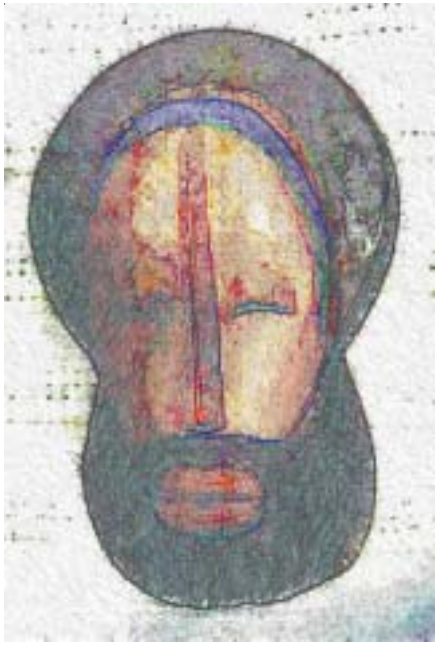

Homilies
1997-1998

Reverend Ron Trojcak

About the Author

Father Ron Trojcak studied music at the University of Illinois (1952-55). In 1953 he entered the seminary at Notre Dame, moved to St. Mary of the Lake seminary in 1955, and was ordained in 1968. From 1968 to 1969, he completed a Masters in Theology at the McCormick Theological Seminar. In 1970 he came Canada to undertake Ph. D. at St. Michael's in Toronto.

In 1972 he came to King's College in London Ontario, where he remained for over two decades, teaching theology and serving as College Chaplain.

In 1980 he went to Lusaka Zambia on a one year leave of absence. It is there that his love affair with African art began. He first purchase was the mother and child by Zambian artist Eddie Mumba. In the winter of 1996 and again in 1997, an exhibition of his collection was hosted at the library of King's College. Some of these pages are decorated with this art.

Father Trojcak retired as Chaplain in 2001. He continues to teach at King's College as an Emeritus Professor.

Some of Father Trojcak's other sermons can be found on the web at www.ronsweb.ca including voice recording in mp3 format.

Dedication

To my multiple families: My sister Doris, my sons Ngandwe, Marcelo & Dieudonne; the King's College Sunday morning community. These homilies, (i.e., conversations) are with, from and for all these.

My special thanks to Tutis Vilis, Eva Kovacic, Paula and Geordie Sinclair

Homilies for 1997-1998

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Dec 7, 2nd Advent #1	Where is home for me?
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Jan 11, Baptism of the Lord	“For the Time Being” by W.H.Auden
Jan 18, Second Sunday	He only looked for suffering
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Feb 1,Fourth Sunday #1	Unable to respond to what is around us
Feb 8, Fifth Sunday	We come into the Presence of the Beautiful.
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Mar 8, Second Sunday of Lent, #2	All belong with each other
Mar 15,Third Sunday of Lent, #2	I will be there when I will be there
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Jan 1, Mary, Mother of God	My connection to all
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April 11th, Holy Saturday	If we omit the suffering of anybody
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April 26, Third Sunday of Easter	The Triumph of a Life
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May 10, Fifth Sunday of Easter	What the Church is supposed to represent
May 17, Sixth Sunday of Easter	The peace that comes to one
May 24, Ascension	The Jesus of everybody in the world
May 31, Pentecost	The Climax of a Story
June 7, Trinity Sunday	Where do we find mystery?

June 14, Corpus Christi	The threshold of this chapel door
June 28, Thirteenth Sunday	Other business to attend to first
August 2, Eighteenth Sunday	The sense that all of life is an act of benevolence
August 9, Nineteenth Sunday	The capacity to respond is freedom
August 16, Twentieth Sunday	Where is the fire for me?
August 23, Twenty First Sunday	Who is in and who is out
August 30, Twenty Second Sunday	Without humility love is impossible
Sept. 6, Twenty Third Sunday	New life that is so fragile
Sept. 13, Twenty Fourth Sunday	Where I can be welcomed
Sept. 27, Twenty Sixth Sunday	Keeps us away from each other
Oct 4, Twenty Eighth Sunday	All is gift. All is grace.
Oct 18, Twenty Ninth Sunday #1	What are we asking for in praying
Oct 25, Thirtieth Sunday	That is not prayer
Nov 15, Thirtieth Third Sunday #1	Where we are supposed to end up
Nov 22, Christ the King	The way things ought to be

Transcribed by Bill Gentile, Paula Sinclair, Rita Jeffrey & Doug Toth from taped recordings of Father Ron Trojcak's sermons.

First Sunday of Advent 1997

A Time of Expectation

I think that everybody recognizes the language of this reading from the gospel. It is kind of the stock in trade of a lot of the televangelists. There is to be this ghastly scene at the end of the world where the sun is going to be darkened and the moon is going to lose its light and the stars are going to fall from heaven. I remember when I was a little kid hearing this stuff and it sounded Cartoon-like, the stuff of comic books. It was trivial, I suppose. And then the more we hear it, the more inured do we come to it and then we just ignore it, I think.

But when the Jews created this kind of language, as they did around one hundred and fifty years before our era, they really were trying to say something of enormous human significance. The language is called apocalyptic language. This is the kind of language that is used both in the readings at the end of the church year and the beginning of the church year, because they both talk about "the End" time. So, I would like to talk a little bit about that and see how that may illuminate the time we spend at advent.

For the Jews, life was pretty short. I mean, by the age of sixteen, one third of the population would be dead. By the age of six two thirds would be dead. So, Jesus would have been a pretty old man at thirty-three or thirty-five when he was finally executed. Life was tough. Disease was epidemic and people suffered from all kinds of serious ailments. And so, in that sense, life was difficult. Economically as well, life was extremely difficult; if most of the people were not existing in a state of extreme pauperism they were pretty close to it. But, the Jews, at their best, did not locate the absolute difficulty of life in those economic or social or physical terms. Rather, as I said, at their best, and they, like us, were not often at their best, but when they were at their

best, they saw the difficulty of life as consisting in a struggle of trying to be good, trying to be faithful to God in a world where that is anything but an easy thing to accomplish.

And, of course, it is not just in their world, that life was hard. We in the west have a somewhat easier time in that we have all kinds of distractions: “when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping” — that is our byword. And so we can dissipate ourselves, we can ignore vast ranges of reality. But those people could not escape from it. On the other hand, our life is more difficult, because I can turn on the television tonight and find out what is going on in Bosnia and see all those starving people in North Vietnam, the floods in Somalia, and the violence that pervades so much of this planet at this very moment. So, that complicates life. But as I said, we have all of these devices whereby we can simply blinker ourselves against all that and, in fact, we do.

So, we need to work very hard to reappropriate what this language meant for those people, because they thought that to try to be faithful to God was the absolute struggle. And it was so big that it was going to involve the entire universe, even the cosmic forces: the planets, the sun, the moon and the stars. And they devised this kind of hyper-dramatic language when in their history, and it happened often enough for the Jews, the powers of evil seemed to be so monumental and so pervasively arrayed against them that they thought “unless God does something then we are all hell-bent; we are doomed to destruction; we will not survive”.

So, they thought, believing in God, that there was going to be this final, absolutely cataclysmic battle between God as supreme good and the forces of evil dispersed on the earth. And because this was the deepest level of struggle - and we are talking about the deepest meaning of the whole cosmic enterprise, not just the human enterprise - it is not surprising that they cast it in these large, large terms.

So that is apocalyptic language and now we have to figure out some further implications. For the Jews, the apocalypse was not just going to happen to them. That is, that the Jews did not have, by dint of their religion, the radically individualistic sense of themselves that we in the west have today. In other words, the destruction by the forces of evil was not just going to kill me; it was going to wipe out all of the world.

This is contrary to what I was told when I was growing up as a little kid in Catholic school. The nuns always told us, “your business is to save your soul”. That

is wrong, because that basically privatizes the whole work of religion and isolates me from everybody else. For the Jews, what was threatened was not just their own individual well-being, but the well being of humanity. Again, a small footnote: this is the Jews at their best. They kept falling into this tribal idea that what was really being threatened was “me and my crowd”. But at their best their fear was for the destruction of all people, just as conversely their hope was only real when it was the hope for everybody. So I cannot just hope for myself. To hope only for myself is to fail God. My hope is real only to the extent that it embraces everybody.

But there is something more that is, I think, peculiar to our possible interpretation of these texts and which we can see by looking at this text’s cosmic dimension. The Jews were not living in a world where they were in danger of so polluting their world that nobody could live there— we are. I mean, the massive forest fires in Sri Lanka, for example, which went on for weeks killing all kinds of people. Why was this done? This was done because they were simply clear-cutting and destroying vast ranges of forest in that part of the world. And, of course, we are all party to that sort of indifference to the world that we live in. We in North America, live in what has been called “the throw-away society”; we can always get another one of any thing. And, of course, with throwing away we pollute and we create further pollution by endless replication of the stuff that we threw away.

I just spent a couple of days in Columbus Ohio. Columbus is a major city — it is three quarters of a million people. They do not recycle anything in that city — nothing. This is a trivial example of a kind of almost studied indifference to the world and, above all, to our responsibilities for this world and for each other. Because, to be faithful to each other means, as we now know better than we have ever known in the history that we have to be faithful to the earth too.

So, what does it have to do with advent? Well, advent is a time of expectation; it is a time of hope. So these readings on the first Sunday of advent give us the opportunity to question ourselves. What is it we hope for? What do I really hope for and how broad is my hope? Is it just for me, or my family, or my friends, or is it for the world? And then, what are my expectations? And how can I act on those expectations, so that God is not going to find a kind of wasteland when He finishes off the human project. I propose that we cannot celebrate Christmas adequately if we do not use this time to examine our hopes, to alter our expectations. To celebrate Christmas, is the celebration of this man Jesus whose life and death and resurrection is a playing out of the cosmic battle between good and evil. Well, His

arrival, His appearance; isn't that what we are supposed to be thinking about, shaping our hopes in the light of?

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2nd Sunday of Advent, 1997 (#1)

Where is home for me?

I think one of the largest obstacles to observing Advent is not only its commercialization, but rather, the pace at which we live, a pace that accelerates almost to the point of madness around the Christmas season. And so, it is very hard to try to figure out what it is we really do hope for, simply because we are battered by all kinds of things coming at us from every direction. With this in mind, I would like to try to extract meaning from the readings today in order to try to come to grips with these fundamental questions: What do I really hope for in my life? What do I really want? What am I really expecting, or anticipating?

The three readings are full of promises. Baruch, who was a prophet, but also the secretary of the prophet Jeremiah, talks about good things happening to Jerusalem: “hills being made low” and “valleys filled up”. And then in the Psalm, interestingly enough, there is actually a reference to that happening: “The Lord restoring the fortunes of Zion”. We are going to come back to what that entails. Then, Paul, of course, is talking about his confidence that God was going to be faithful, that when people started the following of Jesus God was going to transform them and us in such a way that we all become a real community. Of course the figure of John the Baptist, as the great Karl Barth put it, is one great big finger pointing to the future.

Going over these texts, I was finally struck by something that underlies each of them that may be more helpful than what they say on their surface levels. Baruch was writing in the sixth century before our era, and when he was talking about Jerusalem, it was a desert, it had been devastated by the Babylonians. The Temple, the single, central place of worship for the Jews, was destroyed by the Babylonian invasion in 587. Most of the Jews, certainly the prominent Jews, had been

deported. (You might remember that Psalm, “By the waters of Babylon we sat and hung up our harps and our captors asked us to sing a song of the Lord and how can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land”). So all this glad-talk that “Israel may walk safely in the glory of the Lord” was absolutely counter-factual. There was nothing, there was no sign of glory at all! It looked like God had abandoned everything. And if we do not know that that is the historical moment out of which all this glad-talk and these great, glorious promises come, we seriously miss the point.

Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians when he was in jail, as he was frequently in his life. Paul, of course, as we know, ultimately was executed because he was a troublemaker; he was politically disruptive, just as Jesus was. And it is fascinating to observe that the Letter to the Philippians is also the most buoyant of Paul’s letters. The word “joy” comes up more often in the Letter to the Philippians than in any other place in Pauline correspondence. But, the fact is, he was in jail and really close to facing the death-sentence. And it is out of that situation that he says, “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and insight so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless having produced a harvest of righteousness”.

When John the Baptist shows up, what was the political situation in Palestine? Palestine was, as it was through most of its history, an occupied country. For most of its history, the Jews lived under the Assyrians, Persians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans, and here is John talking about the coming of the Kingdom of God. In other words, all of this talk comes from an enormously dark, dark place. I was struck by this because of the fact that, although for centuries we Christians have walked away from it, we are basically an offshoot of Judaism. We are a form of Judaism; that is what Christianity is. (It is only because we won in the fourth century, when Constantine thought it politically expedient to become Christian and, therefore, declared Christianity legitimate and made it the official, imperial religion, that we got to be in charge. Then we could start beating the Jews on the head, which we had been doing, anyway, for a long time). But basically, we have lost our Jewish sense of homelessness. Because that is the characteristic experience of the Jews. So the figure of the wandering Jew which flows in and out of European literature is a standard one.

What I would like to suggest that what we should attempt to garner out of all of this, is a sort of urgency to the question: What do I think is home for me?

Where is home for me? The notion of homelessness is not part of our consciousness. We Christians are in charge, although, this situation is fading rapidly. But basically, we are still in charge socially, culturally, politically, even if the vestiges are, as I said, getting dimmer and dimmer. But I do not think we have this sense of homelessness. Remember that familiar saying: “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests and I don’t have anywhere to go”. This is very hard to talk about in the church, especially the Roman church, which has for much of its history become so comfortable with the powers that be. We are politically, socially, and culturally respectable. And so I keep worrying, in my own behalf, “What has my Christianity cost me?” And I say, in absolute candour, “Very little”.

It is the experience of homelessness which most sharply raises the question of hope.

I do not know, for sure, where to go with this because I think I have been asking, for much of my life, the wrong questions. And the right question, especially at this time before Christmas, is, “What do I really hope for?”. And unless that hope comes out, as Paul will say, against a case of hopelessness, it is not going to be hope, it is just going to be some brainless optimism. So, where are we dispossessed? The Jews have plenty of that experience, and that may be the most important thing about our Jewish heritage that we have walked away from.

The music we are going to play at the Communion is written by a great, very self-consciously Jewish composer, Ernst Bloch. Listen to it carefully. It is simply called “Prayer”. This passionate, intense, almost manic sense of yearning in this music grows out of a sense of homelessness.

This is a funny kind of sermon in a sense, but, because I first of all have to preach to myself, it is the most apt one. Because unless I really examine, “What do I really look for? In what sense am I really alien? Where am I away from home? What do I see as being home?”, I am not going to ask about hope. And there is the collateral question: “What has made me dark?” I am not in Baruch’s position, I am certainly not in Paul’s position, and I am not in John the Baptist’s position.

I do not have that experience of oppression, but maybe that is because something is wrong with my head and my expectations - - I am looking for the wrong thing, I have misidentified this business.

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Christmas 1997, Midnight

This divine image in every human being

This is number 8,752,206 in a series of Christmas sermons that have been preached over the past 2,000 years. Still it is altogether reasonable that there be yet another Christmas sermon, different I hope, because every time period, age, and nation understands this event from its own perspective. But I would like to suggest that we Christians misunderstand this event, we reduce it to a kind of exercise in sentimental self-indulgence, when we do not observe it within the context of its Jewish roots: Christmas as the celebration of the fulfilment of the whole religious project of Judaism. And it is only if we hold on to this that we can save Christmas from inanity.

What is this Jewish religion? What did the Jewish religion, as it came to be known, offer to the world that was different and unique? Well, if you read the Hebrew Scriptures there is a clear clue. Because the one thing that the great religious figures of Judaism, the prophets - constantly protested against was idolatry. Idolatry, simply defined, is the exaltation of any human creation to the status of the divine. But this definition needs to be elaborated. And its clarification is found in the Book of Exodus, where so much of the heart of Judaism lies. Perhaps you remember that narrative: the famous “burning bush” scene. What moved this strange God, unlike every other god of the ancient Near East or North, or South, or anywhere in the world, so far as we know, to intervene in human history is expressed in those deathless words: “I have seen the oppression of my people. I have come to relieve their suffering”. In other words, the most acute form of idolatry was the constitution of any human creation, whether it be political, economic, religious, philosophical, that somehow had oppressive power over people. And what the Jews did in an enormously audacious move was to say, “No. The sacred, the divine, is to be located”, as the Book of

Genesis extraordinarily puts it, “in the image of God, which is the human being”.

What is the divine? We use this word all the time and associate it with things like angels. It is basically very simple: the divine, as anthropologists put it, is the locus of ultimate power and value. Let me give you an instance of how the Jews worked this out. In those familiar lines from the first chapter of Genesis, God made all of the stars and the lights of the heavens, and God made all the powers of fertility of plants and animals. What was being said in those texts was a demolition of religion as usual. Astrology, one of the most ancient religions on the face of the earth, is based on the idea that the stars rule us. Or, the powers of fertility rule us. The divinization of fertility, sex, which through a series of metamorphoses is still with us today, is the most ancient and universal form of religion.

The Jews, however, were different because they believed it is all human beings in their freedom who bear the mark of God. But one has to be very careful about this, because idolatry can take on all kinds of forms. There are certainly overt cases, for example, in ancient Egypt, where the Pharaoh could be worshipped as divine, or periodically in ancient Rome, Roman emperors would proclaim themselves divine. This, of course, made political systems sacred, thus subordinating the people who lived within these systems. Tribalism, the great and continually besetting sin of human beings, is another form of idolatry. And the heart of the tribal view is to say that somehow these other human beings are not quite human, they are not quite as human as we are.

Then we watch the evening news. Look at the economic classes, where to be rich is obviously to be god-favoured and to be poor is just as obviously to be somehow reprobate. To be black is to be only three-fifths human. (In the past, this was actually worked out in percentages!) With regard to gender, we see a recent counter-movement which wants to retrieve the “age of the goddess” (which exists more in peoples’ imaginations than in real human history). But the impulse to do this is very clear, because we all surely know that men image God much more adequately than those earthly, mindless, affectively over-driven creatures who are female. So, we have been able to use everything — our language, colour, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, economic status, and our academic status - - as forms of idolatry and, therefore, to say to the other than I: You are less human than I am.

And so in this man Jesus, this Jew, we Christians find and believe that God

has played his/her final trump by saying, “This human being fully incarnates both the fullness of humanity and God”. And He does so by regarding all others as co-humans. And because we believe that is so, every possible pretext for elevating one human being over another human being is radically undercut, invalidated, and de-legitimized.

And so, even ecclesiastical institutions - for which the temptation to idolatrize themselves is perhaps most sharp, and most subtle - must be aware that they too, we too, would like to elevate ourselves over and against everybody else and deny the humanity of everybody who is not one of our crowd.

So there is nothing very sentimental in the heart of the Christmas event; nursing a drunk, sheltering somebody who is homeless and mentally deranged, or at least unbalanced, or taking care of the mentally retarded people. I am sure you know, if you have ever tried to help these individuals, that there is no romance in any of these acts. But there is the reality of the Christian thing, the Christmas thing, the Jewish thing. And finally, we should take another cue from the Jews because the Jews had a constant struggle all through their history to misconstrue their own election, their status as God’s chosen. Since this danger continues to exist today, then Christmas should be the great caveat, the great warning. And so, you can push this to its ultimate point of audacity and say, “You cannot believe in God if you do not believe in this divine image in every human being!” Or, as the first Letter of John puts it, as does the rest of the biblical texts, both throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament: “How can you say you love God whom you have never seen, yet have the contempt for the fellow human being standing right next to you”. How can we do that and honestly sing “Away in the manger” and “Silent night” and “Come all ye faithful”? So, Christmas is this wonderful time to say, once again, to ourselves, “What does it mean to be faithful? Who is faithful, and faithful to what?”.

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Christmas Day, 1997

Calls us to something larger

One of the great retrievals that has happened in biblical scholarship in the past twenty or thirty years, one that I have returned to over and over again, is a rediscovery of the fact that we Christians basically are no more than a kind of reformed version of Judaism. On Christmas day I think it is particularly useful to review this fact and its implications because we can understand Christmas only if we see it as the kind of conclusion, or the apogee, of the whole business of the Jews' faith about who God was, what we human beings were, and how the world is shaped.

If you read the Hebrew Bible, the one great problem that emerges constantly in the writings of the prophets and the great legal texts, is idolatry. Idolatry means a misidentification of the divine. You see this over and over again in these texts. For instance, if you take the Creation stories, which were written very late, the writers point out that God made the stars, sun, and the moon. In these stories, the writers say things that were contrary to the religiosity of most of the people in the ancient Near East. The stories state: No, we are not ruled by the stars. Human beings are not under the control of astral spirits. Nor are we under the control of the powers of fertility because God made the trees, plants, and animals to make little trees, plants, and animals. Therefore, we need not worship the powers of fertility as virtually everybody on the face of the earth did for a long, long time. This is a misidentification of the divine. And, of course, at the heart of this insight was the Exodus narrative. It contains probably the most stunning passage in the Hebrew Bible, maybe in the whole Bible. There, out of the silence, God comes to the world, this strange, anomalous Jewish God, who addresses the human scene with those extraordinary words: "I have seen the oppression of my people. I have come to relieve their

suffering". In other words, from the Jewish point of view, the heart of all oppression, the heart of all idolatry, is precisely this misidentification of what is divine, because if you can point to a state, a culture, a philosophy, a religion or economic system and say this is God-intended, if not itself divine, then you can legitimately subordinate and oppress everybody in its name. And that is what idolatry is.

What happens in Christmas? What happens in what the Christians later came to see as the incarnation of God? It is simply a reaffirmation of the central fact of the Jews' belief that the only place where you can find the image of God is in us human beings. It is not in some great structure, however awe-inspiring, whether ecclesiastical, political, or economic. And as we see the history of the Jews, as we see our own history as Christians, we see the tendency to idolatrize any of those structures. This is constantly at work. It just occurred to me recently that Charles Dickens, who is a kind of patron saint of Christmas, had Karl Marx as his contemporary. Dickens would have been well advised to write "A Christmas Carol" after he had read Das Kapital because what Marx does, far better than Dickens, is to illuminate this human tendency to suppress human beings in the name of some greater entity.

So, what happens with Jesus? Here is this one human being who took everybody seriously. This man, this Jewish man, let everybody be. Why? Because of their academic reputation, bank account, or wardrobe? No, he let them be simply because they were human beings. And he did it by pointing to the most meagre, negligible parts of his society: women, the poor, handicapped people, and social outcasts. And in doing so, of course, he was continuing this great Jewish protest against the tendency that we human beings have: wanting to divinize things of our own making. I suspect, because we feel so fragile, that unless we can do this, our lives are insignificant. But Jesus does this radically different thing and says, "No. We cannot point to the church, government, or Bank of Montreal, we cannot point to any institution and say that, in the name of those institutions, or those structures, another human being can be subordinated. In fact, it is precisely because of the inviolability of every human being that all institutions must stand under critique. Which is, of course, why I bring up Karl Marx, because this is exactly what he said. And writers have pointed out over and over again that Marx, although he was an atheist-Jew, stood very much in the line of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Ezekiel, and all the rest of the Jewish prophets. Thus, what Christmas does is to bring this Jewish thing to completion, because it celebrates that, in this human being who was

radically open to everybody else, there is a transparency to the God who moves against our own tendencies to oppress each other.

An interesting aside: I listened to an interview with William Buckley, who is a Roman Catholic, and very bright. He has written several books on religion. In the interview he spoke of a cheeky, sort of cheap atheism that was prevalent on the Yale campus in the 1950's. But he said that it is the absolute centrality of the individual, the human individual who is supreme. This is how he combines his own Catholicism with his world-view. I understand what he is saying but I think he is wrong. It is not the question of the supremacy of the individual, it is the question of the supremacy of human connections, because the other thing that the biblical texts tell us, (this too comes from Genesis) is that there is no such thing as the isolated supreme individual - because "it is not good for human beings to be alone".

And so, this, I suggest to you, is what we are supposed to be celebrating at Christmas. Christmas is a politically explosive feast in its genuine meaning, because it calls into question all of our tendencies to misdescribe divinity, to ascribe divinity to various institutions and structures, to give absolute power and value to anything else other than real human connections. And only this can give some kind of meaning to that notion of "A Merry Christmas". "A Merry Christmas" means what? It is the merriment of God in having created this diverse human race with various genders, colours, speech patterns, and sexual orientations, all manner of diversity, in order to become a family. And we cannot curtail the limits of that family and still be faithful to this man who was there for everyone and with everyone. And that is why, to go back to my first assertion, Christmas is essentially the completion of what Judaism was all about. I truly believe that this is the only thing that gives it the prospect of bringing real joy to the world, because joy, in so far as it is privatized, circumscribed, and limited to me and the safe environment of my circle of friends is too fragile and artificial a kind of joy. Christmas calls us to something larger than that.

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The Feast of the Holy Family, 1997

We do not yet know who we will be

For days I have been trying to find out how old today's feast is, the Feast of the Holy Family. I have been unsuccessful, but I am almost certain that it is a fairly late feast in the history of the church. It is certainly not as old as Easter, Epiphany, or even Christmas. I think that this fact is significant and what I would like to do today is ruminate on this business of the family.

This feast is not likely to have been an early one because the early feasts were much more closely attached to biblical stories than were the later ones. And if you look at the New Testament, and if you were to take a concordance, or a biblical dictionary, and look under the title "family" I think you would discover some fairly astonishing things. First of all, there is virtually no reference to the family. For example, when I was growing up and attending Catholic grade school, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were like a second Trinity. You had your family, then you had them, and then you had God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All this is profoundly misleading and I think the onus of that misconception is what is driving my thoughts on today's feast. To get back to the biblical material, virtually every time the family is mentioned in the New Testament it is done so with a warning.

There is this astonishing passage in Mark, for example, which was so scandalous and shocking that when Matthew and Luke came to rework it, they left it out. The passage depicts Jesus, who had been out for days, running around with his followers. He is sitting in a house talking, when his family comes to take him home because they think he is crazy, which in those days, of course, also meant that you were dia-

bolically possessed. This was so scandalous that even its mention in later New Testament thought was absolutely unacceptable and, as I said, Matthew and Luke left it out. We can assume, therefore, that this event was historically accurate. So it seems that Jesus was very much a critic of the family, and, of course, in those days family meant a very extended group of people, not just his mother and father. Later, Jesus hauls off and basically disallows his biological family by saying: "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Who are my sisters?". This is absolutely consistent throughout the New Testament. In this passage from Mark, Jesus' biological roots are simply discounted, because his family is constituted by a common fidelity to God. Thus, is blood thicker than water? It would seem not.

Then, of course, we have another complicating problem with getting to the point in which we can think in a useful and helpful way about the Holy Family today. There is, amongst fundamentalist Christians, this enormous "focus on the family". Take, for example, this big group in Boulder, Colorado with their mega-zillionare headquarters, journals, and television ads, where the family is absolutely central. The Promise Keepers, another fundamentalist Christian movement, are another example of this. Over and over again you see this extraordinary focus and concentration on the family among fundamentalist groups. What kind of family are they talking about? They are talking about the so-called nuclear family. I am not a historian or a sociologist but, from what I have read it seems the nuclear family is a fairly recent invention. Molly and me and baby makes three in "My Blue Heaven". However, the family, for most of the human race, is a much larger reality than what we conceive the family to be today: mother, father, and child(ren). For some individuals in various parts of the world relatives exist in large numbers. For example, from what I understand about African languages, the word "mother" and "father" is extraordinarily elastic. You can call anybody mother, father, uncle, sister, or brother. And I suspect that is true in other places as well.

As we are just finishing the celebration of Christmas there is yet another factor: the big family celebration. It seems to me, at least in my experience and through the casual observation of other peoples' families, that this is a very tough time and somewhat of a strain on families because peoples' expectations are so high. We are all supposed to love each other and be nice. This really does not work. It never had in my original biological family. So what do we do with the Feast of the Holy Family? I think we have to go back to that material in the New Testament that is echoed in this passage from 1 Samuel that Catherine read. For those of

us who have children, we are to recognize first of all, that our children belong to God before they belong to us. I believe that an enormous part of the strain that occurs in families is based on the belief that we, as parents, have total responsibility for these human beings. We simply do not! If we really believe that we have absolute and total responsibility for other human beings then this will lead to serious problems. So, although this flies directly in the face of the myth of "My Blue Heaven" with Molly and me and baby, at the same time it is liberating. It is liberating because these others are God's people more fundamentally then they are mine. Therefore every move you make, word you say, outburst of anger, or moment of virtue you have is not going to determine ultimately the outcome of the lives of these people. This is not the case.

And even all those other things that we feel are such great assaults on the family unit - and they are real - do not determine this. For example, television is one such assault on the family. There was a ghastly statistic along these lines that the CBC announced: 46% of Canadian children prefer their computers to their friends. There are all kinds of things that are assaulting the family. I certainly do not have the recipe for family success, I do not even know what the ingredients are for what constitutes a family that is "successful" except by going back to this business of what we can learn from the New Testament. These biblical texts teach us that our kids are God's children and the best that we can do for our children is to be as faithful to God as we can be in our own lives. That is the determining factor, not all the Dr. Spock, Dr. Ruth, or Doctor whoever books. When we speak of families we are ultimately talking about engendering the base for successful human beings; we are talking about how we can help people grow up. Does this, therefore, alleviate the sense of responsibility that we have for the little human beings who are in our company for a short period of time? I do not think so. But it does help us to see the larger facts of life, namely, that these are not just our children, this is not just my wife, my husband, or my partner, because they are God's, first of all. And I think if you look at all that literature, from the "Focus on the Family" kinds of people, you will see what I mean. This literature drives me crazy because it is just full of detailed recipes on how to have a successful family: Read this book, follow this therapeutic model, or this anthropological scheme, and everything will work. I do not think so.

So to go back to something I previously suggested, I think one of the most useful things to remember is first of all that these are God's people and God is more

concerned about them than we are. God is more able to intervene in their lives, sooner or later, in a more profound and transformative way than we, as parents, are able to.

Secondly, we live in an essentially unfinished state. There is no final stage, as Peter read from this first Letter of John: “We do not yet know who we will be”. But again, to go back to something I mentioned about the family, I think one of the major sources of pathology in the family is that we really do have all these clear and distinct ideas about who our children are supposed to be and how they are supposed to turn out. And to the extent that our minds are driven by those kinds of certainties we are going to miss the point because as John says, “We are God’s children now. What we will be has not yet been revealed”.

So, finally, I end this piece on the Holy Family with hope. Again, to go back to our earlier Christmas sermon, with the hope and belief that God is going to act in behalf of these people, and to believe that God’s image is present in these people even if we do not recognize it, and that God will bring that image to perfection. So again, I think that this is good news. This is ultimately liberative because it destroys that mistaken sense of responsibility whereby we are compulsively driven to be absolutely responsible for these people. We cannot be, we need not be, and this is liberative.

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January 1st, 1998

My connection to all

Readings Numb. 6.22-27; Gal. 4.4-7; Lk. 2.16-21

Several weeks ago, Judy Wrought, my Presbyterian minister friend from Colorado who came and spoke on women in the church, sent me a fax and she said, "I've just run across this text and this has become the axis along which I am going to travel during Advent", and I put it on the bulletin board. But in case you have not seen it, I would like to read it:

Who among us will celebrate Christmas right? Those who finally lay down all their power, honour, and prestige, all their vanity, pride and self-will at the manger. Those who stand by the lowly and let God alone be exalted. Those who see in the child in the manger the glory of God precisely in this lowliness. Those who say, along with Mary, "The Lord has regarded my low estate. My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour".

I thought there were a number ideas in this text that would be useful to look at on this day, the first day of the year. First of all, this text is clearly Marian. The Magnificat from the Gospel of Luke is quoted, the most astonishing lines of which may be: "He has raised up the lowly and sent the rich away empty". Now, in normal Marian piety, Mary is the classic figure of a kind of supine character. At least that is the way she has very often been presented. But I think if you look at the text of the Magnificat you will find that there is enormous, explosive potential in it. These are not the words of some kind of receding wallflower, these are politically explosive words that announce the kind of general upheaval that God is supposed to work in the world.

It is also important to know who wrote the text that I read a few minutes

ago. These words were written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Lutheran theologian, with a very promising academic career in Germany. He got a job at Union Theological in New York, probably the most prestigious seminary in North America. The Nazis came into power and he left the U.S and went back to Germany and set up an underground seminary and became part of a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer and his co-plotters were discovered and he was executed after spending a long time in jail. It is important to keep this in mind because this is the same man who is talking about Mary and "lowliness" and all this other business. So his actions were not based on a kind of privatized piety, for example, with Jesus and I having a sort of private arrangement. No...the beauty of Bonhoeffer was precisely that he saw the political implications of the Gospel and acted on them. And the model for his doing of this was, of course, Mary. This leads me to what I would like to lay out, for myself, as a New Year's program: this whole business of lowliness.

What does it mean to be lowly? Personally, as I understand it, this means that I have to, as Bonhoeffer said, "Lay down all this bravado which keeps me promoting myself so that nobody will somehow be able to get a leg up on me, politically, socially, and economically; and to admit my own deficiencies and hypocrisy". In other words, to live honestly, with all those holes in myself. And in consequence of doing that, therefore, to make myself more truly available to other people. It seems to me that this was the genius of Jesus. Somehow, this universally available man did not scare and intimidate people. And so, one of the things we can do is to try to figure out what concrete and specific forms lowliness is to take for me.

But again, there is a political dimension to all of this, there must be! Too often, we in the church, in all of the churches, have separated private piety from public performance and position. Certainly, if you look at the history of all of the churches this is very clear. So we have to, if we are going to do this straight, look at where we are connected with the lowly in society. And here, we have a particularly rich field - and growing richer - of forms of lowliness. For example, there are more hungry children in this country right now, according to Statistics Canada, than there have ever been. There are more homeless people in this country. For the first time the St. Vincent de Paul Society has come to us at little King's College asking for food and clothes for people in this city. As the mental health institutions in this province are closed, who is walking around? And, of course, the key thing is: "What

is my connection to all of those people?". And I am embarrassed to say, "I do not know". I am here at beautiful King's College where I do my classes and come and say mass and go home to my corgies, C.D.'s, and African art and I am quite comfortable. And where am I connected to all of these other people?

I suggested last Sunday that as a community we need to do more things together. I would like to make some proposals. I would like to suggest that we get together and listen to people in this city who know that there are more people who are homeless, hungry, and without clothes and proper accommodations. I think that this would be useful for us to know. To take another example, to move into something on a world-wide scale: I was talking to one of my neighbours, an international financial adviser who travels all over the world. He told me that the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. I hope that we can do something to find out all about that as well because this seems to be crucial. Tutis has also suggested this individual who is going to come next December to talk about ethical investments. So, I think, however idiosyncratic my preoccupation with lowliness is, that there are some useful things for all of us here, and for all of us precisely as a community too.

Where are we going to be put down by God? Where are we going to be exalted in our lowliness? And above all, how are we going to connect with other people? Because this lowliness - unless it is a form of pathology - is simply everybody being able to face everybody on an equal level. This is what lowliness seems to me to be all about.

So, I apologize for the somewhat shapeless form of these remarks because, frankly, I feel overwhelmed and profoundly and existentially inept. However, I really do believe that at the beginning of a new year, where we are looking for some kind of renewal, where we are looking for a deeper life together, which means a deeper life in our own larger community, you can distil something that is useful for your own thinking and praying and that when we come together again this is exactly about what we can do as a community.

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The Feast of the Epiphany, 1998

The threshold has to be altered

Readings Is. 60.1-6; Eph. 3.2-3a, 5-6; Mt. 2.1-12

Epiphany, which simply means the manifestation, is one of the oldest Feasts in the Christian year. This is evident from the nature of the Feast, as these early Jesus-Jews believed that the destiny of Judaism had been fulfilled through the life of Jesus. This means that, through the Jews, God's mercy was going to be extended to everybody. This universality of God's mercy was supposed to be achieved specifically through this Jewish man, Jesus. Thus, they celebrated the manifestation of this to the world and, of course, the text that best exemplifies this is this famous passage from Matthew.

Teaching Scripture has all kinds of advantages and one of them is that it helps me and the people I work with, to look closer at what the Scripture is about. This holds especially true for this passage from Matthew in which, for example, the star and the Magi are found. Today, most Scripture scholars believe that there was no star or Magi. If there was no star then we have to ask ourselves why they made up this story with the star. The answer is fairly easy: in the ancient world, whenever they wanted to talk about the birth of somebody who subsequently became extraordinarily important in world history, they would say that his birth was marked by all of these portents. For example, when Julius Caesar was born there was a description of a great sign in the heavens. When Alexander the Great was born there also was this great sign in the heavens. In other words, they were trying to

express their own belief in the significance of this person. Thus, when the author of the Gospel of Matthew created this episode about all of these Gentiles, these non-Jews coming, to see this child who was the King of the Jews, he was trying to show precisely what I have said Epiphany is all about: Everybody, through Jesus, having access to the mercy of God. And so, they created these stories to express their faith in this occurrence as being the most crucial event in the history of the world. Because now the world, this terribly dishevelled, disconnected and fragmented reality, is going to be unified by the action of God in this man Jesus. But it's somewhat comforting to concentrate on stars and Magi.

We all know how readily we float to the surface of our lives and want some kind of spectacle, or some kind of trivial sort of certification, or legitimization of what we think is real in the world. It is much more difficult to pay attention, to look attentively for what is real, good, valuable and true. This does not announce itself with all the fanfare and bravura as does, for example, the launching of the Titanic, whether it be the historical ship or this $200,000,000 film.

So, this presents the issue very squarely to us in the form of this question: Where do I find the presence of God in my life? One of the things that comes out of the Scripture is that it is not going to be a particularly notable presence. For example, while thinking about this text from Matthew I was driven back to that famous passage in I Kings, and the whole business of Elijah standing on the top of a mountain. There is an earthquake, thunder and lightning, and he expected God to appear in all of those things. Then suddenly, there was dead stillness. It was in this dead stillness that Elijah perceived the presence of God and I think that this holds true for us also. If you think about, for example, the holidays, who is the person that you have run into who seemed to best embody the patience and the generosity of God? For me, it was a seventy-seven-year-old Scottish Presbyterian lady who walks around with a little black bag with an oxygen container and plastic tubes going up her nose as she sits and talks to you and makes these little honking sounds. This woman radiated generosity, sensitivity and capacity to listen and respond. Yet, when I saw her walking down the street she looked kind of grotesque as she was slightly overweight and dressed in an unattractive, baggy, black-pant suit. However, there she was, utterly splendid, but in no way remarkable by the normal canons of notoriety in our minds.

This leads to one of the last things that we can derive from the Feast of the Epiphany: namely, to question our own sensitivities as to what is important, real and true and our own responses to this. I think it is true to say that we live in a world where we are battered by impressions that are too loud, too highly coloured and gargantuan in scale. The reason these impressions continue to grow is because we need to have more car crashes and bigger volcano explosions as we are being desensitized. Therefore, the threshold has to be altered because we are so deadened and coarsened by all of this excess. Now, if this is the case, then Epiphany shows us that we are going to have to re-examine our whole sensory apparatus in order to detect what is real, important, good and godly. And this will almost certainly be inconspicuous by every normal standard of assessment. In other words, Epiphany is a chance for us to check our hearing and seeing apparatus, a chance to help us arrive again at what is really true, enduring and godly in ourselves and in our world.

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This Sunday, as in the past 25 years, I will read an excerpt from one of my favourite poems “For the Time Being” by W.H.Auden

III

Narrator

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes-
Some have got broken - and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted - quite unsuccessfully -
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid’s geometry
And Newton’s mechanics would account for our experience,
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.
It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten

The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.
For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be
Grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting that moment
We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious;
Remembering the stable where for once in our lives
Everything became a You and nothing was an It.
And craving the sensation but ignoring the cause,
We look round for something, no matter what, to inhibit
Our self-reflection, and the obvious thing for that purpose
Would be some great suffering. So, once we have met the Son,
We are tempted ever after to pray to the Father;
"Lead us into temptation and evil for our sake."
They will come, all right, don't worry; probably in a form
That we do not expect, and certainly with a force
More dreadful than we can imagine. In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance. The happy morning is over,
The night of agony still to come; the time is noon:
When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing
Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure
A silence that is neither for nor against her faith
That God's Will will be done, That, in spite of her prayers,
God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.

IV

Chorus

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

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2nd Sunday, 1998 (#1)

He only looked for suffering

Readings Is. 62. 1-5; 1 Cor. 12.4-11; Jn. 2.1-12.

Liturgically, we have a weird situation today in that it is sort of an uneasy compromise between the renewal of the liturgy at the Second Vatican Council and the most ancient traditions. As you can see, the vestments and decorations are green, thus, representing ordinary time. But in the earliest days this was the concluding day of the Christmas celebration, which always, involved those three stages of manifestation of the divine: the appearance of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus and then the wedding at Cana. And if you read the sermons by some of the early preachers they unite those three because it was supposed to be a single manifestation of the presence of God in the world. And this is primarily what Christmas was understood to be, rather than the birth of Jesus. I go through all of this because what I want to do is use today as a kind of reprise or summary for the Christmas season and the readings today are very helpful in doing this.

The fourth Gospel, the Gospel According to John, or Johanna (some people think it might have been a woman who finally edited this text), is in many ways the most subtle of the four Gospels. The writer and the editors clearly were doing something very sophisticated and nowhere more is that the case than in his/her treatment of the miracles of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, the miracles are never called what they are called in the other three Gospels: acts of power. Here, they are called “semeia”, signs. And I want to talk about this business of signs. For example, what is the meaning behind the first of Jesus’ signs in the Gospel of John? As the majority of scholars put it, this sign contains water as a symbol. Water is a standard part of Jewish purification ritual. Water

now becomes transmuted into something much richer in the presence of this Jew, Jesus. So, now Judaism takes on a much larger and fuller form in the presence of Jesus. Thus, as the Jews believed, God is continuing to act in human history in order to clarify His/Her purposes. What is being signified in this situation is that we have a new stage in God's approach to humanity, a richer, fuller and, if you will, more luxuriant stage.

How does this serve our purposes for the manifestation of Jesus? It is very interesting that one of the few things that we know about the historical Jesus is that he grew up in Northern Palestine, far from the Temple. The point here is that Galilee was referred to as the Galilee of the Gentiles - - these were the people who were not religiously kosher; these were the people who were not as religiously observant as the officials thought they should have been. And the point that the texts make, is very simple: now, in Jesus, in this human being, the heart of religion, what it is to be religious, is manifest. Therefore, first of all, we are not to look at ecclesiastical institutions, mainly the official Judaism, or rather we should say the official Judaisms of Jesus' time. Hence, what is radically altered and radically relativized is the normative status of any of those, bureaucratic forms of religiosity. It is in this man Jesus, this human being, that the reality of God is to be approached and understood.

Of course, we all know that in the Gospel tradition Jesus as a good Jew constantly had fights with other good Jews. For instance, Jesus argued over whether he should cure on the Sabbath or whether he should observe the laws of purification - - for example, washing his hands before he ate. In other words, he argued over whether or not he should observe all the bureaucratic niceties, dot all the institutional i's and cross all the institutional t's. And here in this extraordinary development we believe that God said, "No. If you really want to know what it is to be religious look at this human being <u>in his humanity</u>". You see, this is what the Gospel of John does and it is quite interesting to see how sharply this is developed over and against the treatment of miracles in the so-called Synoptic Gospels.

The Synoptic Gospels say that the miracles were never a means to come to faith in God. Never. And I have to emphasize this because there are all kinds of miracle stories abroad, for example on television, that argue precisely for the

opposite. The people who create these miracle stories have not read the texts carefully. The Gospel of Mark says clearly that Jesus could not do anything spectacular because of the peoples' lack of faith. And if you read the Synoptic Gospels it is always that "Your faith has made you whole". Thus, already there is the belief that here in this man Jesus the reality of God is somehow accessible.

The Gospel of John does it quite differently. This is evident because the author or the editor makes the point of distinguishing peoples' response to Jesus, particularly after the feeding of the 5,000. There Jesus complains that people are after him because they had a free lunch. "You are here because you had something to eat". And in a society that was pre-MacDonald's and pre-Burger King, where most of the people went hungry most of the time, that is no small thing. So, the Jesus in the Gospel of John says: "You've missed the point. The point is that, if you want to be fully human then you have to participate with me as I am human, not because I can do all of these tricks. You are to look at the world the way I look at the world. You are to respond to people the way I respond to people". And it is only by looking at Jesus the man that belief in the divinity of Jesus emerged historically. It is only because they looked at this man so closely and intensely and became puzzled and said, "There is something more going on here". But please note the process, which is what I am trying to get at - - it is only because they looked at this human being and the way this particular human being operated that something else emerged.

You see, we have got it backwards most of the time and we read these miracles improperly, because we only recognize the miraculous element instead of Jesus' humanity. All we have to do is see how Jesus, this man who put on his pants one leg at a time, operated. The heart of the problem is that it is much easier to point to large buildings, big bank accounts, massive ceremonies, great vestments and nice wardrobes and say, "By God, that is where power is and power is God and that is where I want to be!" No, this is not where the truth lies. It has been said here and in the Gospels over and over that we have bureaucratized our ears to the extent that we cannot even hear these things straight most of the time. In the Gospels it is written: "Whoever wants to be the boss must be the servant of all". And they mean it! The word "servant" in this context is understood in terms of real human relationships, not bureaucratic niceties and protocol. It is uncanny to me how in my own head, and - over and over in our world - we can distort and caricature this, and call the distortion authentic.

Finally, what is it that is characteristic of this man? Well, a whole variety of proposals are possible. Let me just make one proposal. I recently read an article by my favourite German theologian, John Baptist Metz, who does what any good theologian does: he caught me up short. He made this simple observation on the career of Jesus: “All religious people are running around looking for sin. Where is sin, we must get rid of sin. Jesus did not look for sin, he only looked for suffering”. That is all. And then he acted. It is embarrassing for me because I have said from this pulpit over and over that the normative text for me out of the whole New Testament, is the great judgement scene from the twenty-sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: “I was in jail and you visited me...I was a stranger and you took me in...I was naked and you clothed me...I was hungry and you fed me...I was homeless and you gave me accommodations”. And I had to wait until I was sixty-two and I was reading John Baptist Metz to say: “No. All this talk is about suffering, not sin”. The business of judgement is about our response to suffering in this world. That is it. It is as simple as that and it is terrifying. It is terrifying because I cannot live the way I live if this is true. I cannot do this and be honest with myself.

Therefore, what is manifest at the end of the Christmas season? God, mother-like, hovering over us tenderly, concerned about how we oppress each other in so many ways and wanting to do something about it. And we recognize God’s movement toward us in this man Jesus, this human being with nothing other than his own humanity as his credentials.

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3rd Sunday, 1998

What does it mean to be alive?

Readings: Neh. 8. 1-4a, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Cor. 12. 12-30; Lk. 1. 1-4; 4. 14 21.

I would like to make an introductory note about this passage from Nehemiah which, as you come to its closing, is very strange. This text comes from the period after the end of the Babylonian Exile, approximately 487 BC. The Torah, the Book of the Law, had been lost. Then, it was discovered and Ezra read it to reconstitute this religious community.

Also, I would like to make another introductory note on this passage from Luke. Here, the writers have taken the first four verses of the Gospel and then skipped three chapters and moved to Jesus' first public appearance. But the one thing that should be noted, however, is that, although Luke is certainly the most sophisticated of the evangelists in his style and language, when he talks about setting down an orderly, accurate account, well, this is not modern historiography. This is still 2000 years old, this is still Greco-Roman historiography which has as its point not the facts, but the edifying meaning of a man's life. So these writers do all kinds of things that we would think are not factual in order to express this.

If you did not hear Eileen's discussion Wednesday you missed a really important opportunity for all kinds of reasons. First of all, the discussion was very insightful, and secondly, the exchange of information was wonderful in that there was a diverse group of reactions to the talk. But I would like to pick up, because I think that this is what our

readings are about, this business of spirituality. This is one of those words that has become a waxen-nose, so that people can make of it almost what they will. Eileen was very clear with regard to her understanding of spirituality and I just want to, in a sense, amplify this by sourcing the biblical material where, presumably, this business of spirituality is rooted, even if it does take non-Christian forms.

The "Spirit" was the Jews' favourite word for talking about God as animating us. So, whenever you hear the word "Spirit", in either the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament, the writers are not talking about the third person of the Trinity (as this did not get sorted out for several hundred years after the closing of the New Testament period). They were talking about God and how God impinges upon the world by animating the world, by making the world alive. An obvious instance of this is the Creation story in which God "breathes" into this little clay doll and it becomes a living spirit. Spirit just means "breath" and the Jews observed the simple physiological fact that when there was no Spirit, or when there was no breath in the human body, you were dead. Thus, they understood that when you were alive you were breathing, you had the Spirit - - the animating power, what makes us alive, or to use Sister Wendy's term, what turns us from zombies into real human beings.

There are just two things that I want to talk about today because this text from the Corinthians is going to be continued over the next few weeks. The things that Paul says about the Spirit are really important. Paul, a good Pharisaic Jew, talked about the Spirit quite often and when he talked about the Spirit - - "We are all baptized of the one Spirit. We all drink of the one Spirit" - - he was saying that we are all made alive.

Thus, the question becomes: What does it mean to be alive? This is where what Eileen was talking about comes into play. Being alive means being honest, loyal, self-aware, responsive to other people, and to have integrity. All of these things, from the biblical point of view, are the result of the action of the Spirit. So, you have in both John and Paul these strange images of people being biologically alive, up and about, yet being dead, i.e. totally unspiritual. They have become zombies, they have become inhuman.

The first thing I want to emphasize is this: to believe in the "Jesus business" is to work under the conviction that texts, in which Jesus says, "Without me you can do nothing" are true. Yet , I personally do not take them seriously, and I don't because this text asserts something that flies in the face of every iota of our

contemporary consciousness here in the West: the idea that we can operate fully, all by oneself, as fully human beings! We have a can-do mentality. We talk about empowering and use phrases like, “I am pulling my own strings”, “I am being my own best friend”. This is what we push, and we try to convince people that the ideal is the self-made, self sufficient-human being. But again, this raises the question, “What does it mean to be a fully human being?” We are all up and about, we are all walking around, but at what depth and from what depth? From what center do we operate? According to the biblical view, the normal center is simply the instinct for self-preservation. This is the ultimate depth. But, the Bible implicitly states that to operate from that center is to in fact be dead, to be unspiritual.

How do we get to the point where, as mature human beings, we come to that kind of self-consciousness? A self-consciousness derived from that statement: “Without you I can do nothing”. That itself is grace. And again, everyone should be familiar with what I am talking about thanks to people like Freud and Nietsche, who say that, basically this is the ultimate claim of the absolute escapist - - “I cannot do it. Big daddy is going to do it for me”. Well, maybe this is so radically difficult to get hold of because there are so few people who seem to have brought this off in their lives - - the sense that apart from the spirit of God they cannot manage a human life. And, a human life means all of those wonderful things that Eileen was talking about.

The second issue is the one that Paul insists on in an almost childishly literal fashion. He was very anxious, as we will see next week, to enable people to see that everyone has the same Spirit; that we are not just animated for our own lives and by ourselves. Otherwise what makes forgiveness possible if I cannot come to the point of believing that everybody else wants the truth, what is good and beautiful, as fully and as ardently as I do, no matter how great the distortion of those desires? The first consequence of this is that we do not know what the Spirit of God is, unless we can recognize, by faith, the action of the Spirit of God in other people. Until then we cannot really talk about the Spirit of God, because contrary to much of Christian history, with its profound privatization and individualism, the reality of the Spirit is radically contrary to this.

Finally, maybe the whole notion of peace is a reasonable way to finish this discussion for today. What peace? Shalome, that great biblical word, “Peace I give to you, my peace I leave you”. It is all over the place. What is peace? Is it some kind of inner contentment? No, this is not what peace means in the biblical sense.

Peace is always a political reality. Peace is always the consequence of relationships and this, and this alone, is the biblical notion of peace and anything else is counterfeit, misleading, perverse, certainly not faithful to the Bible. Peace does not just exist in us, peace exists in the fact that we know that we are animated by a God who loves us, and therein lies the potential to be able to stand, as Genesis puts it, “naked and unashamed” before everybody. That is peace, and to finally take our last lead from what Eileen said: “that is the only possible source of real joy”. So, you might want to ask yourself, as Eileen very pointedly and, I believe, accurately did, “Why the absence of joy?”. We live a joyless existence and we, to a very large extent, live in a joyless world. But why? I put it to you that the reality of the Spirit is the only possible grounds for joy.

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4th Sunday, 1998 (#1)

Unable to respond to what is around us

Readings: Jer. 1.4-5, 17-19; 1 Cor.12.31 - 13.13; Lk. 4.21-30.

It struck me again, as I listened to Patty read from I Corinthians, that this enormously familiar passage is still very moving. However, I think it is terribly important that we be aware of what Paul was getting at when he wrote this letter. Think back to last Sunday's reading from I Corinthians in which Paul talked about all of the members being interconnected and interdependent. This was all the work of the Spirit. So, we need to delve into this business of the Spirit a little more because that is what lies behind this text.

A group of the Corinthians apparently was able to speak in tongues. They understood this as being a gift of the Spirit. However, in doing this they considered themselves superior to the people who did not speak in tongues. The problem in this instance was the same problem that agonized Paul more than any other difficulty he experienced in all of the towns that he preached in and all of the communities that he founded: the breakdown of relationships between people. In other words, this group of Corinthians used the Spirit as the basis for competition, for one-upmanship and, therefore, absolutely contradicted what Paul was talking about in the readings last Sunday - - the Spirit as the precise force that moves, enlivens and animates all of us. This is why he starts this passage by saying, "Even if I speak in tongues, angelic tongues, but did it lovelessly - - it would be a failure, a catastrophe". He pushes this to the highest possible point when he says, "Even if I give away all of my possessions, if I hand over my body but do not have love, I gain nothing". In other words, what he is saying is that there can be all sorts of counterfeit instances of the action of the Spirit, but the real

action of the Spirit is what moves us to be able to love.

Next, he breaks into this speech, giving content to the notion of love: being patient and kind, not envious. Here, Paul, as a good Jew, is simply talking about what the Spirit does. He is saying that the Spirit enables us to move beyond our regular way of addressing the world - - which is to address it through the filter of our needs, desires and appetites. For Paul, this form of experiencing the world cancels out vast ranges of reality and, consequently, we are unable to respond to what is around us. In other words, the action of the Spirit opens us up and enables us to respond to what we find before us. That is what love is. Love is about seeing the other so that one is therefore able to react to the other. And again, Paul's conviction lies at the heart of the entire Jesus business. He lays this out in some of the other letters when he says that, "For freedom Christ has made us free". Thus, he is basically talking about freedom in I Corinthians. And for Paul, a Jew, this was what the God of the Exodus and religion was all about. Religion exists to make us free! But free in what sense? Free in a nice kind of eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophical understanding of freedom? No. Freedom means freedom precisely from all of the things that keep us from seeing the other; freedom from that which blinds us, because we are driven by our own neediness so that we cannot see and, therefore, are not free. For Paul, love was the fruit of the Spirit animating us in such a way that we are free to see the other and to respond to the other. That is why it is kind, patient, and not envious, boastful or rude.

In Paul's reading, love is ultimate responsibility. This is very different from the kind of notion of responsibility that I grew up with. To be responsible meant that I had this kind of inner code that I had to live up to: "You have to be a responsible human being. You have to be accountable for yourself". This is not the biblical understanding of responsibility and freedom. In fact, it interferes with the biblical understanding of freedom, love, and responsibility in major ways. It distorts and cripples it and gives us the illusion that we are loving, free, and responsible when, in fact, at least according to this way of looking at things, we are not so at all. So, this is why the heaviest thing that Paul attributes to love is that "love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth". And by the truth, of course, he does not mean some kind of abstract propositional accuracy or the answer to a mathematical problem, but the reality of who we, and the people whom we live with, are. This is the truth. In other words, there is a kind of eccentricity in love where our center is not in our own self-serving and self-preserving impulses, but, as the great Martin

Buber put it, “between us and the other”.

For years and years I had read, with great confusion, Buber saying, “It is the in-between. That is where real life takes place”. Now, I think I understand what he means. It is not just what is in me and what is over there, but it is precisely in my responsiveness to what is there that life goes on.

I should add one more point about Paul and his response to the Corinthians who could speak in tongues. I think that what I have been talking about is connected to the instance in which Paul contrasts himself with when he was a child: “When I was a child and when I became an adult”. A child necessarily sees the world in terms of their own needs and desires. Or, a child is going to say, “Because I can speak in tongues I must be really special in God’s eyes, and to all of you people around me as well”. In other words, this is all about the competitive impulse. So, Paul is saying, “Now that I am an adult I do not do this anymore”.

Finally, it is interesting to see this text situated between these two other, ferocious texts. As usual, Jeremiah is in trouble. Jeremiah is always in trouble. He is always called the “lamenting” prophet. So, we have God saying, “I am going to make you a fortified city so you can stand up against the entire land - - an iron pillar, a bronze wall”. And then you have this extraordinary instance where in a few verses in the Gospel of Luke, Luke has Jesus saying, while reading Isaiah, “God had sent me and anointed me to bring good news to the poor”; and the people say that all of this is wonderful. Within a few minutes, however, they are ready to kill him. They are ready to kill him because he said, “Listen, I am not just responsive to my fellow Jews but, taking the example of Elijah and Elisha, I am responsible to whoever is needy and suffering in the world”. We do not want this. I, for example, want to determine whom I love. I want to curtail and tailor to my own desires who it is I love and how I love. And so, I think that it is really important that we see this hint of love between these really hard words of Jeremiah and this really hard event in Luke, because it finally illuminates a very important aspect of love; namely, that love is basically an act of courage, as well as an act of freedom and responsibility.

Love takes courage. Love is the very act, the very epitome of courage. We want to run away from the world and ourselves quite often, and here, as it is laid out in Jeremiah, is there going to be a bronze wall? People are going to want to knock you on the head. But love is stronger than death.

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5th Sunday, 1998

We come into the Presence of the Beautiful.

Readings Is. 6.1-2a,3-8; 1Cor. 15.1-11; Lk. 5.1-11

I often wonder whether it was ever easier to believe in God at an earlier time than it is today. I think that this is a good question, and I have never been able to arrive at an answer. For example, if I had lived in the middle ages when the church was the geographical center of every town (even in the larger towns Saints' Days were universally observed) and everything was basically marked with the Cross, faith could have been nothing more than the product of social conformity. Of course, in today's world this is not the case. Today, atheism is a plausible credo that one could live by. But I think that it is true, at least according to the evidence in the New Testament, that faith is never simple or easy. Faith is never like falling off of a log.

The Johanine writings regularly describe faith as a triumph, which means that faith only comes as a result of a struggle. And if you read Paul closely enough you come to understand that the struggle never ends, because as we live, life keeps throwing up instances, events and objects which either obstruct faith or demand that faith take a new form. The classic instance of this is the figure of Elie Wiesel, the great Jewish writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, whose entire family was incinerated in the German death camps. He has written poignantly of his presence at the death of his father, by starvation, in one of the camps. After this horrible experience this fourteen-year-old, pious, Jewish Hasid became an atheist. But later, he became a believer again. I bring him up because it should be eminently clear that the faith of Elie Weisel today (he is still alive and was here at Western a couple of years ago) is certainly not the same faith that he had when he went into the death camps. All of this was stimulated in me by this famous first reading from Isaiah. It

seems so simple: Isaiah sees God and all of a sudden he comes to a totally different understanding of himself and of his world. But reactively, we have to know that Isaiah was a believing Jew even before he had this experience, as was Peter in this strange passage from the Gospel of Luke.

What brought Peter to believe that he was sinful? Simply because they caught more fish? Given the way that Luke sets up his Gospel, the answer is no. This is evident because it is clear that Luke is very consciously echoing the event in Isaiah: the encounter with the Holy. This encounter only occurs on top of the platform of some kind of faith. You see, in a sense these readings are really not all that helpful! They are useful as a kind of model for illuminating what faith does - - it changes our understanding of ourselves and of the world we live in - - but these readings do not provide the impulse for us to begin believing in the first place. But, I believe there is an element from this vivid account in Isaiah that can be helpful in our search for faith.

I think very few of us can say that we have had a vision of God. But, I think that it is true that most of us have had what we might call an encounter with the "beautiful". And if you read the tradition, one of Augustine's favourite ways of talking about God was as supreme beauty. The great Jonathan Edwards, the founder of the first Christian revivalist movement in the United States in the eighteenth century, always spoke of God as "the beautiful". You can even go back to Plato (where Augustine got his start too) who spoke of God as "the beautiful". What I am getting at is this: I believe that everybody has encountered, even in our highly pedestrian and commodified world where everything is bought and sold and everything has its price, an experience of grace. This is exactly what an encounter with the beautiful is all about.

The one scholar who has taken this Isaiah text and beaten it into eloquent shape is a German Scripture scholar named Rudolph Otto who wrote a book entitled, The Holy at the beginning of this century. In this book, he says there are all kinds of parallels between the encounter with God as we get it here and the encounter with the beautiful. I just want to spend a couple of minutes talking about the nature of this encounter and state, first, that whether it is experienced through music, a piece of sculpture, a painting, the sun shining during these bleak winter days in Canada, or the faces of your children, one can be surprised by beauty in any number of places.

What is the first characteristic of such an encounter? It is totally unexpected. It is a gift, it happens. And even though I think we really do look at life (at least most of the time in today's world and maybe people always have) in terms of some kind of cost-benefit analysis, the encounter with the beautiful simply explodes this and discredits this way of constituting the world. There is a free lunch, and the free lunch is provided by the experience of the beautiful.

Another aspect of the so-called aesthetic experience is that it is absolutely non-coercive. It is utterly free. Nobody can shove you before a painting and say, "Look at that. Isn't that beautiful?". No, they may illuminate aspects of a painting but nobody can extort the response to the beautiful. It is absolutely non-coercive.

I think another aspect of the beautiful is based (although it is not the final aspect but will suffice for our purposes) on the fact that there is always a sense of dissatisfaction in the wake of the experience with the beautiful. Because when we run into something that seems worthy simply on its own terms without making some kind of assessment of it - - simply its own worthiness accosting us - - once we move away from this, life does not look the same, human possibilities do not look the same. Is this an experience of God? No. But is it a movement to hope, a movement to desire that God exists? Yes it is. And maybe today in our heavily mechanized world where everything seems to be like so many gears meshing perfectly and running smoothly (of course, until it crashes), we still work on the illusion that we have this wonderfully, humanly constructed world of the Internet, e-mail and everything working so smoothly that there is no possibility for anything alien beyond us to break into this. But, we do not need to stand in a line at Canada Trust and hear "Well, our machines our down today. You'll have to come back later" to be aware of the fragility of this act of arrogance. This act of arrogance is based on our belief that we live in a self-made world, a self-constituted and a self-explanatory world.

Thus, when we come into the presence of the beautiful this all becomes radically relativized and we are put into a position to begin to really search for God, and I propose to you that this is what faith is. Faith is never the final and complete possession of God's faith is always the search for God. As Emmanuel Levinas puts it, "It is the desire for God". And even those great believers like Teresa of Avila say that, "The desire for prayer is prayer

itself", or to paraphrase her, the desire to believe in God is itself faith. Why did anybody get hit by Jesus? Because they had seen God better? No, I do not think so. They believed in Jesus because they saw a quality of life, a beauty of human existence that set into question their own lives and moved them beyond themselves to ask who they really were.

Finally, we are having this African art exhibit, as I suppose most of you know. The London Free Press really did get it right this time when they said, "It speaks to me". It does speak to me and I think if you spend some time around it, it will speak to you too. There is something stunning, indescribable and wonderful about these creations from people who do not speak our language, who do not look like most of us, who are alien in all kinds of ways, and yet who can communicate with us, who can and do, in fact, communicate with us. And so, I think that even these biblical texts can cast some kind of light on what we are doing in this African art exhibit. If it does do this then I think that this will bring us even closer to a form of Christian unity in which we can look at the world and say, "You are my brother. You are my sister, however different you look from me, however differently you act from the way that I act, however different your language, we really do belong together".

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Seventh Sunday, 1998

The Splendour of this Way of Understanding

Readings 1 Sam. 26.2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-25; 1 Cor 15.45-50; Lk. 6.27-38

A great number of people have said that this passage from Luke and its parallels in the other Gospels and in Paul embodies the absolute apex of the Christian life. The Christian life involves many acts: being nice, and, as I said a couple of weeks ago, responding to the beauty of the earth. But I think that all of these aspects of Christianity are lesser manifestations of our transformation in Christ than the description of human life that Luke is offering in this passage.

When we hear this passage, our initial response is to say that this statement contravenes nature. Nobody wants to accept this. Nobody is built in a manner that makes the love of one's enemy plausible in any way. And so then we create this magical notion of grace which somehow radically reverses our nature, transmutes us into lovers of our enemy. I think that this is profoundly wrong and terribly misleading and gives rise to a radically distorted view of God and of the Christian life. Instead of this, I would like to suggest a totally different model of what Jesus and the Christian life was about. I can even point in our time to one writer who has probably shed more light and deepened my understanding of this more than anybody else. He is an English Benedictine, Sebastian Moore, who has created a phrase which encapsulates this radically different view of things. He refers to Jesus as the awakener of desire. You see, our normal assumption is based on what appears to be our most profound desire: - - to retain our own independence. Therefore, the rest of the world is simply grist for that enterprise. For example, we may make little mutual defence pacts, which are fragile. Then, if the line shifts, we make them someplace else with a view, above all, to preserving ourselves. What Moore was getting at, and what has been so helpful for me, is his belief that what we really

desire at our utmost is to be connected with everybody else. This is the deepest desire and it is supplanted by this other desire simply out of fear, guilt (real or neurotic), and out of all kinds of distortions of human life. Again, that phrase from Genesis states this most eloquently: “To be able to stand naked and unashamed before each other”. In his own career, that is by the way he lived, Jesus awakened this deepest desire and illuminated this second stratum of desire, namely the desire to protect and retain ourselves, to reveal it as a distortion. Jesus revealed that the law of human life that we would like to say is the most fundamental is, in fact, not the most fundamental and that our selfhood is achieved when we can be with others fully and freely. Everything else that is contrary to this is precisely a distortion of this deepest desire.

I think that Moore’s analysis of desire is brilliant. I can even quote psychologists and psychiatrists who propose this as psychologically plausible. But what is so wonderful is that this view illumines our text in a way that no other does. It is very easy to say that Jesus said, “Love your enemies. Be good to those who hurt you. Pray for those who abuse you” and then respond to this by stating: “All right, by God, this is what I am going to do, even if it kills us all”. This is not the true Christian course. If Jesus does not open new possibilities for what authentic human life is, then he is of no purpose to us, and I think that this is exactly what captivated these early followers of Jesus: that he broadened the range of our expectations, that he, in Moore’s wonderful phrase, “Awakened”, perhaps you can say, “re-awakened” our most fundamental desire. What this new frame of mind does, is shift, in a massive and absolutely fundamental way, all kinds of other things in the Christian life. It enables us to re-assess, to clarify, and to revalue all sorts of things that are part of the Christian tradition. And I think that it is really fortuitous that this text is given to us in the same week that Lent begins, because Lent, if nothing else, is a time for us to seek ourselves and God. It is a common search. So, Lent is the time when presumably we can clarify for ourselves all sort of things.

Finally, the splendour of this way of understanding this desire is that it absolutely cuts away any possibility for us to see God as the alienating presence that God is so often in the lives of so many of us, so much of the time. God does not want to remove us from ourselves, but to restore us to ourselves. Thus the question is: who is this self? Is this self the one that must do a cost-benefit analysis of every relationship, gesture, word, and move that is made, with the view to protecting oneself? Or, is God the one who calls us always to more, to larger life, as

the Gospel of John states, to fuller life, to real life, in which the love of our enemies becomes not implausible, not counter-natural, but simply the inevitable spelling out of the mercy, grace, and love of God.

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Second Sunday of Lent, 1998 (#2)

All belong with each other

Readings Gen. 15.5-12, 17-18; Phil. 3.17 -4.1; Lk. 9.28b-36

Before I begin I should elaborate on this first reading from Genesis. In part of the narrative, God makes this agreement with Abraham as to his destiny and the destiny of his progeny, namely that through Abraham every nation of the world is going to be blessed and Abraham's offspring are going to be this infinite number: "...more than sands on the seashore and stars in the sky". Then, we get all of this strange talk about cutting up all of these animals and having the flame move through them. This is a symbolic way of talking, given the culture of the time, about the covenant between Abraham and God being ratified. Abraham did his part - - splitting open all of these animals - - and then God, the divine presence, comes and passes between these two halves. So, this is what that is all about. But the heart of this passage, the heart of the whole message to Abraham, is based of course on this business that God is going to use Abraham as his agent to save the whole world so that through the Jews, as John will say, "salvation comes".

All right, so now we must connect this passage from Genesis with this famous passage from Luke, which is paralleled in all of the Synoptic Gospels, and which is always read, in one version or another, every second Sunday of Lent. Remember, last Sunday we had the Temptation narrative in order to get us primed for what Lent is all about - - this great desert experience where we are supposed to clarify who we are and what we are all about. Then, today, there is this big anticipation of the Resurrection. Most scholars believe that the Transfiguration narrative, this business of Jesus beginning to glow, is simply

a retrojection of a resurrection vision into his pre-death existence. Thus, we are not talking about history, we are talking about theology here: that the Transfiguration is an anticipation of Jesus' resurrection. But how do we connect this Transfiguration story with this promise that is made to Abraham? So, this is what we need to address.

If it is the case, and I think that it is, that what is being talked about in this passage from Luke is the Resurrection, then it is important that we understand what the Resurrection meant to these earliest followers of Jesus. And to understand the Resurrection we have to understand the reasoning behind his murder. This reasoning was very simple. We get it over and over in the Gospels: that Jesus was a troublemaker and the particular form of trouble that he indulged in was simply his breaking of all of the social taboos. He was not only upwardly mobile, he was downwardly mobile, he was laterally mobile - - Jesus was all over the place. There were no distances between himself and any of the people around him. He played fast-and-loose with some of the hallmarks of Jewish legitimacy. For example, keeping the dietary laws and the Sabbath regulations. Why? Jesus disregarded these laws because they kept people from coming together. Consequently, he made some of the other Jews angry and he threatened the orderly class system of the Roman occupiers and the whole Roman Empire. So he had to be done away with. But when the followers of Jesus proclaimed that God had raised him from the dead, what they were saying is this: God has validated this way of being human. They believed that God had validated this deep, deep suspicion (which I think everybody harbours) that we human beings all belong with each other. Therefore, all of the defence mechanisms that we erect to protect, defend, and distance ourselves from each other, as well as the sick reasoning behind these mechanisms, are going to give way and God will have what he/she intended: the creation of a human family. Jesus had to be killed. However, in raising this man who behaved this way, the man who has been called the "Universal Brother", God is saying, "This is what I am all about.

This man exemplifies what it means to be fully human". This is why, as Paul will say repeatedly, Jesus, the descendant of Abraham, fulfilled the promise made to Abraham: that through Abraham's descendants the world is going to come

together.

Typically, in the New Testament, the poor are the people who are the most difficult to get together with. Poverty is not just an economic category, it is a social category: the diseased, the handicapped, women, and slaves, or anybody who is socially impoverished. In today's world we would probably call them the disempowered. So, it is incumbent on us to make a kind of imaginative leap and say, "Well how can I get together with all of the people who seem to be my inferiors?". I think it is a fairly strenuous effort to spend time and try to be the sister/brother to the poor. I have not been very successful at this but this is what I have tried to do. This may sound idiosyncratic and neurotic of me, but I can play around with this idea in my head and say, "Yeah Trojcak, this is not a fun job but it can be accomplished".

I would like to suggest, because we so readily oversimplify the breaching of these barriers between ourselves and the poor, that we try something more difficult! That instead of trying to be absolutely connected, transparent, and unified with the poor, we think about the rich. Interesting thoughts occur when your imagination works in precisely the opposite direction. For example, Donald Trump gives a billion dollars to the U.N. (but he made a billion dollars between January and September of last year anyway). And then our friend Bill Gates gives 400 million dollars in Microsoft computer software (with the remote advantage of course that computer users will have to buy more computer software in order to run their computers). So, the rich are really alien. And then, as if from heaven, I fell upon this quotation. It is a statement about power. It deals with the idea that money is power and that even more than political power, economic power is real power more and more in our world. The statement that I am about to read was made by someone who is very wealthy and this is the way in which this person speaks: "Power is sexy not simply in its own right but because it inspires self-confidence in its owner and a shiver of subservience on the part of those who approach it". This is wonderful. I could not believe my good luck in running across this statement from Mrs. Conrad Black in her self-description and the description of her family because it illuminated all kinds of things. Why is it easier for me to imagine getting together with the poor? This is easier to imagine because the poor are absolutely and essentially non-intimidating and, therefore, it is not a great leap of the imagination to say, "I could probably get along with these people". In contrast to this, the rich are essentially intimidating and Mrs. Black puts it out beautifully. The rich have power.

And how rich do you have to be before you have this kind of power? In my opinion, not very. You do not have to be a mega-zillionare, and you do not have to have a 60,000 square foot house like Gates does, because when I read this statement there was this little uneasy voice sticking in the back of my head and it said: “Trojcak this sounds somewhat like you”. For example, I can go into the classroom and intimidate people and make people shiver, if not with subservience, at least with fear of one sort or another. I can do this routinely.

But I still think it is useful to imagine Bill Gates and me sitting down as coequal human beings because it forces me to see the gap; the incapacity of my ability to imagine what God said he/she wants to bring about. This is enormously useful because frankly I am a Pelagian at heart. I figure that “I can bring this off by myself. I can be with all of those other people!”. But in my heart I understand that I cannot. By talking about herself, her husband, and probably all of the Donald Trumps and Bill Gates of this world, Mrs. Black helps us to see the danger of possessing power. But most importantly, her statement illumines all kinds of dark corners in ourselves and the kind of power we exercise or want to exercise over other people and the distances that these exercises of power create. And then finally, this recognition does what these passages from the Scripture and the world in confrontation is supposed to do to us: it moves us to God. It moves us to a recognition of our own incapacity and yet it increases our suspicion that this is really what life is supposed to be about and to know full well that it is only God who is going to bring this about.

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Third Sunday of Lent, 1998 (#2)

I will be there when I will be there

Readings Exod. 3.1-8a, 13-15;1 Cor. 10. 1-6, 10-12; Lk. 13.1-9

Just as a reminder for both you and myself: a useful way of looking at Lent is to see it as a time to clarify what is deepest in us, that is, what we really want, how we operate, and what we really believe, or what we say we believe. And so within this context I would like to talk especially about this passage from the Book of Exodus that Chris read. I believe that this passage is one of the most important in the entire Bible because it plays out the claim that has been made by Jews and we Christians, the offspring of the Jews, that our god is different from all of the other gods or divinities in that the god of the Jews is best described as the "God of history". And what does this mean? Well, if you look at the religious systems in the world, either the ancient religions or the religions of today (although this is clearer in the ancient religions), the divinities of the ancient world were not much more than the elevated powers of nature. For example, storms, lightning, rivers, the sea, the air, and especially the powers of fertility. You can see why people came to this point of view.

The beauty of these systems was based primarily on the idea that the gods were predictable. You knew what was going to happen because plants, for example, do not have a history. They simply grow, bear fruit, and then die. The process is repeated and this is the beginning and the end of it. But this Jewish God breaks out, totally unexpectedly, to enter into human affairs and none of the other gods in the ancient world did this; they were simply based on patterns. If you look at the great Oriental religions, which appeal widely to people in today's world - - Taoism, Confucianism, even Hinduism to some extent, and the

other Oriental religions - - these divinities are radically different because they are to a large extent, the patterns of things that are already in place. And people simply get themselves lined-up with these patterns. This is their religious quest. For the Jews, it is entirely different and this difference is indicated in this very important passage because in it we see the thing that got this Jew-God going; we see that human oppression was the driving force that agitated this Jewish God to enter into human history: “I have seen the suffering of my people and have come to redress it”. And here too this is even more unusual because the gods of the ancient world and the gods of today are always the gods of the big battalions, the gods of the winners. And often enough Christians have also distorted the God of the Jews, and the God of Jesus the Jew, above all, as to make sure that this God is the God of the winners. But this is not the case. The God of Jesus, the God of the Jews, was the God of the oppressed, was the God of the people who were beaten up, and were ignored, and were losers. Again, a radically different notion in comparison with the other religious systems. Even the Catholic religion that I grew up with was, to a certain extent, based on Notre Dame winning football games because “God was on our side”.

So what is history? Trees and rocks do not have history. What is the essence of history? The essence of history is freedom and this is why this Jewish God is called the “God of history”, because you cannot have history if you do not have free agents. This is why the Jews say that their God is the “God of history”, because this God freely intervenes in human affairs. And of course from the other side, this God is also the source of human freedom as well. And here too this is very clear: if you compare all of the religions in the world with Judaism and Christianity, its offspring, in no religion is human freedom so exalted, so central. You may talk about obedience in Islam, or conformity to the Tao in Taoism, but to say that human beings can respond to this God who addresses them by answering “yes” or “no” is to say that we are able to “choose” this mode of response and that we too are free.

This is even expressed in this weird name that is given to God. “Yahweh” is the Hebrew word and maybe you have heard it. Nobody knows for sure what this word means. We know that it is a form of the Hebrew verb “to be” and that it is translated here, as it frequently is, “I am who I am”. And even if you take this translation, this too expresses God’s freedom because it means “I am who I choose to be”. But I would like to suggest that there is another translation which is even

more helpful with respect to what I am trying to get at. This translation runs: “I will be there when I will be there”. In other words, God will operate and intervene in human affairs when she chooses to. And here we would seem to have a problem because if this God is on the side of the oppressed then why, in the name of God, when we live in a world where oppression is so manifest and so universal, does she not intervene and redress our suffering? We do not have to go to Northern Ireland or some places in Africa, you can look anywhere around you to see the powers of oppression working in all kinds of ways. So why does God not act? This highlights the belief that God should intervene if people are nasty. But, if we believe this, then we are ignoring the freedom of God. And in contrast, if we believe that because we are nice God ought to act, once again, we are ignoring the freedom of God. But why do we think this way? We seem to believe that if we are nice, if we are good, then God should make sure that we are taken care of. We believe that it is only fair that God should take care of us. It does not work this way because what happens is that we are substituting our idea of how God ought to work and how the world ought to work. By doing this, we are ignoring the freedom of God: “I will be there when I will be there”.

Now this is profoundly important for one’s religiosity because we human beings have this absolutely endless impulse to know, to be secure, to be certain, to know how things are going to work out, to know how the world can be calculated. We want this in the worst possible way. We want this kind of safety. We want this kind of tidy and cozy universe in which we know how everything is going to work because of the way we do things. To do this is understandable, but to behave in this way is also a denial of the God that we say we believe in. And of course, the archetypal instance of this is Jesus.

What did Jesus do? Jesus was constantly on the side of the oppressed: women, the handicapped, lepers, the diseased, and the outcasts. What did it get him? It got him killed because it is dangerous to behave in this way. It is socially disruptive. So we say that we believe in the God of Jesus and we believe in Jesus as the great manifestation of God and yet we ought to be able to look at the figure of Jesus and say: “All my nice, neat plans and schemes in fact do not work”.

So where does this leave us, if we operate in terms of this God whom we say that we believe in? It ought to make us very clearly conscious of the responsibility that we have for our world and for responding to the oppression that we find in our world, whether it is in ourselves, in our immediate environment, or in the

world at large. We must do this in such a way however, knowing that we cannot calculate how all of this is going to go on and work out. There is a quotation that is frequently cited from Mother Theresa that stands in a long tradition of saints who said the same thing: “My job is not to be successful, my job is to be faithful”. That is all, and God can manage and take care of herself. We do not have to manage God and say, “Now you need to do this”. No, our job is simply to respond to what is going on in our world, precisely in the faith that the God that we say we believe in still runs this universe and still holds this world in her freedom. What we can do is come to the point of faith where we absolutely believe, despite all appearances, that God’s love is steadfast, that God is faithful, that God will act in God’s own time.

It is very difficult to talk about this in the University. We are here, rationalizing everything. We live in a rational universe, do we not? No, not according to Christianity. At its deepest level the world is not subject to our powers of understanding, analysis, calculation, and above all, arrangement. Real life at its deepest is this mysterious dialogue between ourselves and this hidden other who will in fact love us in ways that we cannot calculate. This is terrifically important because we all want a God who is dependable: “I want a God who is predictable and dependable and who will do whatever I want, whenever I want it to be done”. This is not the God of Jesus or the God of Moses, that is, the God of Exodus and the burning bush, or the God whom we say that we believe in. In coming to accept this, we believe that “God will be there when God will there”.

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If we confess this failure

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Readings Jos. 5.9a, 10-12; 2 Cor. 5.17-21; Lk. 15. 1-3, 11-32

The readings today begin as a process of clarification. Here is clarified something that is absolutely essential to what lent and the whole Christian thing is all about: namely, the reconciliation of all of us to each other and to God. And the central issue, of course, is forgiveness. Without forgiveness, reconciliation is impossible. Community is impossible. Of course, this is the whole point of all this from Paul. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

We have this wonderful, familiar parable of the prodigal son to lead us into that. Forgiveness is at the heart of the parable: the father's forgiveness of the younger son, the older son's unwillingness to forgive and, very likely, to be forgiven. And so the key line in this whole thing is this statement of the father, at the very end, to the elder son, "All that is mine is yours." It is the awakening of the younger son to that, as his father embraces him, kisses him and throws this large party for him, that he can really ask for forgiveness. It is precisely the absence of that awareness in the elder son that keeps him from being able to forgive, and as I said, very likely from being able to be forgiven as well. There is a crucial thing that is at stake here.

But I would like to come at it from a somewhat odd angle, and that is the matter of Anti-Semitism. What put me in mind of this was, of course, this remarkable event: the Vatican releasing a 12 page document, which they said they had spent 10 years studying and working on, the point of which was to indicate that during the Nazi regime, in which half the Jews in the world were massacred, some Catholics were involved. But what was

most interesting was what was not said in that document. Two points in particular, I think, are notable. The first was that no apology was made to the Jews, and secondly, it was treated as if this was a kind of incidental sort of thing going on in which the church, the official church in particular, had no particular role. Fascinating!

Anti-Semitism has rightly been called "the longest hatred." And it is literally true. For 2000 years Anti-Semitism has been in place. But we have to be really careful here. The Jews in the Roman Empire were considered atheist because they did not buy into the state religion. Therefore, they were considered odd, and in a sense there was some sort of antagonism there. But it took the emergence of this Jewish reform movement that became Christianity, for real anti-Semitism to appear. This means that you use a religious bias, not just a political or social bias, to condemn Jews, to warrant the hatred of Jews. This is what makes that Vatican statement so odd. Because it would seem to assume that the Nazi regime was a fluke, some sort of strange accident, as if you could not point to 2000 years of violent persecution of Jews by the Jews' younger siblings, Christians. So I'd like to take a couple of minutes to point this out.

It was a long time before Christians were even called Christians and knew themselves as anything other than a different kind of Jew. In the year 54 of our era, the emperor Claudius kicked all the Jews out of Rome. Why? Because they were having some kind of internal squabble over somebody that they called the Christ. It is very clear that here was one sect of Jews opposing another sect of Jews, and they were disturbing public order. And so the Romans, who were very big on law and order, said, "All of you, get out of here." The point is, of course, that it was Jew against Jew. The mutual antagonism grew sharper, and sharper, and reached a notable plateau, when the Emperor Constantine in 313 declared Christianity legitimate and soon after made it the official religion of the empire. From then on, full scale persecution of the Jews followed. You can read some of the sermons of some of the earliest preachers of the church: "burn their Torahs, tear down their synagogues, get rid of them." You can read instance after instance, after instance. 1492 was not only famous because Columbus sailed off, but because the Catholic Queen Isabella and her husband Ferdinand kicked all the Jews out of Spain. And again, there wasn't a gap between the 2nd century to the 15th, because you can fill in all of the gaps with Christian anti-Semitism, up until, and including, our time.

And then we come to the Nazi era. Hitler ruled a country that was half

Catholic and half Lutheran. As far as I know, there was not a single public statement from the church made about the extermination of Jews, except in Holland, of what was happening in Rome itself, in France, in Spain, Italy. 6,000,000 Jews were murdered out of a total world population of 12,000,000 Jews and little was said. The odd priest here and there would make mention of this. We as a group, as a community, said nothing. And the rationale of course, was: well, it's really diplomacy. And if you said something that the Germans didn't like, maybe it would make it worse for the Jews. But if you were a Jew, how could it be worse, for God's sake?

And meanwhile, is it possible that the violence, the official violence, was simply a way to do what every institution does, mainly preserve itself? Diplomacy, diplomacy. How diplomatic was Jesus? I mean it seems to me, we should have said something in the name of the suffering people if we are going to maintain any kind of integrity. Jesus lived by his word, dying in consequence of his undiplomatic words. On the other hand, not so long ago, the French church, not the universal church, but the French church and the bishops of France, issued a public declaration of their own guilt and tendered an apology, even spoke particularly of the silence of the clergy. Did the church at large do that? That is the issue. And why is all this important? Because we need to see how forgiveness is related to guilt. Forgiveness has to be built out of awareness of our own guilt. This is only possible over against our belief that God is ultimately for us. Yet, we don't have that courage, which such faith should engender. We still are unable to say we failed, that we failed God. We failed God's suffering people. We need to learn from that failure, not just as an institution. We need to learn about ourselves and how we can come to forgiveness, how we can build the world that God is supposedly reconciling in Christ. I think the problem ultimately is a question of failure, not of nerve, but a failure of faith. To quote Paul again in a different passage, "neither life, nor things present, nor nothing to come" no one can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus. The church refused to make a simple admission that the Germans had no business massacring half of the Jews of the world. Only if we confess this failure can we really profess our faith to the world, a faith, not in diplomacy, but in God.

Fifth Sunday of Lent

This unimaginable openness

Readings Is. 43. 16-21; Phil. 3.8-14; Jn. 8.1-11.

This passage from the Gospel is one of the strangest in the whole new testament in that it seems to have no certain home. It is not in the Gospel of John in the oldest manuscript we have. Then in later text, in later manuscripts it starts showing up. Then it shows up in several places in the Gospel of John. It also shows up in the Gospel of Luke. I think most scholars believe that it is far closer to Luke in theology than it is to the theology of the fourth Gospel. Why? Because Luke's has been called the Gospel of the Great forgivenesses and if there was anything going on here it is forgiveness.

It is interesting to ask: why does this wonderful story not find a place in the earliest forms of the Gospels and why was it later retrieved from the tradition and stuck in the Gospel? Raymond Brown suggests this solution. In the course of the early church are certain rigourism set in, i.e. severity in judgement on part of the Church leaders in regard to people who had sinned. We know for a fact that, very early, Christians were persecuted and many denied their faith to avoid suffering. But then they changed their mind, repented and they wanted to come back into the community. Now this was a huge crisis for the early Church and the returnees were severely punished by the Church authorities So Brown suggested that today's Gospel story was reintroduced into the Gospel because it addressed a real problem in the Church.

What then is the point of the text? What is the result of this

whole thing? This woman is restored into the community. She is no longer an extern, but now she is part of the community again. If you take Brown's suggestion that is was the severe judgement on the part of the leaders of the community that kept people out, then we can see that in the light of this text and say that what was going on, was the abuse of power. Because the whole point of the movement of Jesus, the whole point of the Jewish God, is to bring people together, with each other and God. It's the beginning, the middle and the end of this thing. So acceptance of people who sin and are repentant is of the essence. Now, the main problem with any abuse of power is that it separates people. For example, every time Jesus talks about authority, the locus of power, he warns against its abuse. Rather, those who want to be leaders must be the servants of all. Power is supposed to be an exercise of ways of embracing people, not excluding people, not intimidating people. For that is the crucial issue: fear. Power if it is exercised is the great weapon of inducing fear. Politically we can see this very clearly in all the sycophants that surround political leaders.

Power has multiple forms among human beings. I have lots of money that makes me powerful. So the poor people can be intimidated. Everybody has had some kind of experience with the very wealthy who do intimidate. Even if they do it unconsciously they are so full of their own possessions and their own sense of confidence in themselves that they can scare the wits out of everybody else. So there is political power, economic power, intellectual power. There is the power of a personality, there is physical attractiveness, which is a power. And they all work the same way; they can make people afraid in various ways. And in doing that they simply separate people. But the worst kind of power, which is what this reading is about, is what we can call moral power. Moral superiority, that is the issue. These good people, scribes and Pharisees, are those who knew the law, and kept it. They could take the moral high ground. I hope that when people use that phrase, "the Moral High Ground", they do it with a keen sense of irony because usually when one says, 'I'm looking for the moral high ground" that just means, I am looking for leverage that I can use to beat somebody up who does not occupy those heights. Listen to political rhetoric and this comes up over and over. And what does Jesus do? Jesus is simply there. Does he berate these people? No. He says, "OK folks here we are. But the first one without sin can throw a rock at this woman." Now we go around pointing fingers and badgering and berating people. Did Jesus say that to that lady? Rather the upshot of this episode is that her accusers went away with a keener of their own frailty and came to more honesty, integrity and therefore

constituted a community because without theses you can't have a community. It is very simple. Finally, there is this lady with this man of enormous authority who says, "OK here we are."

You can use what I've said as a way of tying together all three readings. When Isaiah has God saying, "I'm going to do a new thing". We ask, "What is this new thing?" Well, we get all of these metaphors of wild animals honoring God and God giving water in the wilderness to his chosen people. What does all that mean? That God is somehow going to do exactly what I said. If you read the rest of Isaiah you see God is going to rescue human beings who live under the sign of fear, either being made afraid or making other people afraid. God is somehow going to act in such a way that all of that is going to go away and we are going to have a new thing: people being with each other nonfearfully.

And then you get this great text from Paul. The letter to the Philippians is one of the most tender documents to come from his hand. It was written in jail when he was fully expecting to be killed. He talked with great warmth and enthusiasm to these people about two things: about the cross and about his not having made it yet. Paul says, "I do not consider, I have made it, that I forget what I leave behind, I press onto the goal." It is very interesting to apply all this to the notion of power, because power usually resides in people who have convince themselves, and other people, that they have already "made it". The word that fits here best is perfection. The Latin word "perfacio" means to have done something thoroughly. When I have done something completely, it means I am finished, it's all over, it's perfect. And having that state of finishness and perfection, then I'm in a great position to have all kinds of power and to exercise it on other people. Here is Paul saying "I don't have it". So Paul is undercutting from himself any inclination that he might have had to terrorize people because he was morally superior. In fact, we know that every time Paul ran into a problem, he would not go around and point fingers, and make accusations against people and make them feel guilty. Rather his typical response is this. "There is a situation folks, now you judge for yourself." "You judge for yourself", that is Paul's classic pastoral injunction.

But there is something that is even more important. He keeps talking about the Cross and suffering. There is so much rubbish talked about the meaning of the Cross among us Christians. I would lay money on some preacher in Jones borough, Arkansas, in the past week talking about those murdered little girls and their teacher, and saying "well this is our Cross, this is our Cross". Parents weeping over

their dead children and their wounded. This is your Cross. That's not the cross. It is evil, it is unspeakably awful. But it's not the cross. Because whether Jesus had come into the world or whether God was in the world that stuff would still go on, and worse. For instance, between last Sunday and today, do you know how many little kids, on this planet, under the age of 6 have died of starvation 250,000 little kids, every week on this planet, die of starvation. Pretty awful stuff.

Evil is not the cross. The cross is that place where I tried to get beyond where I am. Where am I? Pathetically attempting to prove to myself and other people that I have some kind of superiority, some sort of power over them. My brain, my money, my book, my house, my dogs, I can use anything. We all use anything to try to establish that sense of being better than somebody else and therefore be detached from somebody else. For me to move from that point to this kind of freedom that Paul talks about for himself, even more, to the freedom that Jesus had where he didn't have to beat anybody on the head. That passage, in the name of God, constitutes the Cross. That's the Cross. And I constantly resist that. I just want to close in on myself, just want to protect myself, just want to shut other people out, just want to intimidate other people, just want to ignore other people. To get from that place to this unimaginable openness of Jesus, and the freedom of Jesus, that passage is the way of the cross and only that. That is really important with Easter two weeks from now. We need to know what we are doing when we get there.

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Palm Sunday 1998

Whether we do trust

Readings: Lk. 19.8-40; (no. 38, pg.222): Is. 50.4-7; Phil. 2.6-11; Lk. 22.14-23.56.

It is interesting to note that the whole passion of Jesus is built on a series of betrayals. There is Judas, obviously. And then there is Pilate, who clearly believed Jesus innocent. But there is also Peter, and all of the twelve except John.

I think the tendency for us, as we hear these things, is to say: well, Jesus knew what was going on, and Jesus is God and was therefore somehow immune to the pain of betrayal. Simple as that.

I don't think that is the case. I don't think that is what the text of Philippians is saying either. Rather, Paul in quoting this hymn, is getting at this: Jesus was a human being just like us, made like Adam in the form of God, tempted as we are to be more than we really are, to be God-like and so to betray our humanity. Yet Jesus entered the world where everybody else was playing that game, and got into this deadly trouble for his not playing the game.

Betrayal: I didn't think there are many things that happen to us human beings in life that are more painful than that. What is betrayal? It means that you basically hand yourself over to somebody whom you trust; who, you believe is going to treat you honestly, fairly, take you seriously. And then they walk away, or lie to you, or ignore you or damage you in some way. And there is left this terrible wound and gaping hole. I think that when that happens to most of us, - and it does happen to all of us, and we all do it too, of course - the normal reflex

runs something like this: well, people are no damn good anyway, so it is a big mistake to trust anybody. So we simply close in on our selves and become untrustworthy ourselves, in consequence. The extraordinary thing about Jesus is that he did not close in on himself . He lived, as the text from the Philippians says, in the condition of a slave. Slave to all of the fears, and guilt and shame, and embarrassment that marks all of our living and all of our operating. Yet he was not deterred from himself being trustworthy, and trusting himself to others and to God.

What I am getting at is that, unless we understand the human meaning of the death of Jesus, then to think that Jesus knew what was going to happen, and anticipated the resurrection, is just evasion of the reality of His death. All that later theologizing about the death of Jesus had to be based on the human reality of the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus was, as I said, a matter of his betrayal. Here was a man who was utterly trustworthy, to whom people could readily entrust themselves, and did. Yet, when it began to cost something, they went away and left him, literally, hanging there. This is really difficult to get a hold of, because we have so mystified the career of Jesus. But until we understand the sort of structure of Jesus' life, and not just Jesus' life, but of our own life as well, we are not going to get very far. We have spent 6 weeks presumably looking at our lives to figure out where we have betrayed, where we have sinned. But, until we are convinced that there is really somebody to whom we could entrust ourselves absolutely, then we are not going to come to recognize our own betrayals: I may have made a mistake, or a bad judgement, or whatever. But not betrayal. Failing to do that, I think we also fail to come to something that Luke had as a hallmark of his Gospel. Do you remember last Sunday, about the story of the woman taken in adultery, whom Jesus forgave. (This is probably from the Gospel of Luke.) You have this echoed all over, only in Luke. Only Luke's Passion narrative has Jesus forgiving those people who killed him. Only Luke has Jesus saying to the repentant thief "it's all right, and it will be all right". In other words, we can only anticipate forgiveness if we have in fact, confided ourselves to someone who is absolutely trustworthy. And only can I then recognize my own betrayal over against that.

But at the same time only then can I hope that I can move beyond that. Jesus certainly trusted, even when, as we have it in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew where Jesus cried out, "My God, why have you abandoned me?" This cry and its terrible sense of abandonment is itself an act of Jesus' own faithfulness. Jesus' own trust. We believe that the trust was not betrayed, and that is what we

call the resurrection.

We are in a position where we have, again, these few days of Holy Week, the time of the year when we are supposed to regard Jesus' career with the greatest attentiveness, give it the most time to resonate in our lives. But until we begin to understand the human reality of Jesus' death, I think, that when we come to celebrate Easter, it is all going to be something that happens over our heads. Something that happens, in some kind of magical realm. We are thus impeded in the way we look at God, and the way we look at ourselves if we see the Resurrection as one more magic trick at the end of a whole series of magic tricks that God would have done in Jesus. What I am suggesting is that we look at this man and revise our own ideas about whether we do trust, and to whom we entrust ourselves, and use these last days of Lent to deepen our understanding, our appreciation and our commitment to Jesus' way of looking at life and the God in whom Jesus' life was grounded.

Holy Thursday 1998

Freedom to let the other be.

Readings: Is. 61.1-3a,6a, 8b-9; Rev. 1.5-8; Lk. 4.16-21.

One of our big problems with the biblical accounts of the passion and death of Jesus is that they are over-laden with so much later reflection that, in a very real sense, they have unintentionally mystified the human reality. Mystified in the sense of hiding the human reality of Jesus' death upon which all of the theologizing was built. We have a problem, I think, in trying to retrieve that human reality. So that is what I would like to suggest for tonight and the rest of Holy Week: to try to retrieve that human reality that we're celebrating.

As you probably know, this year Passover and Easter are simultaneous, and that's wonderful. Because basically this is our Passover, our version of the Passover. What does that mean? What were the Jews doing with Passover, with all that talk about lambs and blood? They are celebrating the fact that the God that they believed in was, above all, a God of freedom. And that is what we are supposed to be celebrating as well. We're celebrating freedom. We are celebrating that same God; the God of Jesus is the God of freedom. And Jesus is remarkable because he incarnated that freedom of God to an unprecedented extent. So we need to talk about what it means to be free and how is freedom expressed in what we are doing tonight.

Freedom for the Jews, first of all, meant, freedom from oppression. It meant that the whole pattern of human relationships was to be altered in such a way that we would be free not to oppress each other. That is what freedom means: that I'm not driven by my compulsion to get even, or to one-up, or, more frequently, to defend and therefore to distance myself from the other. All these words express part of our

repertoire of forms of oppressing each other, and allowing ourselves to be prey to or prey on each other.

The astonishing thing about tonight is this gesture of the foot washing which is, I believe, the quintessential expression of what it is to be free. What was Jesus doing? He was making himself absolutely available to the disciples in an altogether non-intimidating fashion. What kind of freedom must a person embody to be able to operate in that fashion, with a straight face, of course? We are going to repeat Jesus' action, but we do it uneasily, and nervously. Why? Because we are not free. And the very nervousness, and awkwardness with which I and you perform the ceremony is eloquent testimony to our un-freedom.

We are called to so freely operate with each other that, as Paul will say over and over, we can put other's interests before our own: in a non-neurotic way then, to liberate them. To be able to do this is to let people be. To give people a life. To give people their own freedom. That is the only way we get freedom. Freedom is not something you confer on yourself as so much popular language has it. "Buy this book so that you could learn how to free yourself." No. Freedom is always dialogical. I only become free through the other and the other becomes free through me and we both can carry this off, because the God who creates us is free and creates us for freedom. The highest form of freedom is Love. Love does not have to score points but again, lets the other be. Freedom underlies all of the theology of the Eucharist, of everything else, we are supposed to be talking and thinking about, and praying over tonight. That kind of liberation brought to our time and our place by what we believe is the presence of the risen Lord. And the spirit of God operating here among us now. As we will see tomorrow, freedom is fraught with danger. But tonight let us revel in that vision of freedom, for our selves and for each other.

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If we omit the suffering of anybody

Holy Saturday, April 11th, 1998

Readings Is. 61.1-3a, 6a, 8b-9; Rev. 1.5-8; Lk. 4. 16-21

As I said on Good Friday, I have been guided in preparing the homilies for the Triduum by that breathtaking phrase from Paul's letter to the Galatians, "For freedom, Christ has made us free". So we saw on Holy Thursday night that freedom expressed in the career of Jesus. Jesus exercised it in washing the disciples' feet, manifesting His own true demeanour towards them as a servant. We saw Friday, the cost of that kind of life, that way of behaving. And it is not surprising that Paul should be struck by that because the very thing that altered Paul's life, from being a Pharisaic Jew to being a Jesus Jew, was his belief that God had raised this Jew Jesus from the dead. And what was different about this Jew that changed Paul's understanding about what a good Jew was? It was precisely the freedom of this Jew who, in his own life, redefined what it was to be a good Jew. And the hallmark of that redefinition was Jesus' freedom. Jesus' absolute freedom with everyone, above all with those people who were least: the most profoundly excluded by convention or legislation, or simple distaste: women, the poor, the handicapped, the social misfits and outcasts. That's what constitutes freedom. That's what Paul had in mind when he said, "For that kind of freedom, Christ has made us free". And the Resurrection, of course, simply lays out the ground of that freedom.

Why is freedom so notable? Because in the Jewish understanding, freedom is the hallmark of God him/herself. Jesus could be free and responsible because He believed in this supremely free God. This God, who, in freedom, was able to respond to everybody and all of creation, as opposed to the way we act, inhibited by fear or guilt or embarrass-

ment. God was universally free to all of creation and that freedom was God's response. So the Resurrection is simply God freely choosing to raise this free human being, this free Jew, to God's self. Freedom calling to freedom. Depth calling to depth, or in the wonderful motto that the great Cardinal Newman took, "Heart speaking to Heart." Just as Jesus chose to be free to respond to everybody, so it is the freedom of God that moved God to raise this man Jesus. For those of us who believe this, Jesus becomes the paradigm for our own lives.

This sounds so simple, so easy, until you begin to apply it to the world that we live in. What kind of freedom do we experience? And how responsive do we feel the world is to us? Big corporations? Big governments? Big institutions? Big churches? Big universities? It is only when we begin to imagine this kind of liberation, that the full wonder of the Resurrection begins to dawn on us. I think of my experience: I am sixty-two and full of the cynicism emerging from all those years, and the disappointments, and frustrations and the sadnesses, that result from the unresponsiveness of the world to me and my unresponsiveness to the world.

The notion of God freely responding to all of us, is all but incredible, and so again, with Paul, we hope against hope. We believe that Christ has made and freed us for freedom. It is the same in the letter to the Galatians in which Paul said, "In Jesus there is no longer male/female, slave, free Greek, or barbarian". This absence of distance between us is just absolute responsiveness. This is the thing that we say we believe.

And to finish, again with the writer whose thoughts I have depended on so heavily, for much of my life, the German theologian, Metz, who says that "anybody who thinks of the Resurrection without having fully in mind its cost, namely the Cross, has turned it into a pleasant myth or a daydream". And therefore, I bring that up, first, because it is true, and then because it is so easy for us Christians to leap from the Cross into the arms of the resurrected Jesus, and to forget that those wrists have holes in them. And so we don't listen when Luke says that every day we are to pick up our Cross and carry it. And so every day we would prefer to ignore the suffering of our world, even our own suffering. And here too Metz is enormously important because he said that "to the extent that we omit the suffering of anybody at any point, we have failed to take the measure of the Resurrection into account". And this applies particularly to us academics, for whom suffering

finds no legitimate place in our world. We desperately need this! We desperately need this, because only this opens up real joy to us and not some kind of Disney-fied illusionary daydream. Happy Easter.

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How dangerous that freedom is

Easter Sunday - - Resurrection of the Lord, April 12th, 1998

Readings: Acts 10.34a, 36-43; Col. 3.1-4 or Cor. 5.6b-8; Jn. 20.1-18

All during Holy Week, the liturgy of Thursday, Good Friday, last night, and today, I've been guided by a line from Paul's letter to the church at Galatia which, I think, is one of the multiple ways of trying to make sense of what we're doing here today. The line is, "For freedom, Christ has made us free". What was Paul talking about? Well, Paul, as you know, had been a Pharisaic Jew, faithful to God and knowing full well what a faithful person should do in regard to that: You do these things and don't do these things. You eat with these people, you don't eat with these people! You select this thing in your life and reject that, and that's the way you create a life faithful to God. And then he came to believe that God had raised this other Jew from the dead - this Jew Jesus. And what was different about this Jew, Jesus? He certainly was a Jew. He certainly was a pious Jew, but contrary to the Pharisees, he made no distinctions between people. He ate with sinners, he spoke freely to women, and in public. He showed inordinate concern about handicapped people who were ritually unpure and could not be touched - - they were as ignored in their society as they are in ours. The social outcasts, the misfits, the poor above all. Jesus showed this extraordinary openness to all these people. And Paul, when he came to believe that God had raised this Jew from the dead, came to see that this is the way to be faithful to God. That is the way of being Jewish, that is real, that is paradigmatic for us. That kind of freedom. That kind of freedom which is manifest in that stunning gesture of Holy Thursday night

where Jesus washed the feet of his friends. That action serves as a metaphor for His whole approach to the world as the servant of all, available to all. And that freedom was costly and that's exactly what Good Friday is about. Society cannot run with that. It is politically inexpedient to behave in that way. The wheels of commerce, the wheels of government, the wheels of normal communication break down. Jesus is a great spanner in those wheels. And Jesus chose not to run away from His own life but to stand within his own life and to take responsibility for His life. And that cost Him His life. For this is the great genius of the Jew's understanding of freedom: to be free, for the Jews at their best, is precisely to be free as Jesus was: to be free for everyone. To choose to be there for everyone. And only in that context can we make sense of the Resurrection.

Who is God? Who is this weird Jewish God? He is not the God of the winners; He is above all, the God of the losers and by inclusion, the God of everybody. God is absolutely free to everything that She has made - this God. And so out of the freedom of that God, and the responsiveness of that God acknowledging the freedom and responsiveness of Jesus to the whole world that God had made, God raised this man Jesus. And that is what the Resurrection is all about. God being responsible to this world and above all to this man who was supereminently responsive to that same world.

This all sounds so safe, on Sunday morning when the sun is shining and we don't have to worry about what kind of implications this may have for our lives. But think about it for just a minute. How dangerous that freedom is. Where are we free? Where are the institutions and the powers that constrain us or that we use to constrain others? My class, my colour, my language, my economic status, my academic position. We live in a world where the government is not seen benignly but as the enemy. And the government is itself seconded to the powers of the large corporations who are currently running the world. And so who is free today?

What are the implications of acting against those constraining and constricting forces? To put it very simply, who are the stake holders in the world? From my perspective, it's everybody who is like me, who thinks like me, who wants what I want, who has what I want. No. From God's perspective everybody's a stake holder in this world. God is responsive to everybody. Everybody. And above all to the people who seem to have no stake in this world at all. To come to believe that God has raised this man from the dead out of the millions of dead Jews, says what? That this deep, deep hope that I talked about at the very beginning of Lent, that we

all keep very hidden, underneath multiple layers of fear and guilt and anger and cynicism and vindictiveness, this deep hope that we have, that we all really do belong with each other, is realizable for all of us. There are no exclusions. But that is what is vindicated at this Feast of Easter. In other words there is joy at this Feast.

This is the only thing that can bring us real hope: that the world is truly made for all of us. That we are all upheld by God. And under the image and power of that Man, Jesus the world will be for all of us, and we will be for each other, as Paul says again in another place, “members of each other, we really will put the interests of the other before our own”.

And finally, besides Paul, there is another writer, a modern German theologian named John Baptist Metz who has done something very helpful for me this Lent. He has given me a criterion whereby I can assess my notions of freedom, my notions of responsibility. He made this proposal: “It is only when I can somehow encompass the sufferings of the world that I can be really free”. Not just the sufferings of my family, not just my own interior anguish, but the suffering of the world and the suffering of all history of the world. Only when I become partner to all of that misery in this misery-filled world can I really begin to understand what freedom is. Otherwise I’m bracketing; otherwise I’m excerpting; otherwise I’m denying this God who raised Jesus from the dead, who is the God of everybody and above all, who is the God of all the sufferers. But if we do, as Metz suggests, come to believe that God is the God of all of us, then we come to believe above all, that God is the God of all the sufferers in the world. And that belief is sustainable in turn only because we believe that God upholds us. Because alone I cannot endure the suffering of the world, I cannot bear the sufferings of the world, if I am not, in turn, sustained by that God who upholds us all. If I can come to that point then all this wonderful talk about hallelujahs, and joy and glory really does begin to make sense and we can talk about legitimately celebrating Easter, an Easter which is not some kind of Disney-fied wish-fulfillment.

The Risen Jesus has Holes

2nd Easter, 1998

Acts 5.12-16;
Rev. 1.9-11a, 12-13, 17-19;
Jn 20.19-31.

I would like to play fast-and-loose with this text from John, this familiar scene from the fourth Gospel. The point is very clear in that the entire episode is set up and created in order to lead people to this climactic statement: “Blessed are those who have not seen and have come to believe”. That is what this is all about. However, because this is kind of misleading, I would like to add a comment to this statement. If we take this story at face value, what did Thomas see? Did he simply see a dead body up and about? If this is all that he saw, then what did he believe? Did he solely believe that God could resurrect dead bodies? If this is the primary importance of this event, then it really is not worth very much. It is mildly interesting, but it is certainly not very transformative. Rather, as is emphasized in the Gospel of John, in which John underlines various levels of faith and talks about superficial and trivial faith as opposed to transformative faith - the essence of believing in the risen Jesus lies in believing that Jesus’ way of living one’s human existence is the most meaningful way to live one’s existence. Thus, this quasi-magical or carnival sort of faith which subscribes to the belief that “this man with holes in his body is walking around”, is far from the real point.

What I would like to talk about today is something that is implicit in the readings: the risen Jesus does have holes in his body.

I am sure that by the time this story came to its final form (the end of the first century) there was no question that the members of this

Jesus movement had begun to suffer persecution, both from their fellow Jews and the Romans. Recall that Jesus' own death was basically a political execution. The Romans were not about to have anybody running around declaring himself King of the Jews. Hence, the fact of suffering for following this form of life was probably already in place. Or more accurately, the consequences of following Jesus, of following out one's faith that God has raised this Jew from the dead, entailed suffering. We even see this reflected in this passage from the Book of Revelation, which is also written to encourage people who are under the gun for being part of the Jesus movement.

To believe that the risen Jesus still has holes in his wrists and chest is crucial because it is so easy (and historically, Christians have done this) to say, "Jesus has been raised from the dead. We are washed in the blood of the lamb. We are all home-free". This is repeated consistently throughout Christian history. Now let me suggest a different way of approaching this. Would the world today be any different if Jesus had not lived? This is a question that puzzles me. My sense is that there would only be a marginal difference. For example, if we single out our century which is coming to a close, more people have been murdered by other human beings in this century than in any other in the history of the world. This is a simple fact, whether we are talking about Pol Pot (God rest him), Stalin, Mao, or Hitler, etc. The one thing that our century, more than any other, has produced, is dead bodies. And so, one may really wonder where the Christian enterprise lies. I think that this death toll is partly due to the fact that we forget that the risen Jesus has holes; that the resurrection does not just mean that we are all home-free and can therefore slip through life unscathed. For instance, we understand very well that the church as an institution has often not listened to this. The recent statement on the Jews is simply the most recent example of the evasion of responsibility on the part of the official church. It is endless. We could go on; the former archbishop of Halifax, and we could go through bishops and priests involved in pederasty over the past ten years in the Roman church - - we have claimed that the children whom they have abused are to blame. What is going on in these cases? To be precise, we have failed to take responsibility for our lives, both individually and as an institution. I think that this is a key element because if we say that "Jesus is raised and therefore my sins are washed away," then we really do not have to take responsibility for ourselves.

Various Christian bodies do this differently. For example, the Baptists, who

read the Gospel of John very carefully, will say that “we are now living in the light”. So, when people like Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart fall, it just knocks out the pins out from beneath everybody, because this is not supposed to happen. This is not supposed to occur because they are confirmed in grace and they walk in “the light”. We Romans have a different way of doing this in that we say “we may all be sinners but the Church is indefectible; the Church is hanging on and doing the right thing”. Well, the fact is that it is not. In other words, what is going on throughout the Christian enterprise is our failure to say, “Here I stand in the shadow of the crucified Jesus and I am going to replicate in myself his life and career in my own time and place,” . As Paul says, “I will bear in my body the marks of the suffering of Christ”. To believe in the Resurrection is to believe essentially that this is where we are, this is where our interests as human beings lie. It is to take absolute responsibility for living as if we really did all belong with each other, especially the most profoundly forgotten, whether in the past or the present. Clearly, this is the point at which the Cross intervenes. You can only rightly understand all kinds of troubling issues, for example, abortion and sexual ethics, only if the ultimate issue for us as believers in Jesus, is the question: do we all belong together or not? And to the extent that we do, we are going to have to, again, as Paul says, “bear each others’ burdens”.

Moreover, the very capacity that it takes to do this, as Paul will always say, “is itself, if you really want it, the proof of the power of the Resurrection, beaten-up, but not out!” If you get a chance, read the Second Letter to the Corinthians in which Paul goes through so many catastrophes and yet he says, “I am still here and thriving!”.

Finally, all this puts the skids to a lot of our calculations about how rational life should be, how calculable life should be. Those of us who make our living running our mouths, and we hope, with our brains attached to our mouths, have a very hard time dealing with this. For example, this is examination time. We are reading essays and everybody is getting nervous and worrying about “the answers”. We are faced with the eternal question: is this going to be on the examination? Well, is the “exam of life” based on knowing all of the answers? No. We do not have to know any answers because life is not calculable. If there are answers they are hidden, as Paul again will say, “with Christ, in God”. This is really important because we think we live in a rational universe. But whose rationality?

Thank God we have solved some of our problems. We know about penicil-

lin and nuclear energy, however, we do not know about life. To pretend that we do is to evade what life is all about. God knows about life, God has us, and God is free to love as God will love. Our great problem, of course, is that we already think we know what love is all about: how love works, what love is, how love plays out.

So, the risen Jesus has holes, and unless we avoid making the great disconnection between the risen Jesus and the holes we are going to fake it, and God knows we Christians have a long history of faking it. Thus, it is terribly important that we look at this as carefully and seriously as possible. The risen Jesus has holes and this is the only real risen Jesus.

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The Triumph of a Life

3rd Easter, 1998

Acts 5.27-32, 40b-41;
Rev. 5.11-14;
Jn. 21.1-19

The Bible probably does not contain one single text that rivals the Book of Revelation with respect to the sheer nuttiness that it has caused. It is the feeding ground for all of the religious loonies, or it makes religious people loony. There are preachers who have created a whole career preaching sheer nonsense about this very strange text. The Book of Revelation provides a forum for this sort of weirdness because it is filled with very odd symbols. At times, it has an almost hallucinogenic quality. Thus, you can make of it what you want, which is exactly what has happened.

Ultimately, however, what the text actually reveals is this enthronement of the Lamb, this great cosmic celebration, with the whole world bowing before this slaughtered Lamb, the great symbol of Christ. And all of the book's symbolism (the horrors and miasmic obscurity) is supposed to act in favour of clarifying this one moment - - the whole point of the universe - - this celebration of the victory of the Lamb, of Jesus.

Hence, the Book of Revelation ought to be clarifying human life instead of obscuring and mystifying it, instead of making religion a kind of weird sideshow, as many of its commentators have. What is being celebrated is very simple: the triumph of a life, of a man who simply told the truth all of the time and was absolutely open to everybody. The point is that this life has cosmic significance. This life is

exactly what the whole human operation is about, and, is leading to. And it is only because we have trivialized and sentimentalized Jesus' life that it sounds odd even to say it. We can use the passage from Revelation to cast light on these other two readings because they give instances of the difficulty and extraordinariness of Jesus' achievement.

In Luke's text, the disciples who are filled by the spirit of the risen Jesus say outrageous things such as this: "We must obey God rather than any human authority". A human authority does not just mean the police, the government, or the boss. It also means my neighbours, my colleagues, and my kids. In other words, to be faithful to God in the face of all of these multiple voices and messages that we hear telling us how to be, where to be, who to give obeisance to, and who to watch out for, etc., is to simply cut through all of these authorities and say, "I am being faithful to God as much as I can be, despite everything else". How many of us really do this? Imagine a life that simply cuts clearly through all human authority, a life absolutely obedient to God. It is quite amazing. Ultimately, this is what the universe was created for, and did produce, in this one man, Jesus.

And then, of course, in this interesting epilogue to the Gospel of John (this strange passage about Peter, which was added later), we get two more instances of normal human behaviour which are absolutely abnormal; namely forgiveness, in that Jesus clearly forgives Peter. How often does this really happen in human life? How often is it that one feels that one can move straight ahead, unencumbered by one's own failure, by one's own faulty past. And then, clearly, the person who wrote this text and later added it to the Gospel of John wanted to talk about Peter as an individual who held a position of authority. Every biblical scholar agrees that Peter, whatever position he held, clearly had some sort of principal job in this text. Look at the words: "Feed my men. Tend my sheep". The text does not contain the words "manage them" or "boss them". It reads: "nourish them, give them life". What human authority completely functions in this fashion? I do not know any that do. For instance, I know that everybody is calculating - - I too am calculating - - all of the time. Basically, our primary interest lies in finding a way to get through this life unscathed, no matter where we are or what we are doing.

Because we are all so skilled at obscuring the outlines of the issues in our lives, acting unselfishly does not seem particularly notable. I know this is true for me, and it seems to be true for everybody that I know - - that ultimately, we operate in terms of calculating and securing our own benefit and safety. To live a life

absolutely beyond this, to be boss as the servant of all, to be ready to forgive, to say the truth as one knows it, all of the time - - not out of bitterness or as a way of getting even, etc. - - but simply because this is the Godly thing to do. This is what God is all about, and ultimately, this is what is illuminating. This is what the God of Jesus is all about. This is why the Book of Revelation can have the enthronement of this man, - a man who lived this utterly Godly life - as its ultimate celebration. Hence, this is why Jesus was raised from the dead and this is why preachers like Jack Van Impe's mystification of this text is so awful. It turns religion into rubbish and acts, of course, as a great distraction from the real issue in our lives: this is the real search for the God who will enable us to tell the truth and to act as humane and forgiving authority figures all of the time.

So, Easter ends up doing what I suggested that Lent does: to clarify human life and set out the issues of our existence clearly. It is not some vague triumph of good over evil, a life-force conquering a death-force, or spring and eternal rebirth. It is simply the absolute goodness of God manifested in this man's life and validated by God raising this man from the dead, and celebrated in the weird language of the Book of Revelation.

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Calling us to more

4th Sunday of Easter, 1998

Acts 13.14,43-52; Re. 7.9,14b-17; Jn 10.27-30.

Before I begin, I would like to comment on the last line of this passage from the Gospel of John: “The Father and I are one”. As far as the best Johanine scholarship can determine, this statement does not refer to some kind of metaphysical unity between Jesus and God, or to be more precise, a Trinitarian doctrine. This will come later as people think, pray, and suffer through this business of trying to follow Jesus. Instead, this statement represents the conviction of the Johanine church in that Jesus’ actions were precisely an expression of what the Father wanted done on the earth. This is the intention of this remark.

So, we are still in the Easter season. There is something profoundly ambiguous about the Resurrection that has dogged the Jesus movement from its earliest days. I believe it is useful to observe these three readings in relation to this particular form of ambiguity. What is it? The Jews who believed in the resurrection of the dead (and this surfaced very late in Judaism) thought that if God raised anybody from the dead then this was the beginning of the end of the whole human enterprise. Or more accurately, that without a doubt, this was the sign that God was going to close down the whole human experiment and then he/she was going to ensure that evil was definitively conquered in order to realize heaven, or the Kingdom of God, etc. Thus, there was a feeling of finality, an end point reached, when people came to believe that God had raised this man from the dead. And if you read the New Testament you will see that belief in Jesus’ Resurrection is the cause of one of the great struggles there. The clearest example of this struggle occurs in Paul’s first letter to the church of the Thessalonians. Jesus had not come

back, the end had not definitively happened, and some of Jesus' followers had already begun to die. Hence, the rest of the followers were really worried.

Furthermore all of the Gospels wrestle with this problem: namely, that if this is the end, then why has the end not happened? This is the ambiguity. Thus, in one respect you have this end point reached in the resurrection of Jesus, and yet in another, the world seems to continue as if nothing special has happened. This is the problem that dogged the whole early Christian movement and I would like to propose that it has dogged all of us since that time as well.

There is a clue in this passage from The Acts of the Apostles, this strange text from The Book of Revelation, and, by implication, in this passage from John, Each one illustrates that this sense of finality is a misunderstanding. That is, we are shown that the living of the Christian life is a continuing struggle, one which echoes the persecution of Paul and Barnabas.

If the end had happened, then this struggle and these acts of persecution would never have occurred. The references in The Book of Revelation to all of those people who have washed their robes in the Blood of the Lamb are examples of this struggle. Next, this business of snatching things from the Father suggests that there is going to be a constant tension between what is Gods' and the powers of evil as they attempt to steal this from the Hand of God. So, this is the problem.

It is very easy to understand why people thought that the proclamation of Jesus rising from the dead signified the finality of human existence. We all love the past. We all love finality. It is a fact that we always love the past too long, too much. This is very easy to understand in that because the past is finished it is no longer threatening; it is safe. We are secure in the past and this is the reason so many of us attempt to live out much of our lives as a prolongation of the past. There is this bit of farm folk-wisdom that I heard when I was in my first parish. A guy said to me, "there are some people who have twenty years of experience and there are other people who have one year of experience twenty times over". This statement expresses our love for the past very well.

But when we talk about completion, the completion exists only in the case of Jesus. But what the proclamation and belief in the Resurrection says to us, or ought to say to us, is never finished. And, of course, this is what has dogged the Church for a variety of historical and philosophical reasons that we need not go into. There is no question that all of the Christian Churches, particularly the Roman

Church, have said (as one of the great Fathers said, and which we were told over and over while going through the seminary): “Let nothing be innovated except what has been handed on”. Hence, the life of the Church is to be a prolongation of this past moment. And if we look at the history of the Church, as well as the history of us as individuals, this has dogged and beset the Church because the Church, as all institutions, loves the past too much as well. Again this is because the past, as past is safe and so we are in charge of the past. Thus, we immerse ourselves in the past, as institutions, and as individuals. But all we have to do is look at the history of the Church to see the massive changes, the reversals, which of course we rarely admit to. For example, we, as an institution, would like to believe that we did not have anything to do with the destruction of European Jewry; perhaps a few little odds and ends slipped through, but not us as an institution. Slavery is all right. Women really are inferior to men. All of these injustices have been positions taken by the Church. Then, recall the proposition that nobody outside of the Roman Church is saved. It was not until the Vatican Council in 1968 that this was reversed.

What I am getting at should be fairly clear: that to believe in the Resurrection means that God is always pulling us forward into an unknown future, kicking and screaming, most of the time. And yet if we listen to these texts we would hear this other voice, this alternate, authentic voice saying, as God said to Abraham, “I will take you from this land, that you know and are familiar with, to a place that you do not know”. And anybody who seriously tries to live what we call “the spiritual life” knows that this is absolutely the case. God is the God who resolutely calls us forward into the future and this is the meaning of the Resurrection.

So what is possible for the Church? Many things are possible as long as we do not foreclose on God, as long as we do not decide that Jesus’ resurrection signifies the end of the world and we do not decide to simply sit in a kind of waiting room until God shuts down the whole operation. The truth lies in replicating in our own lives, as Paul will say over and over, the struggle that brought Jesus to where he was brought - - the Cross, and then into the arms of God.

But refusing to live out our lives as a prolongation of the past is enormously counter-intuitive and counter-factual. If we look at the whole religious history of the human race, God or the gods are always the gods of the golden age and the past is always considered hallowed and superior to all subsequent time. Everything that occurs afterwards is considered a decline from this golden age. But as Christians

we owe our understanding of the divine to great people like Teilhard de Chardin who said, “God is constantly calling us to more,” to an unknown future, to a shape both as individuals and institutions that we cannot even imagine. Therefore, we, particularly we Roman Catholics who have this enormous baggage of history, need to somehow relativize it in certain crucial ways. And we do not even know what those ways are yet. But the only thing that will make those ways become apparent is precisely our profound belief that in raising Jesus from the dead God has opened an absolute future for us which, by definition, is unknown.

Therefore, sin becomes precisely an act of hanging on to the past too long, of wanting that comfort, however cold it might be. To follow this path is to resist God’s constant urging of us forward to more life and to greater life. And this is what the Resurrection is supposed to mean. This is the truth that cuts through this ambiguity that I started talking about, because those great figures of the Church who surround us in this room, the saints, were always the people who innovated, who always said that there is something more ahead of us. Our job is to be as attentive as we can be to the God who calls us to this “more”.

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What the Church is Supposed to Represent

5th Easter, 1998

Acts 14.21b-27;
Rev. 21.1-5a;
Jn 13.1, 31-33a, 34-35.

I suspect that everybody remembers this line from Paul: If Jesus is not risen from the dead, then the whole Christian enterprise falls apart. It is important that we understand what Paul was talking about. Paul's understanding of the Resurrection is grounded in his belief that, because God chose to raise Jesus, Jesus is thus revealed as the great paradigm for what it is to be a human being. Whereas, if God has not raised Jesus then He is not what it is to be a human being.

And we are all in trouble again and we had better start looking elsewhere for this ideal. Thus, we can interpret the Resurrection as the great clarifying act, in that the Resurrection clarifies both who God is and what it is to be a human being. Today, I would like to talk about something else that the Resurrection clarifies: the nature of the Church.

The word "church" is mentioned a couple of times in the text that Geordie read from the Book of Acts. Next, in the last line from this famous passage in John - - "Everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." the Church is intimated. Most likely, the easiest way to interpret these lines is to observe the traditional New Testament understanding of the Church: the Church as the representation of the New Israel. That is, that in Jesus, the mission that God gave to the Jews is now being carried on.

What does this mean? Perhaps it would be useful to contrast this understanding of the Church with my understanding of the Church (and maybe

it was yours as well) when I was younger. We were told that when everybody dies and goes to Heaven, all the people who are Catholic are going to walk around with "RC" etched on their foreheads and will assume a sort of superior status: that we would comprise this huge Salvation Club, a group of individuals who had been delivered to the Kingdom of God on this greased track. This is not right. In fact, it is profoundly wrong.

What does the Resurrection do to clarify the reality of the Church? First of all, and most importantly, it indicates that the Church is provisional. It is not some kind of permanent institution that is going to endure throughout all of eternity. Thus - to this business of Catholics running around with special badges that proclaim that they are superior to everybody else - it is easy to determine that this is incorrect because there is not going to be a Church in the Kingdom of God. Well, if this is not the case, then what is the Church all about? This passage from John makes it very clear: the Church is supposed to be the great witness to the reality of God in the present, just as the Old Israel was to be the witness to the universally saving Rule of God - - "the light to the Gentiles" - - that phrase that we hear over and over. So, in a world in which people are fairly brutal, indifferent, and defensive towards one another, we have these people who are supposed to be open to everybody instead. This was the mission of the first Israel. Jesus is understood to be the very summation and perfection of the first Israel. And because not everybody in the first Israel followed this understanding, there now exists what we call the second Israel - - the Church. In other words, the Church is essentially "mission," it is essentially God's agency for somehow trying to persuade the world that, to take a leaf from the First Letter of John, "God really is love". God is not the kind of vindictive monster that she is often depicted as, or, this totally indifferent and remote figure, unaware of and unconcerned with what she has created. Furthermore, in loving one another and coming to understand that this is what God wants, we are also to persuade each other, within the Church, that this is what God is all about.

This is, of course, where things begin to get a little touchy, because this clarifies yet another aspect of the Church in that the Church is implicit testimony to our sinfulness. Whereas, if all this were all self-evident then we would not need a body that is supposed to convert itself, and, being converted, convert everybody else to the belief that God really is love and God really wishes to save everybody. So, this is quite different from the model of the Church that I learned about in my youth. The Church is itself testimony to our deficiency, and this is why, when we

are fulfilled in the Kingdom of God, the Church is not going to be necessary anymore. This is evident in that Heaven is simply the transmutation of our consciousness so that we come to say, “My God, we really are loved, we really do belong with each other, and we really are capable of loving each other - - all others”.

So, the Church essentially has a tension built into it because it very quickly became institutionalized. As early as the end of the first century this is evident in the so-called Pastoral Letters to Timothy and Titus. There, the Church was already getting organized and bureaucratized. For example, there are job descriptions in these letters: “A bishop is...An elder is...”. Therefore, there is evidence that the formation of a bureaucracy was taking place. And of course, as soon as a bureaucracy is formed there arises the tendency, of all bureaucracies, to act over and against real life. Because all bureaucracies are interested in power, and above all, the power to keep themselves going. This is the case whether we are talking about the University of Western Ontario, the Bank of Montreal, a dynasty, and yes, even King’s College.

This tension in the very existence of the Church, is spelled out in the classic Israel. For example, when the first Israel failed it failed because it closed in on itself. This is why the Prophets - - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Hosea - - had to come and say, “Break down these walls!”. The Book of Jonah, this funny text about a man being swallowed up by a big fish, has as its purpose a warning against the Jews which states: “The God who loves you also loves those pagans who are your serious enemies”. Yet many of the Jews did not listen. We do not listen very well either. As a would-be community, how exclusionary are we? It is very important to think about the provisionality of the Church, the Church’s existence as testimony to the power of sin in the world, and the call to what the Church is really supposed to do. That is, the Church is to be this group of people who are supposed to be weird and notable because they love each other.

Finally, there is another important aspect of the Church that we should recognize. I keep getting statistics from my home-diocese in the United States, and I know what is occurring in the London diocese: Mass attendance is falling. For example, out of a student population of eighteen-hundred, half of whom are supposed to be Catholic, King’s College Sunday Mass attendance is down to about six or eight students each Sunday. What is going on here? Well, a variety of things are occurring. All institutions, whether it is Jean Chretien’s, Mike Harris’, etc., seem

discredited, and are now objects of suspicion, if not contempt. And, it should be added, that, often enough, they deserve to be. And so has the Church, as we misrepresent, evade, and run away from our responsibilities as an institution. All institutions do this and, moreover, have done this from the time of the very first institutions.

But, in today's world, there is an even more nefarious aspect of this: the near-conviction that institutions never work. So, we think in this manner: "I do not need anybody else. I will do this all by myself, or with the help of my friends, over and against everybody else. That is, we will succeed against this great alien world that is opposed to us". This is the radical individualism of our time. We believe that "there is only one way and it is my way". This basic self-contained and fear-based individualism has as its major presumption the belief that we really cannot trust anybody. I have been teaching at this institution for twenty-five years and I see this more and more among the students. If it is the case that only "we" can construct out of whole cloth the meaning of our lives and our destinies, then what is the Church? It would seem that the Church is a waste of time, or that the Church is simply reduced to bureaucracy. As I stated earlier, Easter clarifies what the Church is supposed to represent. This form of representation is laid out very clearly at the end of this passage from John: "By this everybody will know that you are my disciples, that you constitute this Church if you love one another". And you only learn how to love somebody else with somebody else. Love is not some kind of virtuoso performance comprised of an individuals' appearance on a stage and their statement: "I am going to love you all". No, it does not work this way. It only works this way in Hollywood or at rock concerts. And, as we all know, it does not really work in these situations. In other words, if we cannot deal with the frailty of each other and ourselves, we are dead in the water. And, because the message of frailty is written so large and so deeply in our consciousness, especially for the young (for example, the people who attend university in today's world), we are not going to go anywhere. This is why it is so essential that we understand what the Resurrection clarifies about the nature of the Church, because the alternatives do not work, not even pragmatically. Whether or not an individual believes in God or the Resurrection, etc., nobody can live all by her/himself, no matter how much we would like to whistle past the graveyard, and proclaim that we do and can live this way. For better or for worse we are stuck with each other. And the beauty of the Resurrection signifies that this is not such an awful thing; in fact, remaining faithful to this vision is the only way to reveal our wholeness as human beings.

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The Peace that Comes to One

6th Sunday of Easter, 1998

Acts 15.1-2, 22-29; Rev. 21.10-14, 22-23; Jn 14.23-29.

I have a feeling that the famous song "I did it my way," a song by the late and justifiably lamented Frank Sinatra, is an enduring anthem for North Americans. This song signifies our belief that we can conquer the problems of life on our own terms, without the help of others. I think that most of us ardently believe that this is the only authentic way that life should be lived. In other words, the individualism of our society that has grown massively over the years, is epitomized by Sinatra's song. This is why I think it is so well loved, despite the fact of course that Frank Sinatra did not conduct his career in some kind of solitary, virtuosic fashion. I raise this issue because in today's reading from the Gospel of John there exists a summary of the whole meaning of the Resurrection.

The word "peace" occurs consistently in all of the Resurrection appearances and I would like to talk about this in the context of Frank Sinatra's song, because I think that, for most of us, peace boils down to a kind of inner contentment and self-satisfaction. Although the walls may be falling around us, we are going to be Buddhist-like in our self-containment, quietude, and peacefulness. "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me". This notion is totally opposed to the biblical understanding of peace. The biblical understanding of peace is not based on something that exists within a person. It only exists between people. And if peace does not exist between people, no matter how much inner placidity we may feel or manifest, then it is not Christian. Our therapists and pharmacists may be happy about this kind of peace but God is going to be indifferent to it because it does not have anything to

do with the peace that Jesus, as a good Jew, talked about. It does not have anything to do with Shalom or the New Jerusalem - - “the city of peace” - - that the Book of Revelation talks about.

If we look at the career of Jesus, a career in which this great Jewish idea of Shalom reaches its absolute apex, we might ask ourselves: is there an intelligible way (even if we do not carry it out or believe in it) that we can discuss this understanding of peace? I have been racking my brain over this and I would like to suggest one way that we can interpret this kind of peace. The peace that the Bible and the risen Jesus talk about is the peace that comes to one who is ready to receive everybody. For example, if we look back to this passage from the Acts of the Apostles, the crisis of this early Jesus movement was based precisely this question: how widely available was Jesus and his message to be? Thus, not surprisingly, when the Jesus-Jews argued amongst themselves over the centrality of circumcision - - the very sign embodied in the male genitalia of covenant membership with God - - in the Jewish faith, they discovered that even this highest hallmark of fidelity to God, in the light of Jesus, is not necessary and it no longer counts for anything.

But due to our society’s profound and pervasive individualism, we have to be really careful when we think about this business of being available to everybody. Because this can be read and enacted, and I do this routinely, in such a way that we are still basically managing things: “I am in control. I am available to everybody”. And so this availability does not make sense until we look at its converse, which means to be ready to be received by everybody as well. I think that this is even more difficult for us North Americans. Namely, being received by everybody, not just receiving everybody; being able to exist in such a way that we will allow ourselves to be received by everybody, which is one of the toughest things to do. And only to the extent that this transformation occurs in us can we really talk about the biblical understanding of peace. And, of course, this peace is cruciform (cross-shaped), as everything in Christianity is. Because this is exactly what got Jesus killed: namely, being able to receive everybody and to be received by everybody, even his murderers.

So, it is good that in this year, Cycle C, we have these readings and this emphasis on the notion of peace. So that, as we conclude the six weeks after

Easter, we make sure that we know what it is that we celebrate when we proclaim that God has raised this man, Jesus.

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The Jesus of everybody in the world

Ascension of the Lord, 1998

Readings: Acts 1.1-11; Heb. 9.24-28; 10.19-23; Lk. 24.46-53

We have completed the six weeks after Easter which match the six weeks of Lent, and now, we come to the concluding events: Ascension today and Pentecost next Sunday. I have always felt that the process of the Ascension is weird. The hymn that we sang at the beginning of Mass simplifies this in that there, the Ascension is talked about as a kind of homecoming: Jesus was with God, he came down, and then, he went back up. For Jesus' followers, however, this is not at all the original meaning behind this event. The New Testament texts certainly do not convey this kind of meaning. There are precedents for ascensions. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, Elijah ascended. Moreover, some of the religious literature of this period written by Jews, depicted Moses as ascending. Even the pagans possessed their own form of ascension, as Romulus, one of the founders of the city of Rome, ascended too. Hence, we obviously need to look into this issue in order to properly interpret it.

Whatever happened, and it certainly did not occur in this kind of Cecil B. DeMille fashion which Luke writes about, the Ascension was significant for Jesus. But, if the Ascension is only significant for Jesus then it is utterly useless and we might as well forget it. But, we can at least begin by asking, what was the significance of the Ascension for Jesus? Jesus fulfilled our destiny. He was made by God for God, and went to God. Thus, the Resurrection is the first moment of this process and the Ascension is, in a very real sense, the completion of Jesus' human destiny. Simply put, we believe that Jesus is with God. But, the fact that God raised this particular Jew from the dead clearly means

much more than just the fulfilment of an individual human destiny.

If we look at what is entailed in the notion of Ascension, the first thing that seems obvious is that, for Jesus, the normal context for human life is no longer present. That is, Jesus does not live in time and space, as we do. This has all kinds of implications for us. I would suggest that the whole world is now available to Jesus. He is not simply located in a sixty-mile length of the land of Palestine. In other words, Jesus' destiny is completed because he fulfilled the Jews' destiny: to bring God's saving grace to everyone in the world. And so, because Jesus' local and temporal existence are no longer the constraints of his being, now the whole world is available to Jesus. This is what the religious interpretation off the Ascension represents.

Maybe I am extraordinarily slow, but it is only within the past few weeks that the notion of Jesus as the Saviour of the world has had some real impact on me. I am a victim, of the kind of pietism which constructs a Jesus-and-me spirituality. But before Jesus is mine, Jesus is ours. That is, Jesus is mine only in so-far-as I am aware that Jesus is ours. And this does make a difference, at least for me it has. As I said previously, this is weird. Jubilant Sykes is going to sing, "Give me Jesus". But the Jesus that he is asking for, and you can tell as he sings it, is the Jesus who is everybody's Jesus, and as such, my Jesus. This relationship does not work in the opposite manner. To take on the real ascended Jesus is to understand that Jesus is saving everybody. We can discover this by looking back to the Gospel of Matthew: "Not a sparrow falls from the sky without God being aware. The hairs of our head are numbered". And then, of course, with regard to Jesus himself, there is this stunning judgement passage in which he talks about responding to anybody in need: someone in jail, a stranger, people who are naked, hungry, poor, or abandoned. When you respond to the unfortunate in this manner, you are responding to Jesus who is everywhere. And this is what the Ascension means.

We constantly feel we should appropriate our relationship with Jesus and we feel, because we are so unsure of ourselves and so terribly insecure in our own lives, that if we cannot have our own Jesus, then nobody else should. This is rubbish. The whole business of understanding Jesus' identity is knowing that Jesus is the Jesus of everybody in the world - - Buddhists, atheists, Hindus, and us. This works in tandem with what I was trying to say last week about the provisionality of the Church. In fact, it ought to make clearer the provisionality of the Church in that we can see that the Church is here as the only institution on this planet that does

not exist for its own sake (however badly we carry off this project). And, to a large extent, it is consistently bad. The Church is here to somehow persuade people that the Jesus whom we say we proclaim, is the Jesus who is for everybody, not just for our individual or institutional selves.

This understanding of our relationship with Jesus is extremely important because I consistently find lines such as this in the prayers of the Liturgy: " O God help us whom you have baptized and whom you have redeemed with the blood of the Cross". In other words, "Watch over this salvation club that you have built here on earth". This perspective represents a radical foreshortening. To believe in the resurrection of Jesus is to say: "Now, the destiny of Jesus as a human being is clear. He has gone to the Father and he is now universally available. This is my destiny as a human being as well and this is what I am called to do". So, we can really sing and pray, as Jesus taught us to do, to Our Father.

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The Climax of a Story

Pentecost Sunday, 1998

Readings: Acts 2.1-11; Rom. 8.8-17; Jn. 14.15-16, 23b-26

This is an enormously important feast in the Church year. Some of us might remember, that is, those of us who are old enough, that in the past Pentecost was celebrated as the birthday of the Church. I would like to propose that this understanding is far too parochial, and that this feast is not just the birthday of the Church. If we interpret it in this manner then we seriously misconstrue it because, as I have said, the Church is not a permanent institution in the mind of God. It is simply one of many, even if the principal one, instruments that God uses to bring forgiveness and salvation to the world.

So, we might ask, what does Pentecost represent? Well, Pentecost, like all the great feasts, means a variety of things. I would like to propose, however, what seems to me the most obvious way to understand Pentecost: it is the climax of the drama of Jesus' existence. Pentecost is part of a story, an element in a narrative. It is not an event, a rule, or a proposition. It is the climax of a story. This climax is fairly easy to understand. For example, if, as I proposed last Sunday, the Ascension signifies Jesus' breaching of the constraints of living in time and space with my subsequent universal availability, then the question becomes: How does Jesus become present? That is, how is the word of God announced, and not only announced, but enlivened and embodied in our world? This is what Pentecost entails.

Pentecost is the celebration of the power of God, which follows in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. Put simply, God, in this man, finally found a human being that "worked". And this opens the mercy of God to all of humanity. This is what is adverted to in these readings in a

variety of ways. For example, in the letter to the Romans, Paul makes a very important kind of distinction (one that he writes of consistently) between the Spirit and the flesh. (Now, those of us who were raised in the context of the Church forty, fifty, even sixty years ago, understand very clearly what the flesh represented: everything beneath one's belt. But this is not what the flesh means in Paul's writings.) In his texts, the flesh is simply the full human being as resistant to the energizing power of God, this opening power of God. Thus, to live a spiritual life does not mean to deny one's own physicality, or more specifically, genitality, but to live under the impulse of that enlivening power in all dimensions of one's existence, including the sexual dimension. And if we are available to this kind of transformation then this is supposed to be occurring now, in the present. The result is that sex, for example, does not become a means of oppression, terror, or blackmail, as it so often does. But, in the spirit, it is another means to achieve what all of God's efforts aim at greater life, and I am not just talking about making babies either.

I think that this scene from the Acts is more familiar to us in that it gives us a larger understanding of what the Spirit does. If the Spirit is the power of God transforming us in the history of our own lives as we participate in the history of Jesus' life, then what does it do? In the Acts, we observe these men who are talking to strangers and the strangers in turn are listening. In order to locate the Spirit of God in this instance, let me take my cue (as I always do when I think about this issue), from the great Karl Rahner. In one of his many essays he asked, "How can we tell where the Spirit of God is?". And Rahner answers in this wonderful lapidary phrase: "The Spirit of God is present when any human being takes another human being seriously". This is an extraordinary statement because it compacts so much of human life and good theology. Thus, in the aforementioned passage from the Acts, we observe all of these strangers who both listen to each other and speak to each other. That is, they all take each other seriously. In other words, this instance is not just a kind of C.W.L. meeting to plan the next bingo party or the regular intramural concerns of a given congregation: Pentecost is a cosmic event. It is not just local, it is cosmic, universal, world-wide. The Spirit of God is present wherever one human being can attend to another human being and listen to and speak to that other person. And this is where the story of real life is lived. Hence, according to this view of things, to live is to become better at listening to the truth of each other and speaking the truth to each other.

And here too we have gone far beyond the borders of the Church, although the Church ought to be the paradigmatic place where people can, as Paul will constantly say, speak freely and listen well, regardless of where they are. But wherever real communication happens, between the Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, the Spirit of God is present. And the Church is to function as a kind of signpost so that people can identify that this is what God is about when real communication happens.

Pentecost is a terrific feast. It illuminates the way the stories of our lives are played out in this feast. In the light of this feast, as Martin Luther put it, the painful question arises: "How can I, as a self-encapsulated human being whose primary goal in life is to cover my backside, move from who I am and where I am to this universal availability which exists in Jesus?". The story that entails the occurrence of this is of course Jesus' story and our story is answered by this feast; namely, that God empowers and enlivens us.

Finally, it may be helpful to recall that at this point in the Jesus movement there was no Trinitarian doctrine. This would come in time as Christians thought more deeply and clarified their understanding of the Spirit. And in a weird kind of way I think that it is useful to think of the Spirit in a pre-Trinitarian manner so that we can retrieve the Trinitarian understanding of the Spirit in a more meaningful fashion. In other words, the Spirit of God is God dynamizing us at the deepest places of our humanity to be attentive to each other, to all others. Put simply, to listen and to speak.

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Where do we find mystery?

Trinity Sunday, 1998

Readings: Prov. 8.22-31; Rom. 5.1-5; Jn. 16.12-15

I would like to make a remark preliminary to today's sermon. I think that it is useful (at least it was very useful to me when I discovered this) to observe that the notion of God as Trinitarian, as triune, is not present in the earliest strata of the Christian faith. Most mainstream biblical scholars believe that the Trinitarian doctrine is not explicitly present in the New Testament. And, historically, we know that this doctrine was not clarified until the occurrence of a council a few centuries later. This is a useful footnote for the Trinity feast in that, to hark back to the passage from the Gospel of John, it helps us to understand that we cannot know everything in the present because we only learn about life gradually. This holds true even in the most central issues of faith. (Therefore, we can also assume that this process is still continuing.)

I would like to suggest an oblique approach to Trinity Sunday. We talk about the Trinity as the central mystery of our faith, but I do not know what we do with the category of mystery. Or, more accurately, how much this understanding engages us. We can symbolise the Trinity in terms of shamrocks or three candles that share a single flame, but I do not think that these modes of representation are religiously significant. Moreover, I hope, by making some suggestions to myself and to you about the concept of mystery, that we can begin to locate a little more helpfully what we believe to be the central mystery of our faith.

Where do we find mystery? I would like to make three suggestions with respect to the location of mystery. Aristotle said that "philosophy begins in wonder". Perhaps you have had this kind of experience, when

you wake up early in the morning and realise that the very fact that anything exists is astonishing. This radically transcends our normal consciousness in which reality, as the "given," as data, is simply taken for granted. However, I do not think that Aristotle was totally alone in this understanding of reality because if we look at various forms of literature - - poetry, fiction, and autobiography - - we find that this experience is replicated in the lives of many people. Again, we are so bound up in the quotidian, that is, the demands of our agendas, calendars, E-mail, that it is almost inconceivable. But, all you need do is make even a slight chink in the solid wall of our list of "things to do" and begin to look around and be amazed. This human experience is what one might call a "metaphysical experience of mystery": "Why should anything be?".

The second location of mystery that may be useful is the experience of art, particularly music. For example, with respect to today's Communion, I am going to play a piece of orchestral music, without any words, because we are primarily trying to come to the understanding that mystery is beyond articulation and so a piece of wordless music might provide an entree. I know of few music lovers who do not find themselves reduced to absolute silence by the splendour of one of Oscar Peterson's jazz riffs or Bach's "Air on the G string." In these instances, something exists that shuts one down, something breaks all of the regular categories, the standard ways that we make sense of things. A whole new dimension, a greater form of reality becomes available. We've celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the assassination of Robert Kennedy. Those of us who watched Kennedy's funeral service at St. Patrick's Cathedral heard from the organ loft of the cathedral, Leonard Bernstein and the strings of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra playing the Adagietto from Mahler's 5th Symphony. Did this music touch us simply because of the situation? Or was it because the music is so stunning and overwhelming, that when it ended, it left us breathless and aware that the music had served to point us to something, quite as real as the toast you had for breakfast that morning or the shoes you put on that day - - something richer than the normal range of reality, of what we say is real. This comforting form of reality reminds me of that great line from the W. H. Auden poem that I read from time to time: "The kitchen table is real because I scrub it". However, Auden and his poem open up all kinds of other possibilities, and all the works of art do that: the Arts leave us both filled and hungry. And one might ask, "Is this experience real or imaginary?". I believe that it is real, and that the hunger is for this "other," this larger form of reality.

Finally, a more difficult topic, at least one that I had a difficult time finding the appropriate examples for: Saints. In my sixty-two years of life I have been extraordinarily privileged to know three people whom I consider to be genuine Saints. I started thinking about Medard, and Mary Margaret and Paul, and I have tried to discern why they illuminate, and are mysteries to me when I am with them. And every time I meet them anew. (I use my relationship with these Saintly individuals because our relations with people are analogous to a Trinitarian God, and, in making this analogy, we can better understand the notion of mystery that I have been discussing). In my relationship with these three Saints I have experienced an extraordinary sense of being totally at-home. There is nothing that I could not say to them, and yet at the same time there is an uncanniness about them that puzzles me, an aspect of their being that is beyond me. These people, however, are not weird; they do not walk two feet above the earth. In fact, they are the most pedestrian, "normal" people that I know. But there is this truly uncanny reality of their presence: that I am altogether at home with them, and yet there is something further.

For me, Trinity Sunday is the most worrisome and terrifying feast in the entire year and I constantly struggle over what we can we say about God as Trinitarian. As I have said, my "solution" to understanding a Trinitarian God is to look at this business of mystery, the category within which a Trinitarian God is supposed to be understood. Mystery is a Greek derivative and means "something hidden". In the religious sense, however, this "something" is hidden in the same way that Isaiah said that God is hidden: "Truly you are a hidden god, O God of Israel!". This statement illustrates the great Jewish notion that nobody can see the face of God and live. Why? The answer is that this experience would be too much for us. God is not a deficit of meaning, but a surfeit of meaning. In God, there is not an absence of reality, but a greater reality that we cannot comprehend, a reality that transcends our normal understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live. And so, in an utterly unromantic and unsentimental fashion, I hope that I have provided, for myself and obviously for you, some kind of anchorage to this notion of "mystery" which can inform and shape our praying and our seeking after of this hidden face of God.

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The threshold of this chapel door

Christ, 1998 (Corpus Christi)

Readings: Gen. 14.18-20; 1 Cor. 11.23-26; Lk. 9.11b-17

A few years ago, CBS and the New York Times conducted a nationwide poll of four-hundred-and-forty Roman Catholic adults. The New York Times then published the results of this survey. Some of the results were predictable. For example, 87% of those surveyed stated that they practice birth control; 55% did not reject homosexuality; 50% did not believe in the authority of the Pope; and slightly less than 18% did not believe that Jesus was the son of God. We are very aware of the conflicts that these statistics reveal, especially those that pertain to sexuality. However, it was the first question on the survey that struck me, and I have never heard anybody comment on this particular statistic. The question contained a statement that was to be answered as being either true or false: “At the Mass, bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ”. Of those surveyed between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, 29% believed this to be true; of those between the ages of thirty and thirty-four, 28% believed this to be true; of those between the ages of forty-five and sixty-four, 37% believed this to be true; and of those sixty-five or older, 51% believed that this was the case. If we are to subscribe to the notion that the Eucharist is the heart of the Catholic enterprise, then these statistics are astonishing.

There are many elements at play in these responses of the Eucharist. For example, one might ask, “What does the real presence of Christ entail?”. Most of us were taught to accept a crudely physicalist understanding of the Eucharist and the belief that if we bit into the host, blood would pour into our mouths. However, are the aforementioned statistics simply based on a rejection of this kind of primitivism,

or, is something larger and more serious amiss? I am inclined to believe that the latter is most likely the case so in order to look into this problematic we must ask ourselves, what is occurring in the Eucharist?

I would like to suggest a seemingly indirect manner of getting at the Eucharist. We can begin to attempt this by going back from the passage that Sheila read from 1 Corinthians ("We have received this tradition...that on the night before Jesus died, he said...") and what occurred afterwards, that is, the very situation that moved Paul to begin to talk about the Eucharist. Parenthetically note that this text was written at an extraordinarily early point the history of the Christian movement, -Paul talked about the tradition of the Eucharist around the year 60 CE. Thus, the celebration of The Last Supper, the Eucharist, appears to have been a central element in the Christian belief from its inception. But what moved Paul to speak like this was this. The early Christians assembled in peoples' houses and there, the ritual celebration of the Lord's Supper was always preceded by a normal meal. Paul was extraordinarily exercised because the wealthy people who came, brought all kinds of food and ate it by themselves, while the poor waited for the wealthy peoples' meal to end so that they could celebrate the Lord's Supper. Paul's reaction to this was outrage: he wrote in response, "You do not recognize the body of the Lord!" This remark is what I am interested in because it is most telling. What was Paul referring to? Was he angry over the wealthy missing the meaning of the Eucharist, or (and I would like to suggest that both of these possibilities were probably in play), was Paul disturbed because these wealthy individuals did not recognize the body of the Lord in the poor, that is, the people who were there with them? This dynamic is very interesting in that, because these wealthy people did not recognize the body of the Lord in their fellow believers, they could not recognize the body of the Lord in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This is a startling view of things.

I would like to take Paul's Eucharist interpretation one step further. Not only are we unable to identify with our fellow believers, we also do not very readily identify the humanity of the human beings who surround us, because we have so functionalized each other. And so, I went back to a text that I chose for one of my ordination cards, a line from the Russian religious philosopher, Nicholas Berdyaev who make this proposal: "Perhaps the mystery of God is better revealed by the mystery of humanity,

than by a direct search for God to the exclusion of human beings". Berdyaev makes an interesting proposal in that he talks about human beings as mysteries, that we are more than our official statistics and the occupations that we undertake. But if we are essentially mysterious, and this may in itself involve an act of faith, and, if mystery means "beyond articulation," then where do we go? So then I went back to another text that I had read forty years ago, one that has never left me. It was written by the American writer James Agee. (In the 1930s, he was commissioned by Fortune magazine to live with a group of sharecroppers in the South and to write of his experience. Instead of being 40,000 words, his manuscript became a book-length text. It was not published by Fortune, but it was eventually published as "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men". This is Agee's background. And so, Agee is given the task of entering into the lives of these other human beings; and if you know anything about his other writings, what he writes as a result of this experience is not going to surprise you.) In the passage that I am about to read, Agee attempts precisely to intimate the mysteriousness, depth, and the surplus of meaning in a human being in the very density of his language. So, I ask that you listen very carefully. This is what Agee writes:

For one who sets himself to look at all earnestly...
into the living eyes of a human life: what is it he
there beholds that so freezes and abashes his
ambitious heart? What is it, profound behind the
outward windows of each one of you, beneath touch even
of your own suspecting, drawn tightly back at bay
against the backward wall and blackness of its prison
cave, so that the eyes alone shine of their own angry
glory, but the eyes of a trapped wild animal, or of a
furious angel nailed to the ground by his wings, or
however else one may faintly designate the human
'soul,' that which is angry, that which is wild, that
which is untamable, that which is healthful and holy,
that which is competent of all advantaging within hope
of human dream, that which...is of all these the least
destructible, the least corruptible, the most

defenseless, the most easily and multitudinously wounded, frustrate, prisoned, and nailed into a cheating of itself...how, looking thus into your eyes and seeing thus, how each of you is a creature which never in all time existed before and which shall never in all time exist again and which is not quite like any other and which has the grand stature and natural warmth of every other and whose existence is all measured upon a still mad and incurable time; how am I to speak of you...?

I propose that perhaps it is impossible for us to recognize the real presence of this man Jesus in what we do today because we do not recognize the real humanity of the people we are with. It is absolutely good ecclesiology to say that the Church is the one place where peoples' whole humanity gets full play. And yet, how do we distinguish between the normal sociability of London, Ontario and the encounter with the mysteriousness of the other? Of course, it has to do with our own self-understanding because (and I do not know how this works) I do not think that we can understand the mysteriousness of another human being in that human being's full humanity if we do not understand our own humanity. But such understandings are interdependent.

With respect to my own experience, every time that I have tried to penetrate the depth and mysteriousness of another human being, I have come to discover more about myself. It seems to me that this is absolutely essential in appropriating the Eucharist. This is not some kind of high-flown, abstract form of identification. Rather, it is the most concrete, genuine reality of our human lives, which of course we evade over and over again because it is too frightening. It is much easier to simply stay on the surface of our relationships with each other and with ourselves and not even begin to intimate that there is much more here that we cannot touch; this is the mystery that we do not want to experience. Thus, I really am persuaded that if the Eucharist does not work, it is not because Jesus is failing, it is because we do not work.

And so, I hope that this discussion is a useful source of meditation for you on this feast of Corpus Christi; I have found it to be helpful as I have wondered

about the mysteriousness of the other. Moreover, this mysteriousness of the other is related to our practice here (as I have said over and over, this congregation approximates what I believe a real community represents, more so than any explicitly religious group that I have ever been involved with). But I believe that, among ourselves, there is always a danger of floating to the surface. There is always the danger of thinking that across the threshold of this Chapel there is not a different space, in comparison to what exists on its exterior, that exterior being a space in which we are all just functions or a number of billiard balls banging into each other. I tried to discern how one can relate to the other and I would like to very seriously propose that the best way in carrying this out is silence. For example, silence is the only means that I know that prepares me for the celebration of the Liturgy. Silence is the only thing that is going to give me the interior space to move from secular space to sacred space. Even if we cannot move from "there," the very exercise of silence is evidence of our desire to carry this out. And, we may just be at that preliminary stage of only wanting to be silent enough to be able to say, "These people here - - my doctor, lawyer, or therapist, or teacher, spouse etc. - - now have to emerge into their own full, mysterious plenitude for me here."

Finally, I really believe that to the extent that we can bring the aforementioned identification off, the celebration of this absolutely primal human gesture of sharing bread can be expressive of the real presence of Jesus, an individual who withheld nothing of himself and was absolutely available to everybody else.

If the New York Times is correct then we certainly are in trouble. But it is very important that we look at where the source of the trouble lies.

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Other business to attend to first

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 28th, 1998

Readings: 1 Kings 19.16b, 19-21; Gal. 5.1, 13-18; Lk. 9.51-62

Perhaps my age should play a larger part in my homily preparations, but when I am thinking about these texts I usually do not consider the fact that I am sixty-two and that I can now get senior citizen hostel reservations and discounts at Robert Q. I mention this because of the centrepiece of today's three readings, that is, this stunning line from Paul: "For freedom, Christ has set us free". What does freedom look like to somebody who is sixty-two? It looks like something very different in comparison to one's interpretation of it at the age of eighteen, thirty, or forty...even fifty. So, in a sense, I want to apologize because what I wish to say today is very much coloured by my age. And, by the fact that I just left the bedside of my mother who is dying. So I am in the midst of a death-watch. I presume that many of you in this room have gone through this and that you understand this experience. Dr. Johnson said that this experience "wonderfully focuses your mind".

The whole issue of freedom becomes very important in this circumstance because it sheds some light on all of those stupid things that we did in our earlier lives, The compulsion I had to radically position myself against a loved one and so create barriers, gaps, and distances. How petty and small this seems right now. And yet, how does one refrain from doing these same silly things earlier in one's life?

Of course, what is at stake is freedom. And by definition, adolescence, late adolescence, or, as with me, very late adolescence, is not free. Thus, there is a weird 'necessity' in doing all of those things that are so often, or can be, destructive. These destructive actions are not free and, often enough, they are not freeing.

We would very much like to say, “I wish that that had not happened,” but, it happened. This is all that I want to say about the death-watch experience, an experience that is so enormously important in human life. There is nothing like it, and it raises the question of freedom in the most radical fashion; that is, that “above everything else, I should have been free for you, [or] I wish I had been free for you as I wish you had been free for me”.

As a transitional comment, I was thinking of the Hindu doctrine of the various stages of life and how psychologically, apt these stages of being are. For example, one is supposed to be a soldier, and then a merchant, and then finally a sage at the end of the four stages. Psychologically, this makes all kinds of sense because we have to struggle through those battles of freeing ourselves. However, these battles are never assured of success. I think that we all come to that next stage in the process as casualties, of having negotiated so ineptly the movement to (what I am sure the Hindus have in mind) greater and greater freedom.

Finally, the main point in both the first and third readings, although it is not explicitly stated, is the freedom to seek Jesus. This is evident in Luke when a potential follower says, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father,” which means, “Let me go home and hang around until the old man is dead and then I will show up.” And later, when another would-be follower says, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home”. This is temporizing. There is an inhibition in these situations; there is some sort of impediment to the free following of this man whom we reluctantly acknowledge as supremely human, supremely free. Hence we, like these would-be followers, say, “I have other business to attend to first”. And of course, this is connected to the essence of freedom. When Jesus says, “Follow me,” -however this might work out in one’s life, we understand that the decision to do this makes sense. And we even know that, in following him, everything else will fall into place. And yet.…

As a statement of his freedom, Jesus can say that, “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” and “...look at the sparrows... no one falls without God being aware”. This is freedom; to live the totally God-ward life. It is the freedom whereby one does not let their business, or becoming a success, or getting their BA, or getting married, take first place. How often we feel we must first become settled in life in order to start praying and to “get religion”. (This is where the age aspect of this discussion comes into play because now I can look back at my earlier life and acknowledge

my foolishness.)

So, I do not know exactly where this places us. However, I do know that "For freedom Christ has set us free," free, above all, to respond to each other. This is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the law, rather than all of the intermediate measures that we insist are so vital to our lives. They are not. And this again, is why the death-watch is so useful, because the proper order of things comes through with an absolute, piercing clarity.

An epilogue. I had to go back to my home town where my mother lives: Taylorville, Illinois, population 8,000-9,000. And, as I walked through the streets, reflecting on my earlier life, I gazed at my old elementary and high schools. And I had this regret because growing up in Taylorville, especially in the years following the Depression, signified very limited expectations. I never thought that I would earn a PhD in my life, least of all have two PhD's in a family out of the three children (my younger sister has a PhD), because Taylorville seemed to make life little, and give rise to smaller expectations. But what dawned on me during my visit to Taylorville was the presence of my mother's little life. My mother's life is a little life in the sense that most peoples' lives are little. How many Bill Gates' are there? Probably one too many in the world. But then what life is little? What are the stakes? Where is the real drama? My little German, hausfrau Mother raising three children, tending after a husband, grocery shopping, endless laundry, house cleaning...It dawned on me that all these can be the elements of the drama of greatness. We who live, bedazzled by the disease of celebrity, are perhaps the greatest slaves of all. That is, that unless I can stop operating as a Bill Gates wannabe. I never look around and see where I should be free to respond to the world that is right here, just as these men in The Gospel of Luke discovered that they must shed their former lives in order to follow Jesus.

I am sorry that this has been somewhat dishevelled, but I think that there is a kind of coherence here. We are talking about where freedom is played out, what freedom consists of, what shape does it have, what coloration? I hope that I and you can extract something useful out of this discussion on freedom and that you and I can continue to think and pray over all of this.

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The sense that all of life is an act of benevolence

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998

Readings: (no. 114, pg. 729): Ecclesiastics 1.2; 2.21-23; Col. 3.1-5, 9-11; Lk. 12.13-21.

I do not know who chooses the readings and it is always an effort, sometimes easy, sometimes not, to try to figure out how they all fit together. I think that for today the job it is fairly simple.

The creators of this ensemble of readings took sections of this famous beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastics and combined it with this passage from the Colossians, and especially this little scene from the Gospel of Luke, and talked about the danger of greed, that is, the danger of seeking for money. Now this is a regular biblical theme, you cannot serve God and money. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom. This is a major theme throughout the New Testament.

But it struck me, as I was looking at these readings, that it is too bad that they very selectively chose this passage from Ecclesiastes because I think that in putting together this combination of readings they have somewhat trivialized this, what is probably, if not the deepest, the second deepest and most searching book in the whole Bible.

Ecclesiastes was written late, a couple hundred years before our era. It is probably an older person's reflection on the way that the world works. Their conclusion was that the world does not make any sense. That is, all of the nice, causal, consequential patterns that we would like to see working in the world, massively break down.

And so the people who assembled today's readings chose one out of an entire series of these breakdowns: namely, as is seen in Ecclesias-

tics, that somebody builds up something with knowledge and skill and then some moron comes and tears it down. And all of the urgent seeking for things (money being the assumed object in this case) is useless. But the author of Ecclesiastics is talking about a larger question than the search for money. I think the search for money in itself is indicative of some larger hunger. I think that money is a symbolic element in human life which is a surrogate for some sort of meaning. This is hardly a novel insight, but I think that it very adequately explains the passion that we all have for money. Money is the sacrament, money is the salvific agent because we have stopped looking for salvation in other places. And what Ecclesiastes, which does not focus on money, is really talking about is the inconsequentiality of all of our appetites and expectations in life. The author of Ecclesiastes is saying that nothing works. Forget it. You break your back doing something and spend enormous energy looking for something, and it is all going to collapse. And so the question underlying the whole text is, “Why live at all? Is life meaningless?”. According to all of our normal schemes of meaning, the author wants to say, “Yes, it is meaningless”.

And so the question is, “What do we do now? What do we look to that will sustain us? What will get us out of bed in the morning?”. The answer that the author of Ecclesiastes proposes is very interesting: “Do not have expectations”. And how, unless of course you are crazy, do you do that? Because I know all kinds of crazy people who just live from moment to moment and do not have any expectations or any sense of consequences or responsibility. Presumably, this is not an injunction to go crazy. Rather, it is the proffering of a view of reality which is radically different from the one that keeps us going on the basis of our expectations.

In a critical passage, the author of Ecclesiastes will say, “Enjoy the wine that you have today. Enjoy the wife that you love and live with...”. In other words, he is offering a solution, if you will, to the mystery of life that sounds very Buddhist (but it is not Buddhist, it is Jewish): “You live in gratitude for what is here at this moment”. Life is basically a gift. It seems clearly that is what Jesus had in mind. For instance, it is so easy to trivialize (and the Church does it with great regularity) those stunning passages in Matthew - - “Look at the lilies of the field. Look at the birds...” - - or how we have devastated by sentimentalizing it, the figure of Francis of Assisi, portraying him with birds on his shoulder, talking to wolves and all of this rubbish. This is sheer romantic nonsense because Francis was very aware of the harsh realities of life. And so his was not just some vacuous, Pollyannaish view of

things. But I think that what Jesus was trying to get at, and the way he seemed to have been able to live out his own life, was from the sense that all of life is an act of benevolence, “I am surrounded by benevolence”. And I think that only that can cut through the sacramental quality of money, reputation, sexual activity, pleasure or our regular list of salvation surrogates today.

And it is too bad because whoever picked the readings today really did trivialize this business of the depth of the question that the author of Ecclesiastics asks by focusing too narrowly on the question of money. The question is clearly larger than the question of money.

In the world, the Church ought to be the voice of alternate meanings to all of the different meanings that we get from stock market reports, M.T.V., Entertainment Tonight, Wheel of Fortune or all of those other things that sustain us so much. Somehow, the Church ought to embody and express those deep issues in and of life, instead of making sure every canonical “t” is crossed and “i” is dotted. Straining the gnat and swallowing the camel seems to be our stock-in-trade.

Finally, what is the technique, that is, how do we come to this business of gratitude? And here too we can look at the Eastern traditions and remember Christianity is an Eastern religion as well. And the answer is very simple and abrasive to me, and maybe to you as well: poverty. To literally disencumber oneself in all kinds of ways. And by disencumbering oneself, be able to be comfortable with all of those other people who are in fact poor in our world. How am I to do that when I do not want to move out of my house or give up my CD collections? And, you might ask, must we do this when we do not even know if we are asking the right questions? Yes I know it is a radical self-emptying which enables the meaning that Jesus embodied and represented in his life to address me. “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher...All is vanity”. This is pretty hard stuff, but we are talking about the great, central issue of humanity: “Is it worth getting out of bed in the morning or is it not?”

The capacity to respond is freedom

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998

Readings: Wis. 18.6-9; Heb. 11.1-2, 8-19; Lk. 12.32-48.

This passage from Luke is sort of a miscellany of themes that show up through the Gospel. And Luke is of course organizing this material in his own way and for his own purposes. But the thing that seems to be central in this passage, and at least which is coherent with the first and second readings, is the notion of living out of faith, faith that the Son of Man, Jesus, is going to return, sent by God, to judge the world and complete the human enterprise and establish the Kingdom of God.

This little story in Luke about the master going away, putting people in charge and their misusing their authority, was probably created by the early Church to address the big problem that the promise of Jesus' life and death, and above all, his resurrection, did not seem to be kept. That is, the early Church lived, certainly until about the year 70, in the expectation that Jesus was going to return. Paul, until the day that he died, probably around the year 66, truly believed that. And it did not happen. So they had to accommodate themselves to that. And the different Gospels do it in different ways, but clearly, especially in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, they told these little stories, the point of which was to be ready, to be prepared, to continue to structure your life along the lines of the promise that God made. And that is of course what faith is: to live out of that promise. We see this over and over in the passage that John read from Hebrews, that is, that faith is always faith in a promise. We are to construct our lives living out of a promise. The notion of promise is absolutely central to the notion of faith.

But, in addition, there is something that underlies that notion which can easily be missed and is, in a very real sense, more basic and more worthy of attention. If you look at the Biblical material - - the call of Abraham, the father of all believers, or the call of Moses - - you will find a reoccurring pattern of God addressing people. And the point is that, in the very act of addressing people, God enables peoples' freedom. You can only become free if someone takes you seriously, pays attention to you...addresses you. At least that is the Biblical view of freedom. Abraham is promised and he could say no. Moses is promised and he could say no. But the capacity to say no is obviously rooted in freedom. If you look at all of the other religions in the ancient world - - for example, Buddha's great interior illumination in which he saw that life was suffering and the ego was an illusion etc., or the great Native American religions which operate in terms of great cosmic patterns so that one's job is to somehow fit into these patterns - - only the Jews had this strange God who said, "No, I am talking to you, and therefore, you are now able to respond to me". The very capacity to respond is freedom, because if nobody ever talks to you then you do not have to talk back, you do not have to do anything! You may have to work out an ascetical practice, as the Buddhists do with their profound thoughts about the transformative power of meditation and the path to enlightenment, etc. But this ferocious emphasis on peoples' freedom and responsibility is a peculiarly Jewish thing. I can only respond to the promise if I choose to respond to the promise. Thus, if the promise is a very central notion to faith, freedom is even more so. I can choose not to believe, but faith is precisely choosing to believe. And of course this spells itself out in all kinds of extraordinary, rich, and deep ways. We believe that faith is a grace. Yes, but it is grace as enabling freedom, as all grace is, in the Biblical view of things.

I think that this is extremely important today for all kinds of reasons. For example, how many people in our world really feel free and responsible for their own lives? In many ways I am a child of the sixties and I remember all of the protests and the buttons that said, "Do not fold, bend, or spindle," because many in the old days, saw themselves as these little computer cards with multiple holes in them. And there was the sense that we were simply numbers, ciphers in some great scheme of things. I do not know whether the dangers that were acknowledged with such force and excess often enough in the sixties, have passed. Maybe they are even more dangerous now because we don't recognize them. Or maybe this accounts for the kind of rabid freedom of the Survivalists, for example, here in Canada and the United States, who are going to assert their freedom in the face of

everything else. I think that their stance is intelligible in terms of the seeming disappearance of freedom. The problem with the Survivalists of course, is that their notion of freedom is totally boneheaded, at least as far as the Bible is concerned, because they want to do it their way over and against everybody else. And freedom in the Biblical view is the freedom to say yes, and ultimately, to say I love you, which is supposed to be the highest form of freedom.

And finally, this is really important for us today because I think that the area of freedom is becoming more and more constricted. This is a terrible danger. For example, we live in a world where freedom is being compressed, denied, restricted, or simply ignored over and over again, all over the world...we do not have to go to Cambodia. Look at the power of the structures within which all of us exist here in the greatest country in the world. How much room is their for freedom, for real choice? And so the Church, ought to be able to testify to the centrality of freedom...because that is what makes me a human being! That is how I build a life! I build a life on my choices, that is, my choice to say yes, above all, my choice to say yes to the promises of God. This is the axis along which I am to construct my existence. And the Church ought to be at the absolute forefront of proclaiming and enabling that. Unfortunately if anybody asked for one word to describe the Roman Church today, I do not think that many of us would respond by stating that it is the arena of the greatest human freedom. So, thank God that we have the chance to hear these readings week after week. They help us to examine ourselves, our world, and our own behaviour, or non-behaviour, in the face of so many things that constrict our humanity.

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Who is in and who is out

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998

Readings (no. 123, pg. 739): Is. 66.18-21; Heb. 12.5-7, 11-13; Lk. 13.22-30.

I did not find today's readings too promising at first. But then I found that there is an underlying connection between them. And the issue is rough for me. It might even be the central issue in the whole New Testament, perhaps in the whole Bible as well. It is expressed here in the issue that so agonised the early Jesus movement: namely, who was a real Jew? Now what Jesus did was to redefine what it was to be a Jew. And so there were some Jews who thought that he had defined it correctly, and some who thought that he did not. And even after his followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead, this argument went on and on, certainly until the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. And then it was definitively settled with Constantine saying that Christianity was the Roman Empire's official religion.

But this problem of who is in and who is out is the crucial problem. And Jesus of course got into trouble by constantly stretching the boundaries...by saying that those people whom you think are most remote are in. This is what this business of Luke is about and this very obscure passage from Isaiah involves God bringing all of the pagans into the chosen people. Finally, I presume that the cost of doing this is why they chose this passage from the Letter to the Hebrews about suffering.

I do not like this passage from Hebrews very much because I think that the model that they use of us, as children being disciplined by God as father, is not particularly helpful today. It may have worked

in a patriarchal society two-thousand years ago but I am not so sure it works very well for us. But the issue is the crucial issue of suffering. And what we get out of the New Testament of course is that the opening of boundaries is going to entail suffering.

This is so different from the notion of suffering that I grew up with in the Church. Then, the pain was to continue to stand up for certain Catholic things: you did not eat meat on Friday; you did go to Mass under pain of mortal sin; and sex of course was the absolute taboo etc. To resist all of those things was the source of suffering, but that is an altogether inadequate way of understanding what Gospel-shaped suffering is all about. There, suffering is simply the process of enlarging one's heart and boundaries and becoming more encompassing. That is the only thing that qualifies suffering as Christian: the pain entailed in allowing more people in.

The bombings of these past weeks remind us of the nature of fundamentalism, whether it is Roman Catholic, Moslem, Hindu, or Buddhist etc. It is precisely to narrow, to circumscribe to de-legitimate the humanity of "the other". And so, we can take some sort of message from our own time: that presumably, if you offer greater amplitude for your concern and your heart, then that is going to cost you. But I would like to shift just slightly to this business of costingness, because I think that this is really problematic today.

I was talking to Peter on the way in about the question: "Do I have to go to church?" I remember, when I was a little older than Peter, resisting, and even finally leaving the whole operation. What I want to get to is this: I think that we are living in a society where this issue - - whether one attends church or not - - is increasingly aggravated because it is impossible to find some kind of legitimate reason for saying no to oneself. Now, of course people Peter's age have a larger issue, a larger problem with doing that than we supposedly more mature types. But what I am trying to get at, is that suffering arises precisely from saying no to oneself. I do not necessarily want to go to church all of the time either, Peter, believe me. But I know, and with considerably more years than you have, that this is necessary for me. I need this and I have to resist myself. I have to resist my impulses to say, "No, I want my life to be manageable and tidy. I want to have these people in it and these people outside of it. I want these responsibilities and I do not want these responsibilities. I want to be comfortable! I want life to be fun and easy!" Now understandably, this does not solve Peter's problem or the problem

of J.P. or of a whole bunch of the other kids here who are feeling very restive about Mass. Because Mass is not really built for kids. And often enough, we adults have not shown that Mass attendance is a particularly grown-up thing to do. And for that we owe the kids at least some attention. (There are many other larger problems: how do you articulate, that is, how you symbolize this appetite for growth in little kids today. I do not know how you do that, I am having a hard enough time doing it for myself.) But to suffer means first of all, again, to break open the narrowness of my range of concern and awareness and to be able to say no to my constant tendency to restrict and constrict and to look out for my own interests above all, first, all of the time.

And then Peter and J.P. and anybody else who is feeling uncomfortable about being here and would much rather be outside, you need to hear this because unfortunately I do not think that this is announced anywhere else in our world, that we are supposed to embrace everybody. We do not do it very well...we do not symbolise it for ourselves and for our children. (The Church, unfortunately, seems to be getting narrower and narrower and this is a source of great distress to many of us.) But rehearsing the life of that man who says, “I am here for everybody,” is crucial, because there really is not anywhere else where we can do this, at least not that I can see.

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Without humility love is impossible

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998

Readings (no. 126, pg. 742): Sir. 3.17-20, 28-29; Heb. 12.18-19, 22-24a; Lk. 14.1, 7-14.

This reading from the Gospel of Luke is a curious one. It looks like a combination of Machiavelli and B. F. Skinner. Skinner, of course, was the great behaviourist psychologist. It sounds like Machiavelli, because you get this devious, duplicitous strategy for self-promotion: Do the humble act and then, by God, you will be pushed forward and can cash in. (You also have to remember that this was spoken in a society where the honour/shame polarity was of enormous importance). That is clearly Machiavelli. Of course Skinner was very interested, in order to make his behaviourist theories work, in creating what we call the capacity for delayed gratification. So, the thing to do is to have a little misery right now and then, the pay-off comes later!

I wonder, when I think about these texts, whether Jesus was smiling while he said all of this... if this goes back to the historical Jesus. There is a clear sense of irony, because neither Machiavelli's vision of how life should be put together, nor Skinner's, can accommodate the rest of the Gospel of Luke, or any of the rest of the New Testament for that matter. Therefore, we have to look at this business of humility a little more closely, because that is clearly what the people who put these readings together had in mind.

I think that we live in a society where it is very difficult to talk about humility, and Andy Warhol was right at least, in that everybody wants to have their fifteen minutes of fame, and we go around salivating for that. Moreover, if we can parlay that fifteen minutes into half an hour, or better yet, a lifetime, we are ahead of the game. In other words

today, as one book title has it, we are suffering from The Frenzy of Renown. To be, is to be seen, and to be seen, of course, in the best possible way. That is why public relations is a growth industry. The Pope is coming to St. Louis and so they hired the same group that did publicity for the Rolling Stones tour. We are devotees in the Cult of Celebrity. For example, this is the first-year anniversary of Diana's death and the television is going to be filled with it all week. This lady was killed. She was a nice enough lady, but still..... What does that say about us? To be, is to be seen and to be seen in the most glorious kind of way because that gives us our sense of who we are, that gives us our sense of reality.

The problems with this are multiple. First of all, it is not real and it is not true. But today, to a degree never before in the history of the world, we have the means for manufacturing reality through the media. So humility becomes even more remote and more distant and harder to take seriously.

What we are talking about when we speak of humility is the real self. Today's society says the real self is whoever your public relations agent can mould you into! And we all have public relations agents, whether we pay them thousands and thousands of dollars, or whether we act as our own agents, putting our best foot forward. Public relations are more important than the truth. What Jesus comes and does is to say, "No, folks, who you are is what is between you and God". If there is any appetite for some kind of authenticity, for some reality of who one is, then that is where it is to be constituted, out of this dialogue with this mysterious other who cannot be tabulated on popularity polls, whose presence is not palpable and whose presence is certainly not marketable. (Which, of course, is what drives us today. Is it marketable? Will it sell?) But prayer is supposed to be the effort to disencumber myself of my own illusions about myself, to disencumber myself of the social self that I either intentionally or unintentionally constitute, in order to come to who I really am. And who I really am, of course, is who I am before God, with God. The self is always a dialogical self and to this extent, the public relations people have it right. They create an audience to which I can play. Their sense of the self is, authentic, in that it is a dialogical self. But their sense of the self is all a matter of artifice and contrivance. Prayer is the attempt to escape that. Prayer is the attempt to disencumber oneself, not with a view to impoverishing oneself, but to finding the truth.

And that is why the Church is so crucial. The Church ought to be the place where I can precisely discover who I am, because it ought to be the place where

we do not pretend to be other than who we are. If God is present here among us in this room, at this moment, then we should be able to be who we are here too. So all this is not about some kind of little private compact that I make with God. This is supposed to be able to be articulated in the human reality of this particular gathering of human beings.

The problems, as I said, of coming to terms with this, of taking this seriously, are enormous. They are the problems of a society with this insatiable appetite for the sensational, with this apparently insatiable craving to be larger than I know myself to be. So the difficulties are enormous and I do not think that most of us even take account of those most of the time, so much are they a part of the fibre of our lives.

But then the problem is sometimes excacerbated by the activity of the Church too. I just read that the Christian brothers in Australia are now being sued, probably out of existence, because of the sexual and physical abuse of English children who were sent there to be relocated. And of course how long does it take the Christian brothers to admit that? How long has it taken the archdiocese of Dallas as it is sued for $119,000,000 and after a whole series of denials to admit to the pederastic activity of one priest? We have Mount Cashel. We have the resignation of the archbishop of Halifax in this country. Is humility our stock-in-trade or is it rather this other business? Is the Church as an institution afraid to say: We are a sinful people.

You see there are two absolutely central problems here. Without humility love is impossible. Without truth a genuine community is impossible. We are not talking about humility for the sense of self-denigration, we are talking about people being able to touch each other in their own reality! Without that honesty love is impossible. And all of our talk about love is so much eyewash, dust in the air, and hypocrisy. And love is, of course, supposed to be the great sign to the world: By this sign will all people know you are my disciples: that you truly love one another. You do not love an image, for God's sake! We attempt to love the reality. So that is one of the most important problems that underlies this whole business of humility.

The second one has to do with this issue, again, of the Frenzy of Renown, of celebrity. What is our vision of how we are to run our lives as individuals and as institutions? You see, there is something here that is absolutely critical because the Church is to be the only space in the world where people can say, and not in a

Clintonesque, evasive fashion, “We really are sinners,” because we really do believe Jesus’ life is the way all life ought to go! And we do not do it.

But apart from that, genuine repentance, which of course is simply another form of to the truth, is impossible. Before we are a communion of saints we are a communion of sinners. I should be able to walk into this room and say, “I am a sinner, and I am here among my fellow sinners and can be who I am”. My God, think about that, then think about life as it goes on normally in our world. The pretence. The falsification. The self-inflation. The self-promotion. Where else do you go to hear this? Do we take these texts, this man Jesus, seriously? Do we take this vision of human possibility seriously? Nobody else is talking about this, in my world. Not the New York Times. Not Dan Rather. Not Conrad Black. Not C.N.N. Certainly not Entertainment Tonight. And yet, these are the constituent forces that mould the kids that are going to appear at this institution! And so what do we do about that? Where are we? Who do we really want to be? Do we believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, or do we not? In other words, what is our vision of how life should work? And if that is our vision then repentance should be easy, natural. But it is not, not for us as a Church - and this is the great scandal of all of these evasions - or for us as individuals.

So th Gospel again raises these crucial questions: does Jesus make sense? Is this true? Not, does he make me feel good! Not, does he give me uplift, but is he true? Is this what I really want in my life, for me, and for my world? That is the issue.

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New life that is so fragile

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998

Readings (no. 129, pg. 745); Wis. 9.13-18; Phil. 9b-10, 12-17; Lk. 14.25-33.

We have had a baptism today and it is a happy coincidence that we should have this particular reading. So, I would like to look at this passage from the Gospel to see what this has to say to us on this occasion.

This is a particularly interesting time for me because I became a grandfather last Monday; and so, I find that sitting and holding a newborn baby in my arms is an extraordinary experience, especially a baby that is connected to me. And, I found that it gives rise to abnormally long thoughts about life, about myself, and about this new life that is so fragile. So that is, as you will see, feeding very much into what I thought about this text.

The text is interesting in that it expresses a regular New Testament theme: that every time family relationships are mentioned, they are both warned against and radically relativized. The only comparable matter is when Jesus talks about authority. There too, it is always conditioned with a warning against its abuse. Here we have today, this almost violent language from Luke about hating the closest relationships we have: father, mother, spouse, children, brothers and sisters. What is going on there? Even given lots of allowance for oriental hyperbole and overstatement, there is still something significant here. For Jesus, the family is an essentially ambiguous institution. And in Jesus' own time, of course, the family had a more central reality in the lives of people than it does for us. The family was the place where you were introduced to your tribe - - where you established where you firmly

belonged. So why does Jesus, in that context as well as our own, relativize these relationships. Well, I think that everybody can reflect on her/his own family to see that, yes, the family is the place where I was nourished, where I got the source of my life. But also, the family is the place where I learned to be afraid, to be ashamed of myself, to distrust. Perhaps most significantly, I think that the family is the place where my possibility to connect to the world at large is circumscribed. The family, which ought to be, under the best of circumstances (which of course never obtains - - ever), is the school wherein I learn to see the world whole and round. Instead, it always happens that to some extent, (and I am not talking in absolute terms) but to some extent the family is always the place where some other people are made discountable because of their language, colour, dress, income, social class, or the fact that they are just not in my family. And that is exactly, I suspect, why Jesus warns against the family. The genius of Jesus was precisely the capacity to transcend all of those things in order to let the whole world come into his purview. Again, the ambiguity of the family is that it certainly teaches me to see some things but also blinds me and incapacitates me for seeing other things. And I should not say things, I should say people. How can we withstand that? How can we protect ourselves against that? Certainly not by making will acts.

And now I go back to those little meditations that I had while holding this baby in my hands. Everybody talks about the birth of a child being a miracle. (After the birth of his first child, even an atheist friend of mine who used to teach here came to me and said: “If I were ever to believe in God it would be because I was present at the birth of my child”.) What is miraculous about the birth of the child? Just new life? Perhaps, but it seems to me that one of the things that struck me most was the enormous disproportion, the disproportion between the appearance of this new human being on this planet and all of the activity that surrounded her production. It does not fit! To move from sexual intercourse and nine months later to find a human being...I mean, it seems to me that there are very few disproportions as notable as that in the world! But looking at this little kid, and knowing how the little kid got here, I said: “My God, how do you move from there to here?”. I want to propose then, that the miraculous quality of the birth of a child is precisely that wild disproportion. Which suggests what? I really did not originate this reality that now lies in my arms, in the most radical sense. Certainly I am an agent in the reality of this child. But this child’s reality far transcends anything I could have to do with it.

This, of course, opens up the great question: Where does this child come from? Whose child is this really? And that is where my atheist friend, whose remark was made to me about twenty years ago, has never left me. We would-be Christians answer: Fundamentally, this is God's child. And I propose that that conviction is the absolute and essential first step to moving beyond all the constriction that happens within a family.

But another thing struck me as I sat in the hospital and watched nurses troop through and relatives come in and out. I was amazed and somewhat stunned by the certainty that everybody had about this little kid: "Oh, she is not feeding for this reason; or she is crying for this reason; or, of course we have to have a presentation blanket, of course she has to have a nice pink and frilly dress to leave the hospital with". And it does not take much effort of imagination to extrapolate all those certainties which then circumscribe and truncate the reality of that child's life. Everybody knows too much! Everybody knows too much about who this child is and what this child needs and how this child is to become! The cultural things ...you can make an enormously long list: gender identification; social class; cast; colouration; this child is a mixed race child - at least my grandchild is. But this simply brings more into the mix and everybody knows. And yet what struck me as I looked at this little pulsating, eight-pounds, thirteen-ounce new human being is that I do not know anything; that this child ultimately lies in my arms as a mystery. And this of course is allied to the notion that the child is basically God's child.

You see I can do that because I do not have to wake up at two in the morning; I do not have to tolerate endless crying; I do not have to change diapers. But I propose to you, to every parent in this room, that to the extent that we lose that double awareness that this child is fundamentally Gods', we miss the reality of this child and therefore, personal reality of that child is also as Scripture says; "Hidden with Christ in God" we miss the reality of this child. These are the only cautions we can have and they must operate as such in our lives, precisely to keep us from the raising of that child being an exercise in narrowing their vision, incapacitating them, not freeing them but enslaving them to the standards of my social class, educational group, economic class, colouration, or linguistic group.

The presence of a baby does remarkable things, and the trick, of course, is how to not be so worn out by lack of sleep, by constant demands, by constant attentiveness, so that all of these things are not obscured.

So finally, and before we baptize this new baby, I would like to suggest something that had not occurred to me for years. When I was ordained thirty-six years ago, the ordination to the priesthood at that time was surrounded by all kinds of sick mythology: You were a special person, you were set apart, superior - - our class we had to have a class motto, a class song, we had to singularize this event in every way. I, being swept away in so much of this, came up with a personal motto for myself. And it occurred to me, however inadequate it is, it might be useful for parents too. I said to myself, in the weeks before ordination and after and many times since: “Let me, God, lay my impure hands purely on the world”. This has nothing to do with sex, of course. The motto has to do with my own sinfulness, inadequacies, and narrownesses. I pray to somehow reach the world, touch it, in a way that my own constrictions are not going to furthered, abetted. But I prayed to operate in such a way that the world can become bigger, more capacious with room for everybody. It is very presumptuous of me, but I would like to suggest that as you look at your baby that you be very aware of the smallness of your vision, the smallness of your capacity to love, which you share of course with all of us, and pray to God that you can transcend that.

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Where I can be welcomed

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998

Readings (no. 132, pg. 748): Exod. 32.7-11, 13-14; 1 Tim. 1.12-17; Lk. 15.1-32.

I would like to make a preliminary remark before I try to say something that I hope will be useful about this famous parable of the Prodigal Son or, depending on your point of view, the Prodigal Father.

Luke is probably the one of the four Gospel writers who is most anxious to establish Jesus' recognition of gender equality, to put it in our terms. I mean, Luke is at pains over and over to overcome the patriarchal sexism of his day, and so we get again and again what we have in this reading. First, we have the parable told with a man as the protagonist, and then a comparable parable told with a woman as the protagonist. You will notice, if you go through the Gospel of Luke, that he does this time after time: Zechariah gets John the Baptist's birth announcement, then Mary gets Jesus' birth announcement, and so it goes throughout the Gospel.

But to this famous parable... What are the parables for? It was a standard Jewish mode of teaching: the rabbis regularly told little stories. In the case of Jesus' parables a pretty clear pattern emerges. The point of the parables is simply to raise questions, to cause the listeners to wonder about the way they put the world together. And the hope is, of course (we can presume on Jesus' part), that the listeners move from the way they originally saw the world to the way Jesus saw the world. In a sense, then, the parables could be considered a kind of means of calling people to conversion, to a change of point of view. And the way in which this happens over and over is extraordinarily clever. He starts with standard issue experience, everybody's experience: every late-adolescent kid needs to

go out, declare their independence, sow their wild oats. And so there are no surprises there. And, on the other hand, there are the standard, nose-to-the-grindstone types, who say, “Yes, by God! There is no free lunch and we work for everything we get, etc.”. And the marvellous thing about this parable is that both of those standard ways of putting the world together are radically set in questions, because of the mediatory figure, this extraordinary father.

We have to remember that this story was told in a society that was profoundly patriarchal, where men really did “rule the roost”. As I said a few weeks ago, one of the great Jewish prayers that a male says when he gets up in the morning is “Thank-you God that you did not make me a woman”. (I am sure the prayer is still prayed by many of us in one way or another today.) But what is extraordinary is that we have this boss - - The Boss - - who does not act like a boss at all. No Jewish man is going to run after his kid, run toward his kid, for example. No Jewish man is going to lay on this extravagant reception, this welcome for his kid. No Jewish man is going to embrace a wayward, errant person, a son in this case. Justice, we want justice. And so, Jesus tells about this man and this kid, reversing this familiar pattern, in the hope that people will say: “That does not make any sense. This kid ought to be punished! The kid was right when he said that `I do not deserve to be called your son’. But what Jesus is getting at is that the way we normally construe the world, the way we operate in the world, is not the way He construed the world.

Perhaps even more familiar, for those of us who are older, is this notion of having put in a lifetime of labour and wanting what is fair recompense: “I worked all these years, like a slave and you have done nothing for me”. In other words, that older son puts the world together in such a manner in which everything is supposed to work out as a quid pro quo. Justice above all. Fairness above all. And yet the point of the parable is that God absolutely, in the figure of this father, skews that normal way. So on the one hand the priggish self-righteousness that afflicts so many of us is undercut and a kind of self-seeking, a hedonism which seems to erect absolute barriers between the son and this father, is also dismantled.

But the world does not work the way the story has it. The Church does not work this way! I mean, if you were to ask what is the leading characteristic of the Church, would you answer, as this parable suggests you answer, “It is the place where I can be welcomed back all the time”. We do not do that. We exact our pound of flesh or shame or guilt. So, the listeners to the parable, those who really

hear it, say, “This does not make sense. This is not the way the world works,” which is absolutely true. What Jesus is implicitly proposing is that the way the world works is not authentic, that this world, wherein we work out our ego problems, ambitions, shame, guilt, appetites, and fears of each other that so circumscribe us and distance us from each other – that all this is not in fact the real world. The real world, for the people who truly hear this parable of Jesus, is the world that Jesus construes. That is the real world. Therefore, the world as we know it is radically set in question.

Finally, I think it is inordinately important that we have the opportunity to hear these texts, that we hear these texts together. In other words, it is within the context of the Mass, of the our common worship, that these texts ought to take on greater life. Because outside these doors, in the world at large, these texts are not heard. Therefore, it is also enormously important for us that we have an opportunity to hear these texts together. Because the problem of hearing them all by myself is that it is very easy to abstract and desiccate these texts But, when I have to sit, face to face with other human beings whom I do not forgive, from whom I do demand justice... Then this is the place where my “normal” expectations are emulsified, if you will, or even for a short time that they dissolve into a vision of a whole different kind of world. So we come together to remember a man who said: “This is my life for you. This is my body for you. This is my blood for you. This is my self, this is all that I am for you”. You do not hear that anywhere else, but we have the opportunity both to hear it and celebrate it, and even desire to affirm it in our own lives. That is why we are here today and that is why I think that this hour we spend together once a week is so vital.

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We can distract ourselves

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998 (#2)

Readings (no. 135, pg. 753): Amos 8.4-7; Tim. 2.1-7; Lk. 16.1-13.

Poverty is the one subject that everybody agrees is central to what Jesus was about, so far as we can discover that from the texts that we have. More than Jesus talked about sex - infinitely more than Jesus talked about sex for that matter - more than Jesus talked about the Law, Jesus talked about poverty. Poverty, in other words, lies at the centre of his consciousness. That is beyond dispute.

It is equally beyond dispute that this is one of the issues that none of the Christian Churches, ours or any other, have really ever come to terms with, whatever coming to terms with poverty may mean. Rather you can read great ranges, maybe all of Christian history, as a series if side-steppings of this issue. The classic one, of course, is this terrible deformed version of John Calvin's teaching whereby we can look at the poor and say, "Well, by God, they are poor because they are bloody deserving to be poor! They are worthless! They are lazy! They are shiftless! And above all they are evil! Poor people are poor because they are sinners!". And the beauty of that (that is not what Calvin said, of course,) is that we do not then have to worry about the poor, I mean, if they are sinners they are hell-bent and so, "Too bad!". So we can merrily go trotting along, ignoring them.

But there are other strategies that are used to make the poor disappear. I mean, one of the great whipping boys for preachers for centuries, and particularly today, is materialism.

The opposite of materialism, of course, is spiritualism. Well,

what is spiritualism? I do not know, frankly, but it is really nice to say that materialism is bad without saying what the alternatives are. It is very handy. Materialism means, presumably what? Just our regular acquisitiveness; we want more stuff. And God knows we have more stuff here in North America than anybody in the whole history of the world has had. We have more stuff. Those of us who are not poor have more stuff. What is wrong with that?

To find out, let's look at another preacherly object of contempt: hedonism. Hedonism, "Yes, all of these evil pleasure-seekers running around!". Of course the Church has a long tradition of being against pleasure: "Well if it is pleasurable, by God, it must be sinful! So you must watch out for hedonism!". The problem with the complaints about hedonism and materialism I believe, is the same problem - - they miss the point. The heart of the real problem with materialism or hedonism is that they are basically destructive of the human community. We talk about them as some kind of private ill: "Bloody pleasure seekers! Bloody acquirers!". And the real difficulty, of course, is that the pleasures are sought or those goods are acquired on the backs of other people. In other words, this human fabric is split by materialism and hedonism. Historically, that is the way that it has worked out. And that is where the problem lies.

Unfortunately, as I said, we have not been very faithful in the Church to this vision of Jesus that says basically, as Paul will say, "You are members of each other. You are really members of each other". But for most of us, most of the time, the poor are, in Michael Harrington's great description, "invisible". Who knows about them? We do not. And, meanwhile we can distract ourselves by ranting about hedonism, sex, and materialism, stuff that did not seem to bother Jesus all that much, whereas the position of the poor in the society clearly did... "If you want to be perfect, go sell everything you have and give your money to the poor and follow me". "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven". "Blessed are the poor". These express the central axis of Jesus' consciousness. Why? Because, as Luke, this reading today, has it, in his first public address Jesus quotes Isaiah to this effect: the great sign of God's intervention in human history is that the good news is preached to the poor. The people, in other words, who were left out are now included. The community is built if the poor are there, and if the poor are not there, you cannot talk about the community. If the poor do not exist for us, you certainly cannot talk about the community.

This is hard at the best of times. I do not know how to deal with this. I bring it up because it is in the text. I bring it up because it is clearly what Jesus was largely about. I bring it up because the Church has done so badly by it. I bring it up, finally, in our context because there is a chronic problem in the University in North America, maybe all over the world. Every year, the Chronicle of Higher Education surveys all the incoming first-year students in all of the universities in the United States and I think Canada as well. And they ask some questions: “Why do you come to university? What do you really want?”. The thing that hits the highest percentage, 76-80%, is : “To make more money. To get a better job”. When I am feeling whimsical I think: What if we were to advertise a university education as providing people such a sensitivity to the poor that they would see the poor as their fellow human beings and go operate on that basis. We would empty this place faster than you can imagine.

So what do we do? I do not know. Personally, I have wrestled with this for a long time. As I said, in the history of the Church there have been some noble experiments. Francis of Assisi, this little Italian who married lady poverty. After he died, Brother Elias took over and said, “Now we have to get this on a more business-like footing. Now we have to get a little better organized here. And so, instead of all of those rags that Francis had we are going to have tailored costumes that are going to be really nice”.

The only other recent experiment I know that seems to have really been faithful to Jesus is Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker in our own time. Dorothy Day died in 1968. If you do not know about Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker you really should. She called herself a Catholic Anarchist and she said, “Yes, to be a Christian is to be a fellow with the poor,” not, please note, therefore, to say that “Oh, I need the poor so I can give some money away and that will make me feel good!”. I do not need the poor just to practice my virtue on!

Let me finish with something that I read a couple of weeks ago It is one of the best pieces of theology I have read in a long time. Comblin, a Belgian who has lived in Brazil and Chile for forty years, makes this comment. He talks about the eruption of the poor. The eruption, like a volcano erupts or a boil erupts. This is what he has to say and I think he is dead on:

"The meaning of the eruption of the poor is essentially theological rather than sociological. It describes not a social phenomenon but rather the Gospel. Thus, the eruption of the poor takes place within the context of Christianity. For proof one need only read the Gospels or the entire Bible, for that is where the poor erupt. For our contemporaries, the poor are nowhere to be seen. It was with the Gospel that the poor began to be seen in the world. The Church recovers its Gospel vocation, the poor make their way into human awareness thanks to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What makes the poor a class is only their poverty. The poor are the polar opposite to the rich. For Christians, that is enough to dictate the path to follow. Between the rich and the poor one must choose the poor and stand alongside them."

And then this next couple sentences are very interesting given all those wonderful economists at the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the great economic think-tanks. He says,

"This option does not require any analysis. To identify the rich and the poor one needs no analysis. The difference between rich and poor is obvious and immediate. You only need open your eyes and in a moment and at a glance it is clear who is rich and who is poor. An eruption of the poor takes place whenever the Gospel is made manifest, whenever the Church is renewed, whenever the Church returns to its origins."

In other words, we only really hear the Gospel when we become aware of the poor. And if the Gospel does not bring us to that point, then whatever it is we are hearing is not the Gospel.

Keeps us away from each other

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998 (#2)

Readings (no. 138, pg. 757): Amos 6.1a, 4-7; 1 Tim. 6.11-16; Lk. 16.19-31.

This is the second week running in which the readings have to do with this issue, which I said last week, seemed to have been central in the consciousness of Jesus: poverty. This story, although it only appears in Luke, is certainly consistent with what we read in the other Gospels. We can ask, "Why was Jesus fixed on the poor?". I think the problem, which seems to go back as far as the human race does, is pretty clear in this little passage from Luke. It is the notion that we are what we own, so that if we possess more there is more of us, and if we possess less then we are lesser human beings. How do you account, for example, for something that would have been considered extraordinarily gauche when I was growing up, namely, the flashing of designer names on the front of shirts. People used to be very embarrassed so you had to hide the tags. Now, they are proudly displayed: "I am a Tommy Girl". "This is a Calvin Klein T-shirt". "This is a Pierre Cardin belt buckle, etc.". What is going on there? Is the word "Tommy Hilfiger" so beautiful an object that I can offer it to people? Or rather, is it simply the claim that, because I can afford to buy Tommy Hilfiger clothes, I can somehow superior as a human being?

I believe that is called conspicuous consumption. What is the problem with that? I mean, nice clothes are precisely that: nice clothes. They fit better, they are more comfortable, and they may even be more durable. So what is the difficulty of owning lots and lots of stuff? It is this terrible illusion that we so easily fall prey to: the more I own the more I am, so that I really have serious misconstructions of myself as

a human being. That is the first point. But the second point is even more telling.

If there is more to me because I can wear these clothes or own this property, then this distances me from those who do not own and possess as I do. I mean, there is an extraordinary sense of independence among the wealthy. And the more wealth we have the more independent we can be. We can tell everybody else to buzz off. This is embedded in our consciousness so deeply, but to find it, all you have to do is to look at advertisements: “Win the lotto and then you will be free”. Free of what? Free from having to be bothered by or dependent on anybody else. The difficulty, therefore, is that the human community is made almost impossible to achieve with those kinds of inequities. All you have to do is look at the way the world is structured right now where we in North America consume seventy-five to eighty percent of the world’s resources. Then too, look at the death rates of Third World countries and look at the death rates of our country. Indeed obesity is a major problem in North America. It is not a major problem in most of the world. There is something that simply keeps us away from each other that makes, just as Lazarus was invisible to this rich person, the poor are invisible to us. We cannot see them.

Furthermore, the greatest thing attendant on having lots of money is power. The United States Congress’ senators must raise ten-thousand dollars a day in order to run their campaigns. So who is going to be running the country? And power, of course, as Jesus says over and over, is most often the power to intimidate. And intimidation, to make the other afraid of one, is, again, a distancing manoeuvre. We are afraid of the rich. They are intimidating. And on the other hand, who is afraid of the poor. The poor are not able to intimidate. Well, I have to qualify that because I just read that security guards for gated communities is one of the biggest growth sectors of the service industry in the United States. So, we can build all of our nice houses and then we can erect big brick walls and iron gates and hire security guards in order to keep all of those nasty rubbies out. So we are afraid of them but only in so far as they can take our stuff and thereby diminish us. Again, the problem is determining how we can get together with those kinds of disparities. How can we, as Paul will say, “be members of each other” with those kinds of disparities?.

So, what can be done practically? Well, I have two small suggestions. One is simply to carefully monitor one’s purchasing: Why do I buy what I buy? Where do I buy what I buy? “What do I buy?” is the obvious question. How much do I

buy? And the other thing is a little experiment I have carried on for a number of years and it works, if you pay attention to it. (I keep having these lapses, so it does not work all that well for me.) It is this: when you sit down at a table for a meal, think of an empty chair which is occupied by the two-thirds of the people on this planet who are undernourished. It makes a difference. It truly does make a difference. To walk around imagining the reality, because it is the reality, of the mass of people who are pauperized, on the planet. The historians can correct me on this, but from what I know of the culture of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, or the Middle Ages, being market-driven was not the central means whereby the culture was put together. And today it clearly is. The United States government, to take it as an instance, is the most powerful nation in the world in terms of its money and guns. Yet who runs their foreign policy? How much of their domestic policy is market-driven? So, I think this is a novelty. Therefore, I think that all of this talk about poverty takes on a force and an urgency today that it has never previously had, especially for us in the First World.

But the danger, of course, is, as they say, that this is just going to take me on a guilt trip: "Make me feel bad." Oh, religious people have been doing that for years! "Badger people! Hector them into submission!". That is not at all my intention, because I have to listen to what I am saying. How do you begin to encompass this world where the economic disparities are so gross and becoming graver? It only happens authentically to the extent that we really do believe that we are loved by God. Therefore we do not have to rely on all of this other stuff for our sense of ourself. And clearly, as the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible says over and over, to the extent that we are absolutely persuaded that we are loved by God we become more and more available to everybody else. That is the key, of course.

So, what do we do until we grow deeper into that conviction? (Because I tell you, quite frankly, that is not my normal sense of myself.) I have to simply look at statistics and be driven by the statistics of the mal-distribution of this world's plenty among us. And if you say that is being guilt-driven, I would rather say it is being truth-driven. And that is not a bad thing until I grow up and become more and more persuaded that God really does love me as much as God loves everybody else on this planet, and my response to everybody else ought to take place within that context.

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All is gift. All is grace.

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Thanksgiving, 1998

Readings: (no. 144, pg. 764): 2 Kings 5.14-17; 2 Tim. 2.8-13; Lk. 17.11-19

The group of readings today are kind of a happy coincidence with the day before our Thanksgiving celebration. Especially the first and third readings, have as their point the whole business of gratitude.

I do not think that there are many issues in human life that are as helpful as heuristic devices, that is, as a means of investigating ourselves, understanding the world, and certainly, understanding religion as gratitude. If you start pursuing that, that will take you to all kinds of wonderfully rich and terrifically important places.

The fundamental religious attitude, as has been pointed out by all kinds of people, is, simply, gratitude. Ultimately, the religious person is distinguishable from the irreligious person on the basis that gratitude is the religious person's absolutely foundational human stance. This fad may also be helpful in distinguishing real religiosity from the current and vague notion of spirituality. Paul puts it very simply when he rhetorically asks the question: "What have you that you have not received. And if you have received it, why do you behave as if you have not?". And yet I do not think that there are many things in human life as difficult to achieve as a genuine, and so, free sense of gratitude. And so, we raise the question: Why? Why is it so difficult to have gratitude, as one's absolutely foundational stance? Well, I think it would be useful to look at alternate foundational stances which I think are pretty pervasive in our society, and maybe this will enlighten things.

I would like to suggest two. One is the sense of entitlement, as the absolutely basic stance...so deep that we are not even aware of its operation in our lives. It's the sense that, "I am owed this by life, by reality, by the world". As I have mentioned a number of times, one of the startling things that Robert Coles, the great Harvard child psychiatrist, discovered when he investigated the lives of very wealthy children, was that sense of entitlement was constant in their psychic make-up; and this sense had to be devised, it was not spontaneous. Parents had to create in their children the sense of entitlement: "This is mine by right of some sort". And it is self-evident that if that is where we stand in life, in a preconscious way, then gratitude is out of the question, because it is silly and senseless, literally unthinkable.

The second foundational attitude that creates problems is what we might call the entrepreneurial mentality.

What is an entrepreneur? It is a French word, of course. It is somebody who invests with a view to cashing in on her or his investment. In other words, there is the understanding that this is my effort and this is what I deserve as a result of my effort. And I think that to a very large extent that this view of things comes with the territory of being born in North America: I do this and then this should happen. In fact, I can make claims on it happening. And if it does not happen, of course, then all kinds of serious problems arise in my way of dealing with other people, the world, and myself.

Where does this sense of entitlement and the entrepreneurial spirit come from? Let me make a proposal. I think that they both arise from a common source: a sense of deprivation; that somehow I have been cheated and victimized by life. Therefore, to live is to compensate for that sense by a counter-move; the sense of entitlement or, even more pervasively, the sense of the entrepreneurial approach to existence. If that is true, and I am not altogether sure by any means how true it is, then it raises extraordinarily large questions and uncovers huge problems. How do we crawl out from under that?

But then who has not been cheated in their lives? Who has not suffered some sort of deprivation? This is what we call the doctrine of original sin: that everybody else is playing out their needs on me, and therefore, my reflex is simply to play out my needs on everybody else. And of course the upshot of all of this is that gratitude, as my fundamental response to life, becomes an impossibility.

I think the sense of entitlement and the sense of an entrepreneurial view of

life are rescue-able if they are constructed on the basis of gratitude. Because the fact of being grateful as my fundamental attitude then drastically relativizes my sense of entitlement, radically relativizes my sense of being an entrepreneur in life so I do not make my ultimate claims against life on the basis of either that sense of entitlement or entrepreneurial effort.

Here is a footnote that occurred to me while I have been thinking about this. I was in Washington last week and I had the privilege of going to the Van Gogh exhibit. Everybody knows about Van Gogh's career: he shot himself at the age of thirty-seven, took three days to die, and sold one painting in his lifetime for eighty dollars. And yet, I do not think that anybody has sold a painting for more than the 53.9 million dollars U.S. that was paid for one of his paintings. That fact itself is intriguing. But then in this exhibit, which came from the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, there was a painting called "The Reapers". It depicted a man in a wheat field. And I stood dumbfounded in front of this painting. It does what all art does, which is to give you a sense of the gratuity of existence. Beauty is gratuitous. And then later on I thought: Will someone pay sixty million dollars U.S. for that incomparable vision? Can I translate that vision into sixty million dollars U.S.? I do not think so. I bring that up as simply one of the paradoxes of our lives.

So what do we do, however, if our fundamental experience of existence is that of having been cheated in some way, having been deprived? What can break through that? I do not think that we can do anything to break through that because it is bred in our bones. It is the deepest lines in our psyches traced by those experiences. And I think that the only thing that can alter it is grace - - the Latin word itself means "gift" - - above all, the grace of faith whereby I say that I believe that my sense of deprivation, however deeply felt, is not the ultimate reality here. In other words, I do not see anything save the religious solution to the human quandary. This 'solution' is exactly, of course, what Jesus represented: this extraordinary human being who somehow went through life absolutely convinced that, "All is gift. All is grace". And the kind of freedom that he lived in his own life, the freedom that he enabled other people to have, is all a playing out of this fundamental sense that life is ultimately gift, more than anything else.

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What are we asking for in praying

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998 (#1)

Readings (no. 147, pg. 767): Exod. 17.8-13; 2 Tim. 3.14-4.2; Lk. 18.1-8.

This is a preliminary note because the second reading is so frequently quoted by the Fundamentalist Christians, I would like to make a small comment on it.

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching". I am sure, if you have listened to any tele-evangelist, you will have heard that dozens of times. That is their battle-cry. Unfortunately they do not look at the texts particularly carefully. Whoever wrote this thing, and it was most likely one of Paul's later disciples, was not talking about the Second Letter to Timothy, he was talking about the Hebrew Bible, above all, the Pentateuch, the first five books, and the books of the Prophets. It is very important to notice that. And secondly, even more important is the adjective that is used: Scripture is "useful". It does not say that is essential or even necessary, it just says that it is useful for "reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness...". If scripture is useful then, a fortiori, every other religious institution is useful as well...has the same kind of validity, if you will. It is really important to keep that in mind so that we do not absolutize or divinize anything.

The first and third readings talk about prayer: here it is a kind of magical thing, with Moses having his hands held up, and the Israelites winning as long as he held this supplicatory gesture. And then, of course, there is this little story from the Gospel of Luke, about persistence in prayer. And it is the prayer's petition that I would like to talk about: prayer as asking God for stuff.

It is important, first of all, to distinguish this from those moments of terror that we all have: “Oh my God, I am going to hit that other car!” or “Oh my God, I forgot to turn off the stove!”. These terror-reflexes in which we say, “Oh my God, I need...etc., etc.,”...what does God do with that? I am guilty of that reflex and I do not know how God responds. He probably just says, “Oh well, there is Trojcak at it again,” and probably does not pay too much attention. And I think that an awful lot of our praying, unfortunately, is reducible to that. The reflex that comes out of terror and fear, I believe, can be turned into prayer, but only if it has been transmuted, and only if it has been contained within a much larger frame, which is what we also get from the New Testament. Namely if we take the Lord’s Prayer as a paradigm, as the petition in which every other petition makes sense, the panic-reflex can take on some kind of shape and then I think we are all right. And, of course, the leading petition of the Lord’s Prayer is “Your Kingdom come”.

In another place in the New Testament, Jesus is described as saying, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and everything else is going to fall into place”. What I am getting at is this: the absolutely foundational petition has to be that desire, that passionate searching for the Kingdom of God, and every other petition makes sense only in so far as it is grounded in that petition. (And that is why I think that the terror-reflex needs close examination.)

So, what are we talking about when we talk about the Kingdom? What are we asking for in praying “Thy Kingdom come”? Well, there is a big clue in this passage in Luke: “Will not God grant justice?”. In other words, the absolutely foundational petition is for genuine equity between us human beings. So it is the prayer for the constitution of the human family, “Your Kingdom come” is put here in terms of justice. What does that mean, concretely? Well, it means a whole lot of things. For me, most of the time, I think it means (or ought to mean, whether I am aware of this or not), that I need to be made conscious of the absence of justice in my life and in the world. And that more often than not means that there are all kinds of people, vast ranges of people, I do not even think about, people who do not have justice.

The U.N. report on poverty released this week pointed out that 1.2 billion people, 25% of the people on this planet, live on less than one U.S. dollar per day. I am not aware of that. In fact, I would much prefer not to be aware of that, even if

somebody points it out to me! But, concretely, this is what is entailed in seeking the Kingdom of God! “May those people become real to me”, however that happens, and I do not know, concretely, how it is to happen. Yet every once in a while I get a glimpse, as does everybody else. I’m asking, not that I see the poor as objects of my pity or my charity - that waxy word which can mean all kinds of unchristian things. Rather, let me be aware of them as my co-human beings, with as much title to this earth, and my attention, and the goods of this earth as everybody else. This is really hard for us because we grow out of a religious past of a highly individualistic, interiorized, and privatized notion of what religion is supposed to be about.

And then, of course, we live in an age where self-help is de rigueur. “This is what I need, above all. I need to be helped...Let me get cured-up and then I will go and help somebody else.” I want to question that priority. And I want to do it, finally, by simply pointing to the instance of the miracles of healing in the Gospels.

So you have lepers. You have this woman haemorrhaging for twelve years. You have all kinds of people who are diseased. The common element with all of the healing miracles is that, in the Jewish view of things, to be diseased, to be leprous, disabled, crippled, blind, lame, was to be ritually impure and, therefore, to stand outside the community. It was to be disconnected from everybody else, necessarily. So, for Jesus to cure one of these people meant what? It meant that the restoration of their physical integrity was simultaneously their restoration to the human family. You absolutely do not have one without the other. They are simultaneous. To be cured means precisely to be restored to other human beings; to have access to them and have other people have access to you. That is the cure. That is the meaning of the cure. And that, I propose, is the meaning of the prayer “Let your Kingdom come”. That is what we are praying for: “Let me know myself as connectable, as needing to be connected to everybody else”.

You see, if that is the overriding context, and it surely is as far as Jesus was concerned (if the New Testament means anything at all, it means that), then all of our panic attacks and stress reactions in which we say, “Oh God, oh God, I cannot stand it anymore,” can begin to make sense. All of that can begin to be legitimate forms of prayer. But that is why it is so important that we know what we are doing when we say, “Your Kingdom come. This is what I want. This is what I want to want, above all”. That is the fundamental,

foundational petition: “This is what I want to want because, in fact, it is not what I want”.

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That is not prayer

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998

Readings (no. 150, pg. 770): Sir. 35.15-17, 20-22; 2 Tim. 4.6-8, 16-18; Lk. 18.9-14.

This is preliminary to talking about this passage from Luke. Jesus is setting this thing up in the most stark way, that is, the Pharisees were the truly pious Jews; these were the really seriously religious people; and tax collectors were, if not Mafia types, very close to it. And so, he wants to establish a contrast as sharp as possible.

But then, what is really the problem here? My suspicion is that the first level of response to this is, that the Pharisee is guilty of really bad form. You do not go and promote yourself that way. It is sort of nasty and vulgar. It is just not a nice thing to do...to say that "Well, I am really glad I am not like those other guys".

But that understanding has nothing to do with the text. That, understanding I think, says more about how we hear this stuff, and where we are, then it says about the text itself. What is the problem, then, if it is not just a kind of self-display that we would find distasteful?

Well, these people are supposed to be praying. What is praying about? Praying is the great existential moment where we seek for God to the exclusion of all of our other occupations. That is why it is so difficult to do, because we are all so wretchedly busy, hag-ridden by our agendas, e-mails, laptops, calendars. And, unfortunately, we think it ought to be that way. In fact, I think that if we are not busy we feel that something is wrong with us. I do not think that that was the case in

Jesus' time, but that it is our problem with prayer: simply trying to still all of this noise.

But I think that the primary reason that it is difficult to still all that noise - - and there are several reasons - - is that that noise consists of a chorus of voices telling me who I am and where I belong in the world: "You are a really important person because you are so busy! You have so many obligations and responsibilities, why, you must be important; you must be a truly significant human being!". I think it is very difficult to walk out from under that load - - I have a terrible time doing it. Yet the basic presupposition of prayer is that all of these voices are giving us wrong information. What they are saying to us about who we are - which of course is simply an echo of our own desires, ambitions, and appetites to be somebody - is all wrong. Prayer assumes that we do not know who we are. And to move from this premature certainty as to who we are and where we belong, (and of course the two are inseparable) to a position of real ignorance as to who we are is extraordinarily difficult. That is why I do not think that many of us pray very much or very long. I do not.

But then there is another deliverance of prayer that is contained in this. The way the Pharisee operated had what effect? To absolutely distance himself from everybody else. He is very sure of who he was: "I am not like these other people. They are a bunch of bums". And they were! And this is the interesting thing! But what then is the Pharisee's problem? It is that he brings his own self-understanding before God and sort of flaunts it in God's face: "You see, I am a really fine human being". He therefore goes away, not only unjustified, but ignorant of himself, ignorant of who he really was. I think that the rubric for prayer, besides, as I said last week, "Thy Kingdom come," - is a line from Augustine. In one of his own prayers he says, "Lord, let me know myself. Let me know you". You cannot do one without the other. You cannot know God without knowing yourself. Clearly, the Pharisee did not know either but was quite content to hold on to this sense of himself, stand before God, and tell God what is what. He knew who he was. He knew who God was too: "God is going to congratulate me because I am such a fine fellow". That is not prayer.

Finally, the thing that prayer is to do is this. If, by leading an active and earnest life of prayer I come to know who I am and who God is, then what that means, among other things, is that I also know I am radically connected to everybody else. This is very hard for us in North America because we bring our own

agendas to God, as well as our own sense of ourselves, and of course the two are inseparable. To pray, to seek God, is to come to discover the God who is the God of everybody and, therefore, this means I am radically connected to everybody, above all, those people that are most remote. And this is why over and over in the career of Jesus you have this extraordinary attentiveness to all of the invisible people in his own society: the poor, women, the handicapped, and the sinners, these four great categories, in first-century Palestine, of the faceless and anonymous ones.

So, I hope we have come a long, long distance from this business of seeing this guy simply showing off. There is something much more grave going on than his simply breaching the etiquette of polite society. There is a radical ignorance and self-sufficiency whereby he construes who he is under his own steam or hears all of these other voices echoing his own desires, rather than in ignorance, darkness, and trust seeking this God who will tell the prayer who they are, who God is, and how they are connected to everybody else.

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Where we are supposed to end up

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, 1998

Readings (no. 159, pg. 780): Mal. 4.1-2; 2 Thess. 3.7-12; Lk. 21.5-19.

It is the next to last Sunday of the Church year and, again, the readings deal with end-time things. Maybe it would be useful to just comment on this strange passage that Eileen read from 2 Thessalonians. This is not a kind of Mike Harris before the time: "If you do not work then you should not eat". The writer of this text, perhaps Paul, is worrying about his proclamation of the end-time, and some peoples' apparent understanding that this was an invitation to just sit on their haunches, wait for the end-time to come, and stop participating in the ongoing life of things. So that is the basis of that and we have to be careful not to misinterpret it.

The real issue is the end, which is the establishment of the Kingdom of God, the so-called Eschaton. And scholars differ as to whether Jesus was talking about the end as the end of the world or the end as the end of a certain stage of Jewish history wherein the destiny of the Jews would be fulfilled. And what was that destiny? To be God's agent of salvation for the whole world. That is the whole point of the election of the Jews: that they were to be God's agency to dispense, illumine and open up God's mercy to everybody. Therefore the Kingdom, the entire human race, would be established. The problem, of course, in Jesus' own day was that some of the Jews had (understandably, because they were persecuted and occupied by foreign powers during most of their lives) set up all of these regulations as to who was in and who was out, that is, as to what it meant to be faithful to God. This is the problem, for instance, that dogged Paul during most of his

life. And of course Jesus simply demolished all of those boundaries. So you have the classic statement in Paul to the Galatians: “There is no longer a Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” For all of these things that distance us from each other are removed, even the distinctiveness of the Jews. So the end will either be the end of the world (and you get all of this wild talk about the sun being darkened, wars, and earthquakes because these are just metaphors for the crucial event in the whole history of the world) or it will simply be that the Kingdom will somehow take place on this earth and then the absolute end will happen later.

So the point of the text today (at least two points) is to remind us of what the whole human enterprise is supposed to be all about. Where are we going? What is all human effort supposed to be bent toward? Above all, what is the Church supposed to be, because we talk about ourselves as the New Israel. The Church is supposed to be the one institution in the world that is not here for its own sake but clearly for the sake of the world. And so this is one of the big problems with the Church because we, often enough, fall into the same trap that the Jews did by saying, “No. We want to set up this little Salvation Club and tell very quickly and readily who is in and who is out. We want these boundaries set up very clearly”. So, by reflecting on the end-time we get to think again about what we are supposed to be about as a Church. Whom do we exclude? Who has no place here? Frankly, our record is not very good: women, the role of women, the way we have treated Jews, the authorization of slavery, the enslavement of peoples and the elimination of millions and millions of indigenous people – Indians in the Caribbean, Latin America, and here in Canada – in the name of God of course.

(And I just finished writing a little piece on this poor guy who was beaten to death, a homosexual in Wyoming. They used to burn them.) Who is in and who is out? And in my own life, who is in and who is out? That is what the end-times are supposed to remind us of: to look at again. And there is even a darker aspect of this that should be mentioned as well because, as we know from reading the New Testament, the end also means some kind of judgement. God is going to exercise some sort of discrimination as to where we are, who we have been, and what we have chosen. And what is that going to be? God sitting down on a big bench saying, “Listen you guys, you buggered up. You are going to hell, and you are not going to hell, and we do not know what to do with you?” It is not that. Presumably, the judgement scene is simply going to be a great moment of illumination in which we

are going to know who we really are; that the power of God is going to operate in us in such a way as to make us aware of all of the evasions, the disguises, the camouflage, and the excuses that we have erected in ourselves for excluding the other, for ignoring the other. In other words, the judgement is going to be our own judgement of ourselves. And this is the other thing that is really important when thinking about the end. How consciously do we live at this moment? Because there has to be some kind of continuity between now and the end. And so the question raised by all of these texts is: "how consciously do we live as to what we do, who we are, and what we choose?"

Yet, since Socrates' lifetime, people have said that the unexamined life is not worth living. But why? Because, unfortunately, the unexamined life means precisely living within these little boundaries that we erect within ourselves for the purpose of excluding everybody else, and this, without acknowledging or even recognizing the fact that the boundaries are there and how firmly and ferociously they operate in our lives. In other words, there is a Christian meaning of that Socratic dictum: We have to know who we are. We have to live consciously. We have to live with the intention to establish as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, the Kingdom of God. "Your Kingdom come", we pray. Where is it supposed to come? In us! This is the only one that I can manage at all. I cannot manage my kids. I cannot manage you guys. I am not supposed to manage my kids or you guys. But I am supposed to manage my life as much as I can. I am supposed to live as consciously as I can.

So, in order to prepare for the Kingdom of God, to participate, to create the Kingdom of God, we are called to all of this; the point being not to terrify us when we talk about Judgement, but to show how little our imaginations are as to where we are supposed to end up being. In other words, it may be somewhat intimidating but the prospects that are opened up beyond that kind of scary news are unspeakably grand.

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The way things ought to be

CHRIST THE KING

Readings (No. 162, pg. 783): 2 Sam. 5.1-3; Col. 1.12-20; Lk. 23.35-43

I would like to begin by playing out a couple of images. One of them is from the passage from today's reading in Luke. The Kingdom, in normal Jewish usage, was not so much a place or an institution but a pattern of relationships. And so, when we have Jesus saying to this criminal, as they were both dying in this horrible & terribly undignified way, stripped naked probably to hang on these crosses for several days, saying "Today you will be with me in Paradise", he is not talking about some trip that they are going to make together. He is talking about his relationship with this other human being. And in saying, "we are together', He was establishing the Kingdom. That is the praxis, the behaviour, of the Kingdom. Over against this, I would like to include a quote from something that a friend of mine found on the world-wide web. The address for this thing is www.godhatesfags.com. It was from a church in the States and it appeared in the wake of the murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming. It is a bit of gloating, replete with scriptural references, over the death of this twenty-one year old homosexual man. This is from a Christian source. There seems, at the very least, to have been some slippage in the two-thousand years which separate Luke's composition of the gospel and this preacher who picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard with a sign saying, "Aids Cures Fags."

So, the meaning of the Christ the King is not something that is self-evident.

Indeed, we need to look at it very closely. In a way, the Feast itself is a kind of anachronism. It is a recent feast in the Catholic Church and it is a sort of last gasp, an in-your-face thrust to the rest of the world while the political power of the Papacy waned. The Papal States had been lost in Italy, political power was diminishing all over the continent, and so now we re-assert, somewhat self-righteously it has to be said, that Jesus is still in charge and we are his people. So, one may wonder, given the provenance of the Feast what is being celebrated here? Again, it is anything but self-evident.

If we go back to this notion that "God hates fags", it would be pleasant and reassuring to say, "Well, this view is an anomaly. There are some freaks out there; there are always freaks out there" – No, no. Rather, look at the history of the Roman Church, of all the Christian Churches. "God hates fags" is not some novel idea that some loony boiled up in his own over-heated brain. It is consistent with the behaviour of much of the Christian Church over the millennia; together with the dismissal of women, a two-thousand year history of the persecution of our own religious forebears; the Jews, the extermination of millions of Indians in Latin America, Central America, the Caribbean and North America. Also, there is the number of good Christian nations that could merchandise ten million black-skinned people over a period of four hundred years.

So, we have to be really careful about what we are doing when we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. And I would like to make an alternate proposal: the Kingdom suggests, whether we talk about it as a relationship or as a place, something finished. It was finished for Jesus and this crook who was dying with him. And we human beings, so impatient, so insecure, so desirous to be in control by having everything finished, have too readily and too often assumed that the Kingdom is here. But the evidence is overwhelming that if we take the Kingdom as is presented in Luke and in the rest of the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures, it is not here.

And so perhaps, paradoxically, the best way to get to understand the Feast of Christ the King is to take a more primitive, much earlier title that was given to Jesus; that of Prophet. In the classic kind of Christology that I was taught in the Seminary a long time ago, there was this tripartite description of Jesus: Jesus as

King, Priest and Prophet. Certainly the most ancient of these titles was Jesus as Prophet. And I would like to propose that it is precisely by understanding Jesus as Prophet that we can best understand what Jesus as King really means.

Who were the Hebrew Prophets, in whose line Jesus was the last and the most notable? They are basically the great troublers of society. They are people who went around us saying, “The way things are, is radically opposed to the way things ought to be according to the mind of God”. The relationships that we human beings have set up among ourselves, above all between rich and poor, are simply a form of violence concretized in a social institution or pattern. And all of this is to be demolished. But first of all, it is to be pointed out, and shown that the relationships that we have, that we take for granted, the standard way we human beings deal with each other is precisely contrary to what God intended in making the world in the first place. Not surprisingly, the Prophets were all killed, so that by the time Jesus showed up it was a by-word, that the only good prophet was a dead prophet.

As a fellow Jew, Jesus spoke to the Jews who too quickly wanted to draw boundaries around who was in and who was out, who was worthy and who was unworthy, who was godly and who was ungodly. The entire New Testament testifies to Jesus as one who realized the true destiny of Israel: namely, to be God’s saving agent for everybody, without exception. And so some of the Jews, and certainly the Romans who saw any kind of counter-social arrangement other than that of the imperial structures as a threat, had to get rid of him. But what Jesus died for is just this good Jewish belief; that God has no favourites, that God is radically impartial, more drastically impartial than we can even imagine. And so Jesus behaved that way, spoke that way and died in the name of living that way. This is why we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King with the Passion narrative. Because, if you read the New Testament, it is only in the Passion Narratives of all four Gospels that the notion of kingship is even seriously raised: “Are you the King of the Jews”? The Gospel of John says, “Yes I am, but my Kingdom is not from this world”. As I grew up in the Roman Church, we of course said, “Well that is good, because the Kingdom is Heaven. We are all about Heaven”. No, we are not all about Heaven. The text does not mean, “it is pie in the sky when you die, bye and bye”. But rather it stands as a radical criticism to the way this world works. “My kingdom is not built the way kingdoms here are structured, namely, by one form or another of institutionalized violence”. And so what we are here to celebrate is what we celebrate every Sunday – the memory of this man who says, “This is

my life for you. This is all I am for all of you". So, Jesus the Priest is memorialized every time we celebrate this memorial of the Last Supper. But it is Jesus the Prophet, perhaps, who most readily gives us the best entrée to understand and to be able to see that our anti-Semitism, our sexism, our homophobia, our racism, our ignoring of the poor, above all, are precisely counter-movements to the Kingship of Christ.

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