder if God has forgotten us. But Isaiah compares the Lord's love to that of a mother, "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb?" Even if she should forget, God will never forget us.

In the Gospel, Jesus makes another claim to divinity, which shocks those who listen to him. We are not so shocked, at least intellectually, but we often act as though these words were meaningless. If we really believed Jesus was God, the Creator of the Universe, and not just the Easter Bunny, wouldn't we pay more attention to what He wants us to do?

In the name of Christ, Blessed John Paul II, and our Holy Father Benedict XVI have called us to build a culture of life, a civilization based on love, by rejecting the works of darkness and the bondage to bloodlust, materialism, and greed which sustain the culture of death. This comes through our conversion in Christ Jesus and our perseverance in the works of mercy, justice, and peace. The culture of death won't just go away by itself, it's the default option in this day and age. May God give us the strength, courage, and faith we need for this journey!

### **The culture of death.**

**Thursday, March 22**

Exodus 32:7-14; John 5:31-47

We humans are a stubborn species, and our allegiance to evil is strong. While Moses is on the mountain speaking with God, the people of Israel build and worship a golden calf, an idol made with human hands. Jesus came into the world, not seeking the praise and honor of other people, but rather to do God's will -- to preach peace and justice and liberation, to proclaim that the day of the Lord was at hand, and that all that was revealed through the prophets would come to pass. The culture of life will triumph over the culture of death, but often you'd never know it by looking at what people are doing with their lives and the bountiful natural world that God has created.

A Golden Calf is a much safer object of worship than the Lord of the Universe. The calf doesn't talk back, it makes no inconvenient demands upon you, you don't have to worry about little details like justice, peace, wisdom, and beauty. It's easy, convenient, and provides instant gratification. It's no wonder Golden Calves are so popular these days. You see them everywhere, on every channel of communication, in the halls of governance and throughout the marketplaces. The God of Israel, however, does make inconvenient demands. When you exploit the poor and commit injustice and oppression, God sends prophets to call you to repentance. If you turn your back on Him, the Lord continues to love you. You may refuse to believe in God, but God always believes in you.

### **Let us oppress the Just.**

**Friday, March 23**

Wisdom 2:1, 12-22; John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

The just speak out against the evils of their day and this is generally not appreciated by those who commit those evils. The just seek an end to exploitation and this threatens those who exploit. For this saying of truth – publicly! persistently! – the wicked hate the just, and react with oppression.

Jesus, who is Justice incarnate, has spoken often against the wickedness of the ruling religious, political, and economic elites of his era. For this, the authorities are conspiring against him. But the people are more open, they wonder if indeed this is the Messiah. He is the true Just Man, oppressed because he is Goodness, Beauty, and Wisdom personified.

What is it about this tendency of human societies to persecute and kill prophets? What are the consequences to human societies that murder their prophets? Judging from both salvation and

secular history, the consequences of murdering your prophets are dire. What individual human actions contribute to climates that tolerate, even encourage, the persecution of the just? We do this when we are silent when others speak evil of the just. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador once said that going to hell was not only a matter of what you do – but also a matter of what you don't do. All that is necessary for evil to triumph in temporal affairs is for good people to do nothing. It is time that we consider how to encourage and support our prophets, and the best course in that regard is “do what the prophets call us to do!” Listen, pray, learn, and practice.

### **Poor People Are Stupid Scum.**

**Saturday, March 24**

Jeremiah 11:18-20, John 7:40-53

The poor are the objects of special scorn from the Beautiful People in today's Gospel. How can they know anything about the Messiah? Nothing good can come out of Galilee -- or Appalachia -- or the dysfunctional inner city -- or from *that* part of town where all of *those* kind of people live. How can *they* know anything? *They* are poor. Away with them, they hurt our eyes, somebody should do us all a favor and quickly put them out of *our* misery. If Jesus was the Messiah, *We* the Smart and Beautiful People would know this. And furthermore, he'd be from *our* side of town, not from that *awful* part of town. Anyone who comes to his defense must be one of *them*.

Jesus is obviously a sensation among the poor and working classes of Jerusalem in 33 AD. Even the guards whose paycheck comes from the ruling elites are impressed. How can we arrest him? Haven't you heard him talk? What's the Beautiful People's answer to this? Jesus can't be the Messiah because he's poor and the poor love him. He flunks their "Messiah Must Look Like Us Test".

The Church of the Poor had the right opinion about Jesus 2000 years ago. When was the last time we listened to what the poor are saying to us today? This isn't a popular way to win political power in today's degenerate moral climate – no political consultant would recommend this seriously. The poor are dysfunctional, everybody knows that. If they weren't, they wouldn't be poor. It's their own fault they're in that situation, that's what we tell each other. Thus we allow ourselves to be deluded by our own propaganda, believing the political fictions we have told ourselves in order to get and keep power. We refuse to see the structures of sin which help perpetuate poverty, we ignore the exploitations and oppressions that impoverishes a multitude. It's dangerous to listen to the poor. We might learn some Truth about Jesus, a Truth that brings sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and justice to the poor. That would upset more than one apple cart, so it's not a popular choice.

### **We would like to see Jesus.**

**The Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 25**

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

Greek converts to Judaism come today to visit Jesus. They want to see this man who works miracles. What do they see? A grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, but in its death, it

brings forth a new harvest. A Man who is "more than a man, who gives his life for the salvation of all. He is one who will be lifted up in crucifixion, and thus will draw all people to himself. He is the One who will erase the old divisions between Gentile and Jew, for this Gospel is for all the world, irrespective of nationality. It is a message of reconciliation, and peace among people who are divided by class, ethnicity, language, and culture. As Jesus is speaking, the voice of God cries out glory and power from heaven -- the crowd hears thunder, but some understood that it was a divine epiphany, an unveiling teaching truth to anyone who had ears to hear.

The author of the book of Hebrews reminds us today of Christ's love for and solidarity with us, who has offered prayers and supplications -- "with loud cries and tears" -- which were heard by God for our salvation. Jeremiah looks forward to this Messianic era, a time when the Law has become no longer an external set of regulations to be memorized, but rather a way of life imprinted upon the human heart. All will come to know the Messiah, and the Reign of Justice will be a reality for all people, "from the least to the greatest". From such obedience comes forgiveness and better ways of doing things.

Can we open our ears to hear the voice of God from heaven proclaiming glory and justice? Are we ready for the Law of God to be imprinted upon our hearts and minds so that we may live in the Reign of God? Do we offer hospitality to those who are different from us -- or are we stingy with our friendship and welcomes, excluding people because of race, or culture, or economic status? Would we prefer to remain in our ignorance and sin? Of course we would, that is our default situation. It is by grace and our obedience to the supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and love that we rise above that default, and learn to live in beauty and wisdom, hope, joy, and peace.

**Sorrows, Guadalupe, Fatima**  
**Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, March 26**  
Isaiah 7:10-14, Hebrews 10:4-10, Luke 1:26-38

Hail Mary, Full of Grace, the Lord is with thee, is what the angel said to Mary, a salutation echoed by generations of faithful Catholics in prayer and praise. This is where the eternal God becomes incarnate in the womb of a poor woman from a poor town in a poor province ruled by a cruel military empire, who becomes a homeless political refugee in Egypt. A virgin conceives and bears a son who is called Emmanuel, God-who-is-with-us.

Mary is in solidarity with all who suffer. Her own heart was pierced with the sword of sorrow and anguish. We can see her as Mother of Sorrows, and find peace and comfort. We can see her as Our Lady of Guadalupe, appearing in the form of a maiden of a conquered and enslaved people, giving them hope and peace. We can see her as Our Lady of Fatima, who appeared to 3 children of a poor farmer, in a poor town, also in a poor province, calling us to works of justice and reparation for the sins of the world. Mary is the one who shows us an example of obedience to God's call to servant leadership. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

None of this is mere symbol, it is reality. Mary is not a figment of our imagination, she was a real woman, with all of the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, of women throughout all time. She

lives today in heaven. Caring and compassionate, she prays for us, at every “now” and at every moment of death.

On this day we celebrate both Mary's response and the fruit of her obedience -- the Incarnation of our Lord, the one who brings salvation and justice and healing to all people. Let us also remember that the best celebration is our own obedience to the call to be Mary's own missionaries of justice and peace everywhere that we go.

## **The Works of the Father**

### **Tuesday, March 27**

Numbers 21:4-9, John 8:21-30

The people of Israel were quite angry. How dare this God liberate them from slavery only to run them around in the wilderness and feed them bad food. How much worse could things get? Plenty. Their camp was invaded by fiery serpents. Out of the frying pan, into the fire, and from whence does salvation come? From obedience to a command from God through Moses. It's not a very hard command either. Just a simple look.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is again speaking of his upcoming death and the importance of his teaching. Everything that Jesus gives us comes from the Father. God is with him and thus, what Jesus does is pleasing to God. Let us now remember -- what did Jesus do? He fed the hungry, comforted the afflicted, healed the sick, denounced political, economic, and spiritual oppression, challenged religious hypocrisy, and brought the Word of God to all people. These works are pleasing to God. It's not an accident that so many stories are recorded about Jesus visiting and having table fellowship with noted sinners -- tax collectors, prostitutes, people afflicted with grievous illness, etc. If we would follow Christ, we must do the works that he has done before us.

Let us take refuge in ambiguity, let us be explicit.

- When we denounce political, economic, and spiritual oppression, we do the works of Christ.
- When we feed the hungry, heal the sick, comfort the afflicted, clothe the naked, we do the works of Christ.
- When we ask why are these people hungry, afflicted, and naked, we do the works of Christ.
- When we drive the bankers out of the Temple, we do the works of Christ.
- When we have fellowship and friendship with the marginalized and rejected, we do the works of Christ.

This is Christ's message to us. What will our response be?

## **Slavery to Sin and Unjust Authority**

### **Wednesday, March 28**

Daniel 3:14-20, 91-92, 95; John 8:31-42

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is a lesson in the just and unjust exercise of authority. Nobody had more power than Nebuchadnezzar. He was the King and his word was

law. He built a giant idol and ordered all his subjects to worship this false God. He had authority, and he used it unjustly.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to obey this unjust command. They spoke truth to power and told the king they were content to rest in the love and protection of the one true God. Whether they were physically protected from the flames was not important to them, their obedience to God's command was what mattered, which was embodied in their resistance to the unjust demands of this earthly king.

Hmmm, what can the Church be saying to us in selecting this reading for today? Certainly there is the message that worship of the true God is important, and worship of idols is wrong, but is there not also a message of courage and fortitude in the face of the unjust demands of earthly governments? Right now the Catholic Church is facing a terrible challenge from the United States government, in the form of the new federal mandate requiring Catholic institutions to include abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization, and contraception drugs in their insurance plans. The government effectively is demanding that we worship this false idol of secularism.

Meanwhile, Jesus is talking to people who are proud of their heritage. Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. Jesus brings the Word of God -- indeed, he is that Word incarnate in human flesh. His truth brings freedom -- salvation and liberation -- when we hear the Word and become disciples of Christ. Note that there is nothing passive about this -- we are called to remain in the Word and to be disciples of Jesus, with all that that entails, i.e. feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, denouncing injustice and exploitation, sheltering the homeless, doing the works of justice, peace, and mercy. It's a warning against trusting in a proud heritage, because our pride can save us from nothing, indeed, our pride can send us to hell. But when we come to know the Truth, we will be set free from every bondage.

Hmmm. . . what can this mean for we Americans, as proud of our own national heritage as the Jews of Jesus' day were of theirs? Are we in danger of creating our own false idol, and making it an object of our worship?

### **Keeping God's Word.**

**Thursday, March 29**

Genesis 17:3-9; John 8:51-59

Jesus continues his dialogue today with those who trust in their nationality, rather than God, for their salvation. How familiar does this sound today! Especially to those of us who are citizens of the United States of America, our eyes blinded by our trust in our military power and globalizing corporations, we think we can sow in furrows of injustice "forever" without reaping a seven fold harvest.

But Jesus says that it is those who keep his Word that will not see death, and his Word says to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before God. This is not a description of the foreign or domestic policies of the United States government (nor many others on the face of this planet). Pride in nationality has its appropriate place, but it's not news that we Americans have a problem

with the proper ordering of our values. We magnify the trivial, glorify the violent, and praise the greedy, while scorning the poor and marginalizing the weak. That's not the way to get to heaven or to build a just society.

At the end of today's Gospel, Jesus makes a clear announcement of His divinity. So when Jesus says something to us, we should pay attention. The words of Jesus are much more important than anything that any United States politician, president, senator, or congressional representative may say. The message here appears to be – Trust in Jesus, beware of the government.

### **Continuing a theme. . .**

#### **Friday, March 30**

Jeremiah 20:10-13; John 10:31-42

In today's Gospel, Jesus again claims to be God, and people react by picking up stones to kill him. These are hard sayings for people to receive, then and now. It is much easier to think of Jesus as a really good man than it is to realize he was God. Or maybe he was the Easter Bunny – a nice, non-threatening symbol of spring and rebirth. But not God, no, that would make too many demands on us. If we start doing justice and mercy, challenging exploitation and liberating those who are enslaved, people might start throwing stones at us too!

Jeremiah is also not very popular with the rulers in his era. His sufferings are a "foreshadowing" of the experience of the Messiah. Like Jesus, he is surrounded by secret plots and terrors, deserted by his friends. But God protects His prophet. Those who persecute the just will not triumph.

"For he has rescued the life of the poor from the power of the wicked!" Thus Jeremiah describes the lot of the poor throughout history. The rich and powerful have forever seen the poor as their prey. From the pyramids of Egypt to the Roman galleys, and on to medieval serfs and the modern transnational corporation, the weak and helpless have suffered from the depredations of the powerful. Jesus, who is God, did the works of the Father and calls us to follow Him and do likewise. It is a message of love, repentance, conversion, solidarity and service.

### **Promise of Redemption**

#### **Saturday, March 31**

Ezekiel 37:21-28; John 11:45-57

Today's Gospel begins right after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Many people were believing in Jesus because of this act. Others went and told the rulers. Caiaphas the High Priest, who had obviously studied Roman politics, says that Jesus must die or the whole nation will perish. Better him than us, he argues. Because of these threats, Jesus withdrew from the public eye. The spies of the rulers were about in the streets and marketplaces, looking for the Galilean rabbi.

In the first reading, Ezekiel sees a vision of the promised redemption of the Messianic era, a time of peace and security, when people will be undisturbed in their homes and farms, false gods will

be put away, a civilization of life and love and justice. It is a vision far removed from our present reality where the culture of death remains the order of the day. Justice is subordinated to power, the wicked rule and the people groan.

The victory of hope is upon us, however. Even as the conspiracies against Jesus mount, the truth of his message becomes more apparent, more convincing, people respond to this radical declaration of love from God and become new persons, passing from death into life, from defeat into victory, and from sorrow into joy.

Now, in our liturgy, we are about to enter into the greatest mysteries of our faith. Through the events memorialized in the Holy Week liturgies, we pass from death to life with our Lord, from the Cross to the Tomb and onward to the Resurrection!