Invitation To Christian Discipleship

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The Gospel According to Saint Mark

Teacher's Manual

INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT MARK

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FOREWORD

This present work, The Gospel According to Saint Mark, is part of a larger Catholic bible study, *Invitation to Christian Discipleship*, a seven year study which consists in lectures, summary of lectures and worksheets. The summaries and worksheets are published separately under the title SOUND OF THE LIONS. This seven year study has been designed for the Catholic laity that the "Word of Christ" rich as it is, dwell in them.

> ***Thus they will be able to grasp fully, with all the holy ones, the breadth and length and heights and depth of Christ's love, and experience this love which surpasses all knowledge, so that they may attain the fullness of God himself. (Eph. 3:18-19)***

The general motivating force behind this study is the preservation and growth of the Christian Faith as understood and transmitted by the Catholic Church through the centuries. It has four immediate goals:

1. **To ensure a true spirit of repentance;**
2. **To foster a deeper commitment in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ;**
3. **To create a greater awareness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer; and**
4. **To encourage a more vibrant participation in the life and mission of the Church.**

Invitation To Christian Discipleship **has been accredited by the Catechitical Institute of the Diocese of Orange, California. It is now available to all parishes and at-home study groups. It is designed for a lay person to present.**

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PREFACE

There is only one Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There are four inspired versions of the one Gospel: Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. The word 'gospel' means 'good news.' It reveals the good news about the salvation of mankind. As St. Paul explains: *I mean that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's transgressions against them. (II Cor. 5:19)* The Gospel reveals through the life of Jesus of Nazareth God's love for sinful humanity and His divine plan of universal salvation.

The Church emphasizes, "By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of mankind is made clear to us in Christ who is the Mediator and, at the same time, the fullness of all revelation." (Div. Rev. 1-2) Through Christ we come not only to experience salvation, but we encounter in Christ the fullness of revelation, as Christ is God incarnated. The Church clearly rejects any revelation, after the time of the Apostles, to be a public revelation from God to mankind. The Second Vatican Council confirms: "We now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Div. Rev. 1-4)

The Lord chose the Apostles. as His instruments, to reveal his divine revelation to the world. This divine revelation became the Apostolic Tradition within the Church. When Christian scribes recorded in writing the Apostolic Tradition, this became the inspired Christian Scriptures. However part of the Apostolic Tradition remained in the Church as oral teaching rather than written scriptures.

Inspiration and Revelation

We need to understand there is a difference between inspiration and revelation. *The Church teaches that the entire Bible is inspired but it is not all* divine revelation. Many things written in the Scriptures concerns itself with the circumstances surrounding revelation, the effects and reactions to divine

revelation. Revelations itself deals with the "deepest truths about God and the divine plan of human salvation.

"Inspiration" comes from the Latin word "inspirare" which means "to breathe into." When the Church teaches that all the Scriptures are inspired, it implies that the Holy Spirit of God influenced these writings in some manner. The Second Vatican Council proclaims: "Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors, or sacred writers, must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth which God wanted put into the sacred writing for the sake of our salvation." (Div. Rev. 111-11)

This is a subtle teaching and easily misunderstood. It teaches that inspiration is limited to "that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." In other words, it is the purpose and the intention of the sacred writers to teach those sacred truth needed or useful for salvation. Regardless of the literary means the author uses to express these truths. We ought not to read more in the Scriptures than intended by the Holy Spirit.

To know what God intended to communicate through the sacred writers, and actually did communicate through their writings, calls for proper interpretation of the Scriptures. In summary we may say: Every word of the Sacred Scriptures is inspired, but not every inspired word is a divine revelation.

Interpretation of Sacred Scripture

The proper interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures seeks to understand the literary meaning of what is written. The literary sense of the scriptures is the actual sense intended by the inspired human writer and the sense that the words used actually express. The proper interpretation of the scriptures seeks to express what these words actually expressed at the time of their writing and what the author desire to express through his particular literary form. Obviously, this is no simple task. Not only must the ancient usage of these words be understood but the circumstances and the culture in which the author lived and wrote are equally important.

The proper interpreter of the scriptures needs to enter intellectually a world nineteen hundred years ago. The ancient past differs from the modern present. The past must be permitted to speak in its own voice. The ancient write must be heard within his own world, if the true message of the scriptures is to shine forth. Much scholarly research is demanded.

The Church teaches that one of the most valid interpretation of scripture is the scriptures themselves. This means to see one particular scripture against the light of the entire revelation of the scriptures. A particular revelation must be held upon against the entire fabric of revelation for it proper interpretation. As an example: We read in Exodus: *The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another. (Ex. 33:11)* We read in the following text: *You are my intimate friend. . .you have found favor with me."* The literal interpretation of the text would be that Moses looked upon the face of God. But this would not be what the author intended as later he relates these words of God to Moses: *But my face you cannot see, for no man see me and still lives.* In order to properly interpret a passage the interpreter must not only be familiar with the entire work at hand but with the other sacred scriptures in order to maintain that harmony of truth belonging to divine revelation.

There is a harmony between the revelation in the Scriptures and the truths taught within the Church on matters of faith and morals. A proper interpreter of the sacred scriptures will support this harmony. The Church proclaims Jesus Christ to be the fullness of revelation and not the Bible. Jesus Christ lives and remains within the Church guiding it through the Holy Spirit. The Church posses the complete treasure of divine revelation through the presence of the Holy Spirit, acknowledged to be within the Church "the living voice of the gospel." As the Holy Spirit is the author of both written and oral tradition there is harmony between the revealed elements of faith. "Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church." It is the work of the interpreter to demonstrate this harmony.

As the Holy Spirit is the author of the Sacred Scriptures, prayer to the Holy Spirit ought to accompany the study of the scriptures. St. Jerome teaches that the study of the Sacred Scriptures without inspiration from the Holy Spirit is like skipping stone across a frozen pond. Without divine inspiration the Holy

Scriptures does not reveal its depths nor serve up that heavenly food which gives life and nourishment to the human spirit.

The Church truly knows that any in-depth understanding of divine revelation requires more than scholarship. It demands "the obedience of faith" which consists in a "full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals." The faithful Christian seeks to "walk in the faith"—to live the truth revealed. This truth shinning brightly in the scriptures and teachings of the Church are the light on the path upon which the Christian safely walks.

INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

GOSPEL OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST ACCORDING TO SAINT MARK

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Around 135 A.D., Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis testified that;

> ***Mark became the interpreter of Peter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said and done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teachings as necessity demanded, but not making as it were an arrangement of the Lord's words, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave nothing out of what he heard and to make no false statements in them. (Eusebius, H.D.iii.39)***

Today, we call this written work the "Gospel of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ According to Saint Mark." In Classical Greek, the word "Gospel" means "good news." Tradition affirms the author to be John Mark, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. The home of Mary, John Mark's mother, served as the meeting place of the early Christian Community in Jerusalem. Tradition also tells us that this house was the place of the Cenacle where Our Lord celebrated the Last Supper with his Disciples. This house, the home of Mary, was the first Christian Church. In this environment, John Mark grew up. Probably he was only a child or young boy during the time of Jesus. He appears in the Acts as a young man going on a missionary journey with his cousin Barnabas and Paul of Tarsus, the first great missionary journey of Saint Paul. Beginning in Antioch, the trio sailed to the Island of Cyprus (the home of Barnabas) and returning to the

mainland at Pamphylia, crossed the high Tarsus Mountains into Galatian country. From the Acts of the Apostles, we discover that Mark remained with the missionary party during their Mediterranean cruise, but deserted Barnabas and Paul when they came to Perga in Pamphylia and faced the rugged and dangerous Tarsus Mountains, returning to Jerusalem. We do not know the reason for the departure of Mark from the missionary party at Perga, but a later episode in Acts indicates, at least in the eyes of Paul, that human weakness and frailty contributed to the desertion. A few years later, when Paul and Barnabas decided to make a return trip into Galatia, Barnabas wanted to give Mark a second chance. Paul would not hear of this. We read:

> ***But Paul insisted that, as he had deserted them in Pamphylia, refusing to join them on that mission, he was not fit to be taken along now. The disagreement which ensued was so sharp that the two separated. Barnabas took Mark along with him and sailed for Cyprus. Paul, for his part, chose Silas to accompany him on his journey.***
>
> ***(Acts 15:38-40).***

This sad disagreement ended a great apostolic team. Here we glimpse an example of the human frailty to be found even in great apostles. This episode permits a revealing insight into the character of Paul. Apparently, Mark did grow up in the Lord and in the eyes of Paul. Years later, Mark gained the good graces of Paul. Paul speaks of Mark as his *"fellow worker."* Paul wrote to the Colossians, Mark was with him in Rome, *"Aristarchus, who is a prisoner along with me, sends you greetings. So does Mark, cousin of Barnabas. You have received instructions about him: if he comes to you, make him welcome." (Col. 4:10)* While in prison in Rome, Paul wrote Timothy, *"I have no one with me but Luke. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he can be of great service to me." (2Tim. 4:11)* It is a comfort to see that the saints did not have to wait until Heaven to live in peace with each other. It takes time for some of us to mature in grace and for others to properly appreciate us. If you find yourself frail and weak in your apostolic commitment, perhaps you should pray to Mark, rather than to Paul.

The Scriptures reveal John Mark's close association with St. Paul, but the only reference of his association with Peter can be found in Peter's First Epistle, written from Rome, *"The Church that is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greeting, as does Mark my son." (1Pet. 5:13)* Since John Mark's very home was so closely associated with the early Church and since Peter was chief spokesman of the community, it is probable that the young Mark heard Peter preach on occasion and later accompanied him on his journeys. We do know that Peter, Paul and Mark were in Rome shortly before the deaths of Peter and Paul.

Both Peter and Paul died during the persecutions by Nero, around 64 A.D. Prior to the time of this Roman harassment, the chief persecutors of the Christian Community were hostile Jews. As a result of the persecutions inaugurated by the chief priests, the Pharisees, and later by Herod Agrippa, who ruled Judea from 41 to 44 A.D., the Church had been forced to spread outside Palestine. From the time of Nero until the Edict of Milan, decreed by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, the Christian Community would be subjected to persecution by the state. Many Christians were soon to follow Peter and Paul as martyrs for their allegiance to Jesus.

Mark wrote the Gospel in Rome shortly after 64 A.D. It was written in Greek, the universal language of the day. This Gospel account was intended mainly for Gentile converts, who faced unpopularity and persecution from the state due to their faith in Jesus Christ. Many converts had already begun to suffer and some had actually been killed. Living in such a hostile and deadly environment truly tested the faith of believers. Mark wrote to support the commitment and faith of persecuted Christians. His Gospel narrative revealed to them the life of suffering endured by Jesus and the death He suffered. Jesus warned his disciples that they would be treated no better than the Master. They too, as his disciples, would suffer for his namesake, but if they perseveringly shared in his sufferings and death, they too would one day share in His glory. This would be possible because Jesus is not only the promised Messiah, "the Christ," but He is Lord – He is the Son of God. What occurred in the lives of Christians had been foretold by Jesus

and permitted by the Father. Mark's Gospel account has been called *"the martyr Gospel"* for it was written to encourage Christians faced with the possibility of having to die for their belief. One scholar referred to it as "a passion narrative with a very long introduction." Saint Paul's proclamation, *"I preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified"* finds a powerful echo in this Gospel.

It must be remembered that at this time, as far as we know, no written account of the Gospel existed. The literary form in which the Gospel comes to us today is presumed to have been created by Mark. Both Evangelists – Matthew and Luke – in their Gospel account, built on the foundation laid by Mark. It indicates something of the unique genius of Mark.

CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The early Christian Community believed itself to be living in the last days. The end of the world was shortly expected. The Church saw its mission as bringing a saving knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to the then-known world. It had to proclaim to men who Jesus was and how He had come to such an exalted position. Did the life lived by Jesus merit such honor and glory? What was the vital importance of Jesus for the personal lives of men? What demands does He make on men? Through its preaching ministry the Church answered these questions. Likewise, the Church had the task of bringing the Christian Community into a deeper relationship and identity with Jesus so that when Jesus returned, believers would be worthy members of His Kingdom. This the Church did by teachings and exhortations from the life of Jesus. This demanded that Christians, in some degree, be able to see Jesus and know His expectations for discipleship, to understand what His relationship was with them and what their relationship should be with Jesus. They had to know Christ in order to know how to live as Christians!

During this period, the Church was not as much interested in the life of Jesus, but rather what deeds in the life of Jesus constituted the "good news." In other words, what had contributed to the salvation of mankind and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. For this reason, the death and resurrection of Jesus were the essentials of the Gospel. The death of Jesus had been interpreted as the sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world. Since there was such an emphasis on the death of Jesus in the early Church,

the Passion narratives are highly detailed and developed.

It would be understandable that no Jew would accept the Gospel message unless it was clearly demonstrated to be firmly rooted in the teachings of the Old Testament and that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. For this purpose, the Church needed memories of the Lord's life that demonstrated the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Mark sought to show from the prophecies that the sufferings and death of Jesus were part of the Divine Plan and a prelude to His return in glory.

By the time of the composition of our first Gospel account, much information already existed as Christian tradition in the form of independent and unrelated stories. Such stories passed from a Palestinian culture into a Grecian world and no doubt underwent modifications suitable to Church life and worship. By the time of Mark's writings, these stories had already acquired a fixed form in Christian tradition.

Not all Christian teachings would have been drawn from the earthly life of Jesus. Christian prophets themselves played a part in creating the Christian tradition. It was taken for granted in the early Church that the heavenly Jesus was continually revealing further truths about Himself to the Church. We see this confirmed in John's Gospel when Jesus said, *"I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. When He comes, however, being the Spirit of Truth He will guide you to all truth." (Jn. 16:12-13)* St. Paul spoke in First Corinthians of the Christian Community as possessing the *"mind of Christ." (1 Cor. 2:15)* The Church saw no real distinction between the Jesus who revealed while on the earth and the Jesus who reveals from Heaven through the Holy Spirit using the Christian prophets. It is possible that many of the memories of Jesus' earthly life were interpreted, modified and augmented by later revelations. Many truths only realized after the Resurrection, such as the Divine Sonship of Jesus, may have subsequently found their way into the teachings of the earthly life of Jesus when in reality they were revealed after the Resurrection. They belong to what has been called the *"Easter Faith."*

By the time of the composition of the first Gospel account, it would have no longer been possible to recover the historical order of events in the life of Jesus, except in the most general way.

At a superficial glance, the Gospel narrated by Mark, appears to be a series of stories with no logical connection among the instances. Sometimes they are related by a short connecting phrase, but essentially, each unit is independent and complete in itself with no indication of time or place. One unit could be removed and not disturb the sequence of the narrative. This Gospel narrative has been described as a series of pictures arranged side-by-side in a photograph album.

Apparently, from the large collection of stories at his disposal, Mark selected those best expressing the Gospel message to a Greco-Roman community. Mark arranged these events to magnify and illustrate that message about Jesus, which he knew was important for this Christian Community to grasp and understand. Written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it carries an enduring message to all disciples of Jesus through the ages.

None of the Gospel narratives were intended to be biographies of Jesus Christ. They are not and never were intended to be an account of an historical life regardless of how holy that life may have been. Mark tells us nothing about the birth, childhood, or physical appearance of Jesus. Only indirectly does he reveal something of the personality of Jesus. This Gospel takes the form of a historical narrative. It relates the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist; it reveals a ministry in Galilee – a ministry filled with misunderstanding and rejection; it tells of journeys outside Galilee; it comes to a climax with the profession by Peter that Jesus is the Messiah; it relates a journey to Jerusalem followed by a series of events ending with the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is described as speedily passing from one event to another. The narrative generates a sense of urgency. Jesus appears hemmed in by crowds, wearied by their demands and besieged by demons. It has been calculated that three or four weeks would suffice for everything related in Mark if you omit the forty days in the desert.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES

The important point is not the literary form used by Mark, but the purpose and intention of this narrative. Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, informs us that Mark was the interpreter of Peter. The Acts of the Apostles preserves a sample of the preaching of Peter and most probably preserves the style in which the early Church proclaimed the Gospel. Peter delivered this sermon

to a Roman centurion and to his household in Joppa (the audience had a Greco-Roman background). Peter proceeded to address them in these words:

> ***"I begin to see how true it is that God shows no partiality. Rather, the man of any nation who fears God and acts uprightly is acceptable to him. This is the message he has sent to the sons of Israel, the good news of peace proclaimed through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all. I take it you know what has been reported all over Judea about Jesus of Nazareth, beginning in Galilee with the baptism John preached; of the way God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good works and healing all who were in the grip of the devil, and God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him, finally, hanging him on a tree, only to have God raise him up on the third day and grant that he be seen, not by all, but only by such witnesses as had been chosen beforehand by God – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commissioned us to preach to the people and to bear witness that he is the one set apart by God as judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets testify, saying that everyone who believes in him has forgiveness of sins through his name. (Acts 10:34-43)***

The sermon of Peter could serve as an outline for the written Gospel of Mark. Mark begins immediately with the baptism of Jesus by John and continues with eight chapters of proving, by miracles and exorcism, the claim of the Gospel – the Kingdom of God has come in Jesus of Nazareth.

The personal religious background and expectations of Mark likewise influenced his selection and presentation of material. Mark's Jewish background led him to believe that God has a definite purpose in creation and that throughout the history of man, God has intervened to bring this divine purpose to fulfillment. Nevertheless, various created powers opposed the plan of God and, in the course of time, these evil powers exerted influences over creation and diverted it from the divine purpose. In order for the divine plan to be fulfilled, it was then necessary for God, or His representative, to engage in a decisive and final struggle with the powers of evil. In this struggle, the evil powers would be defeated and God would bring into fullness the divine plan. According to the divine plan, certain persons would eternally enjoy the Divine Presence often pictured as a glorious banquet. Many believed during the Lord's days that the moment of

divine intervention had arrived.
Mark regards Jesus as God's agent sent to begin the great and final battle against the powers of evil. This is manifested in the temptation scene, with Jesus casting out devils, in calming the sea and in Jesus' successfully silencing His human opponents who were regarded by Mark as agents of the devil.

Mark presents Satan as the agent who snatches the Word of God out of the heart of the hearer. Satan opposes the Gospel message and his power must be destroyed if the Gospel message is to take root and the mission of Jesus is to be successful. If God's reign has come into this world, it threatens the Kingdom of darkness and provokes its evil forces to do final battle. Jesus appears as one who expels these evil forces and preaches the Gospel. Those who follow Him must do the same.

THE ROLE OF MIRACLES

Some scholars believe Mark wrote precisely to correct an erroneous image of Jesus fostered by certain Christians who popularized Jesus as a Wonder Worker. They truly made a caricature of Jesus. Certain men and women found this image very appealing to their spirits, but it was not conducive to preparing men and women for martyrdom. Both Greek and Jewish literature abounds with the fame of such men and their exploits. Certain rabbis were noted for curing the sick, expelling demons, causing the rain to fall, making ugly girls beautiful. In the temple of the Greek god Asclepius at Epidauras, written testimony after testimony gives witness to the marvels accomplished through prayer to the god. Such things were not uncommon in the time of Our Lord and as always they served as spiritual food for certain men and women. Souls always seeking signs and wonders from God reveal the immaturity of their spiritual lives and the weakness of their faith. They must see (or feel) in order to believe. Mark knew wherein resides spiritual maturity and, more precisely, Christian maturity. His Gospel account attempts to reveal the real truth about Jesus and Christian Discipleship. We only need to read some of the apocryphal works that circulated in the early church to realize the problem the Christian Community faced in preserving a proper image of Jesus.

In a work called *"The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ"* – circulated within a hundred years after the death of Jesus, we read:

But the Lord Jesus had made twelve sparrows, and placed them about his

pool on each side. But it was the Sabbath day, and the son of Hanani, a Jew, came by and saw him making these things, and said "Do you thus make figures of clay on the Sabbath?" And he ran to them, and broke down their fish-pools. But when the Lord Jesus clapped His hands over the sparrows which He had made, they flew away chirping. At length the son of Hanani, coming to the fish-pool of Jesus to destroy it, the water vanished away, and the Lord Jesus said to him, "In like manner as this water has vanished, so shall thy life vanish" and presently the boy died.

Another time, when the Lord Jesus was coming home in the evening with Joseph, He met a boy who ran so hard against Him that he threw Him down; to whom the Lord Jesus said, "As thou has thrown me down so shall thou fall – nor ever rise." And that moment the boy fell down and died.

Then said Joseph to St. Mary, "Henceforth we will not allow Him to go out of the house; for every one who displeases Him is killed."

According to the many other stories told in these accounts, the boy Jesus was quite the terror of the neighborhood.

Mark does record miraculous deeds accomplished by Jesus during His ministry. He does so because it was well known that Jesus had worked miracles and expelled demons. These miracles were signs of the presence of God's Kingdom come in Jesus Christ. But to see Jesus merely as a wonder worker and to think the accomplishment of such marvels to be the essence of His mission is to be misled. Jesus, as presented by Mark, had no intention of establishing His claim as Messiah or as God's Son on the grounds of His miraculous activities. We know such signs can be taken two ways. The enemies of Jesus saw and acknowledged the miracles and the de-possession of demons, but they attributed the power working in Jesus to be Satan. They saw Jesus as a man possessing magical arts in league with the devil.

Mark uses miracle stories within the Gospel, but not without interpreting them. In the early days of the Church, men and women simply retold the miracles of Jesus. But the simple telling of the miracle stories was conducive to misunderstanding of Jesus. By the time these stories appeared in the Gospel accounts, they, for the most part, appeared in a setting with a

theological interpretation to safeguard them from misinterpretation. We will see in the very beginning of the first Gospel that Mark associates the healing of a paralytic with the power of Jesus' words to take away the sins of men. The placement of this instance at the very beginning of the Gospel may be giving us the key for interpreting the miracles presented in Mark. This episode illustrates that the very words of Jesus possess divine power. By a word, He recreates the very soul of a man by forgiving his sins. This indicates to the reader that the very presence and power of Jesus is manifested in the words of Jesus was well as in the miraculous deeds. The purpose of the miracles is to lead men to believe in the power of the Word!

MARK AND THE WORD

Mark's narrative centers on the very Person of Jesus. He is overwhelmed by the life lived by Jesus – a life filled with suffering and ending in a scandalizing death on a cross. In the mind of Mark, it is this life lived on earth and, most particularly, the end of that life on the Cross that reveals all. Mark believes Jesus to be the Messiah – to be the Son of God – but he does not believe that anything manifested this but the entire life and death endured by Jesus. Only when that life had ended was the truth truly revealed. Jesus is the Christ – Jesus is Lord! The knowledge expressed in the Scriptures, during the early life of Jesus, that He is the Messiah or the Son of God is but a projection of the Easter Faith back into the earthly ministry of Jesus. It is hindsight. The sole exception to this is the profession of faith by Peter in the Eighth Chapter. Mark, therefore, does play down any manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah, or the Son of God, during His earthly ministry.

After a long narration of the Passion, the Gospel of St. Mark abruptly ends. Mark desires to leave the disciple with the taste of the Cross in his mouth; or better still, pondering in his heart the meaning and the mystery of the sufferings and death of Jesus of Nazareth. He does not desire the Easter Joy to eclipse, in the minds and hearts of Christians, the importance of the Cross in the Christian life. The essence of Mark's Gospel could be summed in St. Paul's proclamation, *"I preach Christ and Him crucified."* In a sense, Mark leads with the Crucifixion rather than a Cross.

A GOSPEL SOURCE

Mark's Gospel account serves as a major source for the Gospel accounts of both Matthew and Luke. Mark's narrative is the earliest and shortest Gospel narrative, with 661 verses. Matthew's version of the Gospel, written around 85 A.D., has 1,068 verses of which 606 verses pertain to Mark's version. Matthew incorporated all but 55 verses of the First Gospel. The Gospel account by St. Luke, composed around 90 A.D., contains 1,149 verses. Luke reproduces 320 verses from Mark. Twenty-four of these verses do not appear in Matthew. Therefore, we are left with only 31 of Mark's verses not appearing in either Matthew or Luke.

The Gospel accounts of Mark, Matthew and Luke are referred to as the three synoptic gospels. The word "synoptic" derives from two Greek words meaning, "to see together." Scholars have been fond of placing these different accounts in three parallel columns and, side-by-side, noting the similarities and differences. We know that each Evangelist handled traditional information somewhat differently. Each account was produced to meet some specific and practical need in the Christian Community of its origin. These needs of the Church controlled, to a great degree, the choice of material to be used, the emphasis to be given and the arrangement and adaptation of the material.

Scholars tell us that Matthew was probably a converted Jewish rabbi and wrote for Jewish Christians who had to daily live with the hostility of the Pharisaic party. This was the only Jewish party to survive the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. In their effort to preserve the Jewish religion they were determined to drive all Christians from the synagogue. The community that Matthew wrote for was faced with hostility of the synagogue down the street. Matthew endeavors to prove that the Kingdom of God, the New Israel, had come in Jesus Christ – the New Moses. Therefore, Christians were members of the New Israel. Matthew writes as a scribe of the New Torah – a scribe bringing forth both the old and the new.

St. Luke, being of Grecian origin, wrote for a Gentile Christian Community that no longer expected an immediate Second Coming. It was a Church learning to live with the possibility of a long delay of the Parousia (Second

Coming). The Gospel tradition, as understood by Luke, failed to convey a proper understanding of Jesus to the Gentile Christian. Therefore, Luke used new material and rewrote much of the old. In this narrative Jesus appears more in the light of the Human Ideal. Under the hand of Luke, the Gospel clearly becomes a rule of life – a social Gospel.

As we study the Gospel According to Mark, it will be interesting to note the changes his material underwent in the hands of Matthew and Luke as they adapted his material for their own purposes. This gives us an insight as to how the Evangelists used the traditional material at hand in the composition of their Gospel accounts.

The Gospel According to Mark is probably the purest presentation of Jesus of Nazareth that we possess.

Mark begins his account with the words, *"Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (Mk. 1:1)* He begins immediately by identifying Jesus as the Messiah. Already, by the time this Gospel was written, Christ (the anointed-one), an adverb, had by usage become a proper noun. It is the Gospel of Jesus Messiah. When Mark refers to Jesus as the Son of God he certainly intends to express more than the concept of Messiah. This title occurs at critical points in the Gospel: the Prologue, the transfiguration and at Jesus' death on the Cross. Mark attaches great importance to the title.

We see in the Old Testament that the People of Israel were referred to as the sons of God.

> ***So you shall say to Pharaoh: Thus says the Lord: "Israel is my son, my first-born. Hence I tell you: Let my Son go, that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, I warn you, I will kill your son, your first-born." (Exodus 4:22)***

God proclaims through the prophet Hosea, *"When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son." (Hos. 11:1)* Individual kings of Israel, after being anointed, were considered sons of God. In a certain sense, they were considered adopted by God who protected and loved them as a father does a son. In Second Samuel 7:14, God said of David, *"I will be a Father to him, and he shall be a son to me.... I will not withdraw my favor from him as I withdrew it from... Saul."*

In the secular literature of the Grecian world, the title *"Son of God"* describes a great ruler or a *"spirit-filled man,"* whose outstanding deeds indicate divine origin. Since Mark's narrative was directed to men of such a culture, this may have been the meaning Mark intends to convey by calling Jesus the *"Son of God."* At the end of the Gospel, we do see that he places these words in the mouth of the centurion. Apparently, Mark implies that Jesus is a supernatural being of divine origin, uniquely related to God. The divine origin of Jesus is illustrated more by divine actions than words – the forgiveness of sins, the expulsion of demons, dominion over the Sabbath, knowledge of divine mysteries. Nevertheless, in Mark's account, Jesus is truly man and no Evangelist is as comfortable with the humanity of Jesus as Mark. He portrays the human traits of Jesus more than any other Evangelist. A human portrait of Jesus emerges out of this narrative.

THE GOOD NEWS

In the four accounts of the Gospel, Mark alone opens with the words, *"Here begins the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the Son of God."* Mark's use of the word Gospel" is unique among the four Evangelists. He may have introduced the word 'Gospel' into the tradition about Jesus. Matthew uses the word four times, but in a qualified sense. Luke refers to his account as a narrative and does not use the word "Gospel" except in the Acts.

As mentioned earlier, the word "Gospel" means "good tidings" and derives from the Greek word "evangelion." In the Classical Greek, the word signified "good news" – particularly news of a victory. In Roman times, it applied to the news of the birth of an heir to Caesar or the ascension of a Caesar to the throne. It is possible that Mark desired to indicate to the Romans the Lordship of Jesus by the use of the word "Gospel."

The use of the word in the New Testament, and particularly in Mark, was no doubt influenced by the Prophet Isaiah's use of its Hebrew equivalent "Basar." We read of Isaiah announcing the good news of salvation of Zion:

> ***Go up onto a high mountain, Zion, herald of glad tidings; Cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news! Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! Here comes with power the Lord God, who rules by His strong arm; Here is His reward with Him, His recompense before Him. (Is. 40:9-11)***

Again, Isaiah writes:

> ***How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of Him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, "Your God is King." (Is. 52:7)***

In Isaiah 61:1, we read the famous words that Jesus read in the synagogue of Nazareth and applied to Himself:

> ***The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.***

It is highly possible when Mark wrote, *"Here begins the Gospel"* that he beheld Jesus as the "good news" foretold by Isaiah. In Mark, the "good news" relates to the coming of Jesus, the account of His life, His death and Resurrection. In Matthew and Luke, the word "gospel" appears to signify the coming of God's Kingdom. St. Paul is closer to the mind of Mark when he makes this summary of the Gospel in the Epistle to the Romans:

> ***Concerning His Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but was made Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead. (Rm. 1:3)***

Mark equates the Gospel with Jesus. Jesus Christ is the "good news." The object of the Gospel is Jesus: the power, the passion, the glory of Jesus. It is more than a book that merely recites the events of the life of Jesus. The words, the deeds, the death and Resurrection present Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God – the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The Cross of Jesus is central to the Gospel – it proclaims the good news of God's grace and salvation. The Cross is the Wisdom of God.

The Gospel is salvation history begun during the earthly life of Jesus and continued by the Resurrective and Eternal Lord, Jesus Christ. Its words are alive and spirit-filled. The power of Jesus operates through the Gospel. When the Gospel is proclaimed, Jesus is present whenever the saving words and deeds are announced. In other words, when the Gospel is preached – when the saving words and deeds of Jesus are proclaimed on the authority of God – the Gospel has the divine power to save a sinner's life. St. Paul insists

that the preaching of the Gospel to the Thessalonians caused their conversion to Jesus. He writes to them:

> ***That is why we thank God constantly that in receiving His message from us you took it, not as the word of men, but as it truly is, the word of God at work within you who believe. (1Thes. 2:13)***

Paul describes his ministry among the Corinthians with these words:

> ***As for myself, Brothers, when I came to you I did not come proclaiming God's testimony with any particular eloquence or "wisdom." No, I determined that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When I came among you it was in weakness and fear, and with much trepidation. My message and my preaching has none of the persuasive force of "wise" argumentation, but the convincing power of the Spirit. As a consequence, your faith rests not on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1Cor. 2:1-5)***

Paul writes to the Colossians how the Gospel bears fruit and continues to grow within them:

> ***You heard of this hope through the message of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, has borne fruit, and has continued to grow in your midst, as it has everywhere in the world. (Col. 1:5)***

Paul writes in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, *"If our gospel can be called 'veiled' in any sense, it is such only for those who are headed toward destruction." (2Cor. 4:3)* St. Peter writes in his first Epistle, *"the Word of the Lord endures forever… now this 'Word'… was preached to you." (1Pet. 1:25)*

When Mark writes *"the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God,"* he does not wish to imply the beginning of a book or even a life of a person, but the beginning of the saving acts of God in the public life of Jesus of Nazareth. He intends to convey to his readers that this same Godly power and presence manifested in the earthly life of Jesus is still present among those who in faith hear the Gospel and accept the Lordship of Jesus! Wherever the words and deeds are retold in faith, the power of Jesus is present to save. The Gospel is not merely an announcement of what God did in Jesus but what God is doing in Jesus! The Book of Hebrews testifies that

the Word of God is alive with the Spirit:

> ***God's word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart. (Heb. 4:12)***

In the study of Sacred Scriptures and in our own apostolic endeavors of bringing the Word of God to others, it is well to bear in mind the teachings of St. Paul to the Corinthians. Paul teaches the Gospel to be the very *"wisdom of God." "What we utter is God's wisdom: a mysterious, a hidden wisdom." (1Cor. 2:7)* A Christian is able to grasp and understand this wisdom only *"through the Spirit." (1Cor. 2:10)* Paul infers that the Spirit imparts to us the very *"mind of Christ."* If we are to truly understand the Scriptures, we must be men and women of prayer who seek during their reading and studying to be opened to the Spirit of God within them. The human intellect is not sufficient in the study of God's wisdom and word. It is confronted with the eternal decisions of the Divine Will regarding the salvation of Men, the mystery hidden from the ages. God shares with man the Divine treasure of wisdom which totally transcends the understanding of the human mind. The deepest truths about God and our salvation are made clear in Jesus Christ. Jesus is both the Mediator of divine revelation and the fullness of all revelation. Jesus brought revelation to its fulfillment through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and Resurrection from the dead and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon believers. Jesus confirmed, with divine testimony, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death and to raise us up to life eternal.

In the Sacred Scriptures, the Father, who is in Heaven, meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the divine force and power in the Word of God is so great that it becomes the support and energy of the Christian Community, the strength of its children, the food of the soul – the source of spiritual life.

Paul warns that if we approach the Scriptures without prayer, without being open to the Holy Spirit – as natural men and women – we will fail to understand them. But, more than that, we will be bored with them and consider them of no importance. Paul writes,

> ***The natural man does not accept what is taught by the Spirit of God. For him, that is absurdity. He cannot come to know such***

teaching because it must be appraised in a spiritual way.
(1Cor. 2:14)

In his second epistle to the Corinthians, he said:

> ***If our gospel can be called "veiled" in any sense, it is such only for those who are headed toward destruction. Their unbelieving minds have been blinded by the god of the present age so that they do not see the splendor of the gospel showing forth the glory of Christ, the image of God. (2Cor. 4:3-4)***

Paul speaks of his own people, the Jews,

> ***To this very day, when the old covenant is read the veil remains unlifted; it is only in Christ that it is taken away. Even now, when Moses is read a veil covers their understanding. But whenever he turns to the Lord, the veil will be removed. (2Cor. 3:14-16)***

The Psalmist encourages us, *"Today, if you would hear His voice: 'Harden not your hearts.'" (Ps. 95:7)* The Scriptures imply that biblical faith is more than an intellectual assent to truths. It is a loyal adherence to a personal God. It is a continuing act of personal commitment by which man offers his mind and heart to God. Biblical faith spells itself out in obedience to God. The man of faith entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of the intellect and will to God. God reveals and man's response is obedience. Of course this obedience of faith is impossible unless the Holy Spirit first opens the eyes of the mind and moves the heart to turn to God – the grace of conversion!

There are certain inner dispositions we should bring to the study of the Scriptures. A Christian ought to come to the reading of Scripture with his faith in Jesus Christ who is the final utterance of God's word. There will be no other revelation given to man until Jesus comes again! By this we mean any revelation that determines the salvation of mankind. Our Lord can give guidance to the Christian Community through private revelation.

A Christian ought to come to the reading of Scripture with his faith in the Church, which is the guardian of the Word. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council confirmed:

The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the Name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the Word of God, but serves it.

This office is held by the Bishops, successors of the Apostles.

The Church has always venerated the Divine Scriptures just as She venerates the body of Christ, She unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life.

The Christian ought to come to the reading of Scripture with his faith in the Scripture itself, which is the expression in human language of the message delivered by God. Again the Church tells us:

The books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, without error... that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.

It is the obligation of interpreters *"to carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words."*

The New Testament is the permanent and unchanging testimony of the apostolic generation. They do not claim to be a complete collection of the early Church's beliefs. Nevertheless, they lay down what cannot be changed: the rule of faith as it was recorded, to which the Church is always bound, and which She can develop and expand – but never falsify.

There is a growth in the understanding of the truths handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts – for as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in Her... the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through Her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them.[1]

St. Augustine tells us it is vain and useless to utter the word of God with our lips if we do not listen to it in our hearts. ***"Today, if you heard the voice of God, harden not your hearts!"***

St. Gregory suggests, ***"First, find in the Holy Scriptures knowledge of your own self and then carry it to others, least in reproving others you are lost."***

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1 Quoted material taken from Document of the Second Vatican Council on Revelation.

CHAPTER 2

PROLOGUE TO THE GOSPEL OF MARK

THE PROPHET

At the opening of his gospel account, Mark declares his faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. He reveals to us the Church's early belief about the role and nature of Jesus. In the eyes of many, the earthly life of Jesus had been greatly misunderstood and exaggerated. The life of Jesus was being made to conform to what man imagined the earthly life of the Son of God ought to have been. This produced a two-fold evil: it not only distorted the truth about Jesus but it also falsified Christian discipleship. Mark sought to remedy this evil by presenting, as realistically as possible, the earthly ministry of Jesus. He knew that the earthly life and not the resurrected life of Jesus was the pattern of Christian discipleship. Only when a disciple had run the course – fought the good fight, arrived at the end of his personal Christian pilgrimage – could he hope to share the rewards of his Risen Lord. He wrote for Christians faced with martyrdom. He sought to teach them, through the events and circumstances in the life of Jesus, what to expect as Christians and how to deal with it. He understood that the disciple is not above the Master. With well-illustrated events from the life of Jesus, Mark explicitly endeavors to teach Christians what it can mean to be a friend and disciple of Jesus Christ. All the evangelists did precisely the same thing. They picked from the traditional material available to them the instances and events that best conveyed to their readers the truths that needed emphasizing in their particular Christian Community.

It is in keeping with the traditions of the oral and written Gospel that Christian teachers today present events from the early life of Jesus that throw light on the current needs of the Christian Community and that give proper direction to the faithful. In our study of the First Gospel, both in our lectures and group discussions, we will, by the grace of God, do precisely this. For the true Christian believer, the life of Jesus is a *"lamp unto their feet."* Let us recall the words of Paul to Timothy:

> *Likewise from your infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures, the source of the wisdom which through faith in Jesus Christ leads to salvation. All Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching – for reproof, correction and training in holiness so that the man of God may be fully competent and equipped for every good work. (2Tim. 3:15-16)*

The first thing Mark relates is that a prophet had risen in the land. It is the mission of the prophet to be the mouthpiece of God to the people. God does not speak to a prophet, He speaks directly through the prophet. The prophet was John the Baptist and God called the people of Israel to repentance through him. The appearance of John, son of Zackery and Elizabeth, at the desert's edge demanding repentance, stirred all Israel. His physical dress awakened within the minds of men the image of the great prophet Elijah described in Scripture as *"wearing a hairy garment with a leather girdle about his loins." (2Kings 1:8)* Jewish tradition held Elijah would return to Israel before the coming of the Messiah:

> *You are destined, it is written, in time to come to put an end to wrath before the day of the Lord... Blessed is he who shall have seen you before he dies, 0 Elijah, enveloped in the whirlwind. (Sirach 48:10-11)*

It had been many years since a prophet had risen in Israel. With the death of the prophets Hagai, Zechdriah, Malachi and Joel, the Voice of God had grown silent in Israel. This Divine silence lasted over four hundred years. During this time, the rabbis spoke of hearing *"batkol"* "a daughter of the voice" which was but an echo of the heavenly voice – inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The Jewish historian, Josephus, spoke of an uninterrupted succession of prophets from the time of Moses to around 424 B.C. In the Jewish community, after that time, the written Lord of the law replaced the spoken word of the prophet as the vehicle of the revelation of Yahweh; prophecy was replaced by the teachings of the scribes as a guide of faith for Israel and by the seers who were the authors of the apocalyptic works, such as Enoch and Daniel.

Once again, the Voice of God resounded in Israel through the Prophet John the Baptist. John was awakening a religious revival in the land. We read:

> *All the Judean countryside and the people of Jerusalem went out to Him in great numbers. They were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. John was clothed in camel's hair, and wore a leather belt around his waist. His food was grasshoppers and wild honey. (Mk. 1:5-6)*

This memory of John the Baptist was to linger long in Israel. Josephus, writing after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., recalled John as:

> *a good man who bade the Jews cultivate virtue by justice toward one another and piety toward God, and come together for baptism: for immersion, he said, would appear acceptable to God only if practiced, not as an expiation for specific offenses, but for the purification of the body, when the soul had already been thoroughly cleansed by righteousness.*

Josephus admitted that John wielded great influence over the people. As he noted, this influence produced fear in Herod Antipas and led him to arrest and murder John.

The importance of John the Baptist is seen in the New Testament from the fact that all four Evangelists linked John with Jesus. John's ministry prepared for the ministry of Jesus and inaugurated it. Mark describes John in these prophetic words, *"I send my messenger before you to prepare your way: a herald's voice in the desert, crying 'Make ready the way of the Lord, clear him a straight path.'" (Mk. 1:2-3)*

The first line of Mark's prophetic saying comes from Exodus and Malachi and not from Isaiah. We read that God spoke to Israel in the wilderness of the Sinai desert and He promised them if they were faithful to His commands He would guide them:

> *See, I am sending an angel before you, to guard you on the way to bring you to the place I have prepared. Be attentive to him and heed his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not forgive your sin. My authority resides in him. If you heed his voice and carry out all I tell you, I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes. (Exodus 23:20-22)*

Malachi, one of the last prophets of Israel, echoes these words of Exodus and

clarifies them, *"Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me." (Mal. 3:1)* Malachi identified this messenger (angel means "messenger of God"), as Elijah, *"Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day." (Mal. 3:24)* In Isaiah, we read, *"A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!" (Is. 40:3)* These combined prophecies announced two people: John, the messenger who prepared the way in the wilderness, and the Messiah who followed John and made His appearance in the wilderness.

From Jewish history we see that the desert wilderness played an important part as the environment used by God to prepare his people for the Promised Land. This 'forty year' experience was filled with hopes and promises and failures and despairs. History would later recall more the memory of Israel's purity in the wilderness where she was established and declared to be Son of God rather than her sinful rebellion. In prophetic teachings, the desert wilderness became symbolic of a spiritual condition in which Israel served Yahweh and God loved His people. What Israel had enjoyed in the desert had been lost. The prophets called for a renewal of the exodus into the wilderness in order that Israel be restored as Son of God. Israel must return anew to the wilderness for her filial relationship with God could only be re-established by her humble submission to God's Will. All that pride and disobedience had achieved must be sacrificed. Israel must acknowledge her whole history of disobedience and be willing to be reduced once again to zero. Her reduction to nothingness was the beginning of new history of grace. The words of the prophet Isaiah called for a Second Exodus.

The prophets Amos and Hosea inferred that a return to the wilderness would be a return to the Grace of God. There, in the wilderness, the former relationship of love and trust in God would be restored. Yahweh would again speak as a Father to His children. Hosea prophesied the necessity of a return to Egypt *(Hos. 2:14)* because of the hardness of Israel's heart *(Hos. 11:5).* The prophet Ezekiel announced a new exodus into the wilderness in which Israel would be brought to Judgment. Yahweh would purge every transgressor and rebel from the nation *(Ez. 20:35-38).* Those who remained after the purification would return to the land of Israel and they should be a pleasing odor to Yahweh. *(Ez. 20:41)* For Ezekiel, the wilderness was a place of judgment.

The tradition of a Second Exodus for Israel into the wilderness strongly

colored the rabbinical teachings concerning the Messiah. It was believed that the Messiah would appear in the wilderness and there He would engage in a final struggle with the cosmic forces of evil. The Messiah would work for forty years during which time the miracles of the manna and water would be repeated. The life of the Messiah would duplicate in many ways the life of Moses. It was an accepted truth that the Messiah would begin His mission in the desert. Therefore, for a man to call men to the wilderness was to claim to be the Messiah.

The Judean desert became the scene for many so-called Messianic movements. Josephus told of a Messiah movement by the people into the desert where they were promised, by their leaders, visible proof of God's protection by miraculous intervention. These people met with disaster and were slaughtered by the Romans under the procurator Felix. Another group who followed a false Egyptian messiah met a similar fate. This man led four thousand from the wilderness on march to the Mount of Olives intending to make a triumphant march into Jerusalem. St. Paul was later falsely identified with this group. ***(Acts 21:38)***

Josephus related that, after the burning of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., the surviving Jews within the city petitioned Titus, the son of the new Roman Emperor, to allow them a last request: to retreat with their families into the wilderness. The petition expressed a pathetic hope that messianic deliverance would occur there and their terrible defeat would suddenly be turned into a messianic victory. They never ceased to expect a political Messiah.

Against such a background, it is understandable that John's appearance in the Judean wilderness as an Elijah-like character caused tremendous excitement among the people. John did not seek a physical return to the desert, but rather to reestablish among the people the spiritual condition of the first Exodus. John identified the wilderness with a state of spiritual repentance. The silent Voice of God spoke again through John demanding contrition and confession of sins followed by a turning over of their wills to God. John demanded baptism as a sign of repentance. Men came from all over the land to be baptized. When certain Pharisees and Sadducees were stepping forward for this baptism, he said to them,

> ***You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come? Give some evidence that you mean to reform. Do not pride***

yourselves on the claim, "Abraham is our father." I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these very stones. Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt. 3:7-10)

Apparently, the act of the Pharisees and the Sadducees was one of hypocrisy. The spiritually proud feel no need of repentance. The more alienated a man is from the true spirit of God, the more unconscious he is of sin. It is very hard to convince a proud man of sin. They are consciously self-righteous. Holy men and women always see their sins before them. As the psalmist cried, *"My sin is always before me."* It is a necessary condition for repentance and salvation.

REPENTANCE

Repentance implies a turning away from one way of life and embracing another. Biblically, it implies turning from evil ways and deeds. It is quite radical, for repentance demands a total change and the adoption of an entirely new attitude toward God. One must relinquish all previous attitudes and habits; reject one's former life with its false values and illusive desires. Hosea described it picturesquely as the return of a faithless wife to a loving husband. *(Hosea 2:4,24)* Jesus described it as becoming like a little child. *(Matt. 18:3)*

Some prophets were very pessimistic about Israel's ability to repent. Hosea said, *"Their deeds do not allow them to return to their God; for the spirit of harlotry is in them, and they do not recognize the Lord." (Ho. 5:4)* Jeremiah asks, *"Can the Ethiopian change his skin... the leopard his spots? As easily would you be able to do good, accustomed to evil as you are." (Jer. 13:23)* Repentance demands both knowledge and love.

Repentance is truly a divine operation within man. It is not a work of man by which man moves by his own nature toward God, but a work of God in man through which God freely draws man back to Himself – and, in this point of the history of salvation, through Jesus Christ. The Scriptures confirm that repentance brings salvation, *"If you wish to return, O Israel, says the Lord, return to me.... Then you can swear, 'As the Lord lives, in truth, in judgment and in Justice.'" (Jer. 4:1-2)* Repentance brings deliverance from

evil planned by God: Yahweh encouraged Jeremiah to preach, ***"Perhaps they will listen and turn back, each from his evil way, so that I may repent for the evil I have planned to inflict upon them for their evil deeds." (Jer. 26:3)*** **And again,** ***"Perhaps, when the house of Judah hears all the evil I have in mind to do to them, they will turn back each from his evil way, so that I may forgive their wickedness and their sin." (Jer. 36:3)***

Repentance means that transgressions are blotted out! We read in Isaiah:

> ***O Israel, who are my servant! I formed you to be a servant to me; O Israel, by me you shall never be forgotten: I have brushed away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like a mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you. (Is. 44:21-22)***

God gives this message to the wicked through Ezekiel:

> ***As I live, says the Lord God, I swear I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked man, but rather in the wicked man's conversion, that he may live. Turn, turn your evil ways! Why should you die, 0 house of Israel. (Ez. 33:11)***

The Book of Sirach warns the sinner against postponing a return to God:

> ***Say not: "I have sinned, yet what has befalled me?" for the Lord bides His time. Of forgiveness be not overconfident, adding sin upon sin. Say not: "Great is His mercy; my many sins He will forgive." For mercy and anger alike are with Him; upon the wicked alights His wrath. Delay not your conversion to the Lord, put it not off from day to day; for suddenly His wrath flames forth; at the time of vengeance you will be destroyed. (Sir. 5:4-9)***

In the mind of John, repentance is shown by baptism, confession of sins, and the production of fruits worthy of repentance that illustrates a person's life has truly changed. John imposes good works of giving alms to the poor and the faithful execution of one's duty.

Repentance is very prominent in the gospel. This must be attributed to its importance in the teachings of Jesus. As we shall see, Jesus continues to confirm and echo the preaching of John. The very first words spoken by

Jesus in the gospel are, *"This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the gospel." (Mk. 1:15)*

It is obvious that in order to be united with God through Jesus, a person must have a spirit of repentance within his heart. It is a fundamental condition for a successful study of the Scriptures. We do well to bear in mind the example of the Pharisees who had no conscious awareness of sin. They did not feel the need of repentance. They truly became unable to accept Jesus – for He had come to call sinners, not the righteous. Their righteousness did not lead to salvation but to perdition! Repentance is an initial grace for salvation. Jesus cannot enter a life when the heart is unrepentant. Repentance is the preparatory grace for salvation given by the Father – certainly to all who humbly desire it. Perhaps it is of this grace Jesus spoke when He said that no one can come to Him unless drawn by the Father. The Jews insisted on baptism only in the case of Gentile converts to Judaism as a necessary purification ceremony. This was not a ritual generally practiced by Jews, although we do know that the religious community of Jews living in the wilderness at Qumran did baptize all members who entered the community. When John demanded baptism of Jews, he implied that Jews had no right to membership in the people of God by the mere fact that they were Jews. This John implied when he warned the Pharisees that God could raise up children to Abraham from the very stones. Because of the Jewish people's sinfulness, their condition was no better than that of Gentiles and the same radical repentance was demanded of Jews as of Gentiles. John sought to awaken the Jews from their self-complacency as God's chosen people. He endeavored to prepare the hearts and spirits of men for the reception of the Messiah. He sought to prepare good soil – receptive to the Seed of God. John proclaimed to the people, *"One more mighty that I is coming"* and John was himself not fit to untie His sandals. He considered himself unworthy to do even the task of a Gentile slave. (We see how truly humble are truly holy men.) The One to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit. He would not purify men's bodies with water; He would purify and sanctify their souls with the Holy Spirit. John proclaimed the imminent coming of the Messiah!

THE MISSION OF JESUS

In the village of Nazareth, working in a carpenter shop, Jesus heard the call to Israel to repent. It was not the voice of John that Jesus heard, but the call of the Father. His time had come! He left everything and began His

journey south toward the mouth of the Jordan River – heeding the call of repentance. With others, Jesus followed the call of John to the wilderness where Israel's sonship with God was to be renewed.

Jesus, certainly of Himself, had nothing personally to repent. As Paul told us,

> ***He is the image of the invisible God.... In Him everything in heaven and earth was created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations, principalities or powers; all were created through Him, and for Him. (Col. 1:15-16)***
>
> ***This Son is the reflection of the Father's glory, the exact representation of the Father's being, and He sustains all things by His powerful word. (Heb. 1:3a)***
>
> ***Though He was in the form of God... He emptied Himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. He was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that He humbled himself. (Phil. 2:6-8)***

Jesus understands what it means to be human in the Presence of God. He freely accepts what it means to be a human sinner before the Divine Justice of God. Jesus was born into the Jewish race. He identifies the Jewish people with Himself. He incorporates within His unique Person Israel itself. He became Israel before God – Israel with all the burden of its long history of alienation from Yahweh. Mark does not see Jesus as an individual interested in His own righteousness. From the very beginning, Jesus is a member of a body of people whose heritage and sinful situation He shared. Like Moses, He did not divorce Himself from the sins of His people. We read in Exodus that Moses said to the People,

> ***"You have committed a grave sin. I will go up to the Lord, then; perhaps I may be able to make atonement for your sin." So Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Ah, this people has indeed committed a grave sin in making a god of gold for themselves! If you would only forgive their sin! If you will not, then strike me out of the book that you have written." (Exod. 32:30-32)***

The sins Jesus confessed before His baptism were the sins of Israel!

Not only is Jesus the symbol of Israel but He is the New Adam. Jesus incorporates within Himself all mankind. He is before God the representation of sinful humanity. We read in Colossians:

> ***It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in Him and, by means of Him, to reconcile everything in His person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of His cross. (Col. 1:19-20)***

When Jesus stepped into the River Jordan to be baptized, He freely accepted the vocation to which God called Him – to be the Redeemer of Israel and the Savior of the World. The Divine plan for the salvation of mankind now began to unfold. That day at the Jordan, Jesus truly committed Himself to the Cross – to another baptism that would make Him restless until it would be accomplished. Our Beloved Brother, Jesus, would pay in full, by His sufferings and death, the sinful debt of mankind. Peter reminds all men:

> ***Realize that you were delivered from the futile way of life your fathers handed on to you, not by any diminishable sum of silver or gold, but by Christ's blood beyond all price; the blood of a spotless, unblemished lamb. (1Pet. 1:18-19)***

This humble act of obedience to the Father's will demonstrates true Sonship. And, the Father confirms this to Jesus,

> ***Immediately on coming up out of the water He saw the sky rent in two and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. Then a voice came from the heavens: "You are my beloved Son. On you my favor rests." (Mk. 1:10-11)***

John taught: *"I have baptized you in water; He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." (Mk. 1:8)* Mark clearly intends to demonstrate that with the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus, He is the Messiah who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The Old Testament associated the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with a new exodus. Isaiah writes:

> ***The city will be utterly laid low. Hill and tower will become***

wasteland forever for wild asses to frolic in, and flocks to pasture, until the spirit from on high is poured out on us. Then will the desert become an orchard and the orchard be regarded as a forest. Right will dwell in the desert and justice abide in the orchard.
(Is. 32:14-16)

I will pour out water upon thirsty ground, and streams upon the dry land; I will pour out my spirit upon your offspring, and my blessings upon your descendants. (Is. 44:3)

In Jesus, Israel returned to the desert in repentance and through Jesus, Israel's sonship was renewed. When the baptism of Jesus had taken place, a divine testimony in the descending of the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven attests that the lost sonship had been re-established in and through Jesus. As Jesus descended in utter humility into the waters of the Jordan for baptism, the Holy Spirit was drawn from heaven into the humanity of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit operated with the humanity of Jesus to re-establish the Kingdom of God upon earth. The humanity of Jesus became the reservoir of the Holy Spirit. Through the ministry of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was poured into the lives of men. Jesus is the Dispenser of this Spirit. The operations of the Holy Spirit are manifested in the preaching, exorcisms and miracles performed by Jesus. Jesus' obedience unto death on the Cross enables Him to share the Holy Spirit with His disciples. Man lost the Spirit of God through sinful disobedience; Jesus restored this lost spirit to humanity through humble obedience.

Humble obedience to the Will of God is the criterion of true Christian discipleship. We may be sure that the Holy Spirit finds no entrance into a proud and haughty heart. Men and women whose lives give no evidence of humble obedience to godly authority may work signs and wonders, speak in tongues and give prophecy, but no Spirit of holiness operates within them. Satan can simulate all the gifts of the Spirit and he can fill the soul with sweet consolations to encourage rebellious spirits. The holiness of such people is but an illusion – a creation of the Evil One. Pride permits such delusions to take place. Such Christians fail to heed the advice of the Scriptures: *"You who stand; take heed lest you fall."* The Scriptures confirm that God resists the proud. Be cautious of those so called 'spirit-filled' people who refuse to give obedience to the Church. They may be spirit-

filled, but it is not a holy spirit that fills them. Time will prove this correct. St. Teresa of Avila, who lived in a time when whole nations rejected the Church, on her deathbed exclaimed, *"I rejoice that I die a faithful daughter of the Church!"* Never is humble obedience more exalted or extolled than in the earthly life of Jesus. How rightly He could say to His disciples, "Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart." We should not dare call ourselves Christians until we have been well schooled in the meekness and humility of Jesus.

Mark is content in his narration to indicate that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of John. Both Matthew and John the Evangelist stressed that John the Baptist gave direct testimony about Jesus. The very fact that the early Church placed such importance on the testimony of John indicates the power of John's influence over the Jewish population. John holds the unique position in history of being the last Old Testament Prophet.

The three Synoptic writers, Mark, Matthew and Luke, all mention that immediately following the Baptism of Jesus, He entered into the wilderness. Mark gives this brief account:

> ***At that point the Spirit sent him out toward the desert. He stayed in the wasteland forty days, put to the test there by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and angels waited on him. (Mk. 1:12-13)***

This statement concludes the Introduction, the Prologue to the Gospel by Mark. As with the Prologue in the Fourth Gospel, fundamental Christian truths have been revealed.

TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS

According to the expression used by Mark, Jesus was compelled by the Spirit to enter the wilderness. The words indicate a strong and violent propulsion on the part of the Spirit. Entrance into the wilderness followed the baptism as a necessity. As mentioned, entrance into the wilderness is symbolic of repentance. The heart and essence of repentance is not the negative element of turning from sin but the positive condition of submission to the Will of God. The true spirit of repentance precedes baptism and continues after baptism. It is a fundamental spirit of Christ and therefore, of Christian

discipleship.

Jesus' sojourn in the desert recalls to mind the forty days spent by Moses on Mount Sinai and Elijah's forty-day journey to Mount Horeb. Both of these men were fundamentally men of the desert. Their religious missions, though different, were essentially expressed during those crucial days. The heart of their ministries found a keynote expression in the concentrated experiences of forty days. So, too, it was with Jesus of Nazareth. The earthly ministry of Jesus found symbolic expression in these few verses.

Mark indicates the loneliness of the desert and the absence of human support. One traveler wrote of this region:

> ***For hours, as you travel across hills, you may feel no sign of life except scorpions and vipers which your passage startles, in the distances a few wild goats and gazelles, and at night the wailing of the jackal and the hyena's howl.***

Ancient people believed the desert to be the home of evil spirits. Wild animals, closely associated with demons, were part of the realm of Satan. Jesus' environment brought to Him not only loneliness but the horror and danger of demonic companionship. In the wilderness, Jesus was 'put to the test' by Satan!

Satan appears in the Scriptures as the prince of demons – the head of all powers hostile to God. Satan hates and destroys God's work among men. His primary work is to destroy the relationship between God and Man. In the New Testament, Satan appears as ruler of an organized empire of evil, the prince of the world, from whose control men are totally unable to free themselves. The Scriptures tell us *"To this end was the Son of Man manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil." (1Jn. 3:8)*

The determination of Jesus to repent – to abide in the wilderness – brought Him into conflict with personified evil. At the beginning of the ministry, Satan engaged Jesus and attempted to win a decisive victory against God by turning Jesus from His vocation, His mission. Mark relates only the first clash and not a victory. Jesus did not win the victory in the forty days, nor did He cease to be tempted afterwards. Mark understood the whole mission of Jesus as an encounter with Satanic forces. What was symbolized in the

baptism and sojourn in the wilderness was not merely the first act of the drama, but a composite picture of the entire earthly ministry of Jesus. The environment of those forty days symbolizes the entire milieu of Jesus' earthly existence. In the coming drama, Jesus and Satan are the main actors. Jesus continued to meet the personal forces of evil particularly in His encounters with men. When Mark speaks of men he usually indicates persons alienated from God by disobedience and under the power of the Evil One. Even the disciples of Jesus are pictured as men who failed to understand Jesus and His mission and seek to turn Him from God's will. Both the enemies and the disciples are portrayed as men alienated from the Will of God and thereby a source of temptation for Jesus. Jesus continually lived in temptation and continually was victorious. To live in such a condition means to abide in the wilderness!

The climax was the Passion and the encounter assumed a deadly aspect. The Son of Man fell into the hands of wicked men and surrendered to the powers of evil that saw in His Crucifixion their triumph. Jesus' journey in the wilderness ended in the grave, as had once the rebellious Israelites during their march through the desert.

When Mark relates the presence of *"wild beasts"* and *"angels,"* he implies that all the forces of both Heaven and Hell were present in the wilderness temptation. The angel of Yahweh was a familiar figure in the Old Testament wilderness stories. The angel guided and aided Israel during its journey to the Promised Land. The angel brought food and nourishment to Elijah in the desert. *(1Kings 19:5-7)* When Mark relates that the angels ministered to Jesus, he informs us that the aid received by Jesus during His trials and temptations did not come from man nor the earth, but from Heaven – from God. Luke relates that during the Passion when Jesus could find no human support or comfort from His disciples, *"An angel then appeared to Him from heaven to strengthen Him." (Lk. 22:43)* Mark teaches that though temptation by evil is inevitable in the wilderness, God does not leave His servants unaided; angels will minister to them!

To understand temptation in the Scriptures, we need to distinguish between two kinds of temptation. One has a good end and flows from a good source, namely God. The other has an evil intent and flows from an evil principal namely Satan. When a temptation comes from God, it is a test and flows from a good source, namely God. The other has an evil intent and flows from an evil principal, namely Satan. When temptation comes from God, it

is a test and trial sent for the good of the spirit. When it comes from Satan, it is a seduction to evil and has deadly ambitions. Temptation from God enables us to grow in virtue and love of God. Temptation from Satan seeks to separate man from God.

The Hebrew word for temptation 'nasah' means 'to try' or 'to test.' It is a test to reveal the inner disposition or will of a person rather than his abilities or virtues. Two classical examples in the Old Testament of temptations by God are the story of Abraham and Isaac, and that of Job. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as the stars, but He demanded that Abraham sacrifice his only hope for this fulfillment – his son Isaac. Job, we are told, *"feared God and avoided evil,"* and *"he was blameless and upright."* His love of God was severely tested through numerous sufferings and tribulations. The heart of temptation is the visitation of unmerited sufferings upon a man. It intends to shake a man's faith in divine justice and love. It is a test of faith. It drives the man deep into his soul. It reveals a man's true disposition and will toward God. It manifests a man's degree of holiness. In the case of Job, he responded, *"The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord!"* And *"even if He kills me, I will trust in Him."* The Book of Wisdom tells us:

> ***Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed, because God tried them and found him worthy of Himself. As gold in the furnace, He proved them... and as sacrificial offerings He took them to Himself. (Wis. 3:5-6)***

A genuine Christian must expect trials and tribulations. We have only to look at the Lord's life and all those who are His true friends to know the truth of that statement. We read in the Book of Sirach:

> ***My son, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials. Be sincere of heart and steadfast, undisturbed in time of adversity. Cling to Him, forsake Him not; thus will your future be great. Accept whatever befalls you, in crushing misfortune be patient; for in fire gold is tested, and worthy men in the crucible of humiliation. Trust God and He will help you; make straight your ways and hope in Him. (Sirach 2:1-6)***

We are tested by God not in order to prove how strong we are, but in order to make us strong. Temptation calls our wills into conflict, reserved strength into play. It forces us to exercise our wills. The very decision of the will

strengthens the will in virtue or in vice. For example, a person makes a vow of fidelity to another person during a marriage ceremony. It is a willed commitment on the part of one person to another. When a married person finds another person sexually attractive (which would be quite normal), the attraction may become a temptation to marital infidelity. It is of such temptation that St. James wrote:

> ***No one who is tempted is free to say, "I am being tempted by God." Surely God, who is beyond the grasp of evil, tempts no one. Rather the tug and lure of is own passion tempt every man. Once passion has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin reaches maturity it begets death. (James 1:13-15)***

If the married person rejects the temptation, the rejection confirms and strengthens the commitment to the married partner. Through temptation, fidelity grows. Marriage is strengthened by temptation. If a person is seduced by the temptation, the will becomes less firm in its commitment to fidelity. The marriage relationship is weakened. Of the soul-strength developed by overcoming temptation, St. James wrote:

> ***My brothers, count it pure joy when you are involved in every sort of trial. Realize that when your faith is tested this makes for endurance. Let endurance come to its perfection so that you may be fully mature and lacking in nothing.... Happy the man who holds out to the end through trial! Once he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (James 1:2-4,12)***

Our endurance creates our love!

Oftentimes, Our Lord permits trials and tribulations to destroy the illusion we have created about our holiness. We think we are stronger than we are; we feel we have more virtue than we do. Our pride or the Evil One has deluded us. No matter the cause of the delusion, it is not a good situation. Our Lord does not let His friends abide in Fantasyland. He permits trial to come upon us, to bring us to a realistic awareness of our true spiritual state. He permits this for an increase in the virtue of humility – the foundation of all other heavenly blessings!

We should not let temptation upset us but quietly remind ourselves, "I must

be tempted in order to grow!" St. Paul told the Christians at Corinth,

> ***No test has been sent you that does not come to all men. Besides, God keeps His promise. He will not let you be tested beyond your strength. Along with the test, He will give you a way out of it so that you may be able to endure it. (1Cor. 10:13)***

The only way out in some cases is flight. For example: Scriptures warn us to *"flee fornication!"*

Scriptures even speak of man being a tempter of God. We are warned not to tempt God. To tempt God is not to recognize His power and presence in our midst and demand that He prove His presence in some extraordinary way. The classical Scripture case of this we find in Exodus. When Israel came to Massah and Meribah, they found no water. We read, *"the Israelites quarreled there (with Moses) and tested the Lord saying, 'Is the Lord in our midst or not?'" (Ex. 17:7)* Again, man is said to tempt God when he lives a life that tests the goodness and patience of God. The Scriptures warn Israel against such evil, *"You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test as you did at Massah." (Dt. 6:16)* Psalm 78 reminds us what it means to sin in this fashion:

> ***Yes, they spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the desert? For when He struck the rock, waters gushed forth, and the streams overflowed; can He also give bread and provide meat for His people?" Then the Lord heard and was enraged; and fire blazed up against Jacob, and anger rose against Israel, because they believed not God nor trusted in His help. (Ps. 78:19-22)***

Trial comes to every man and we are encouraged to pray for deliverance from such temptation – man confronted by Satan. He comes with only one purpose: to destroy God's work and alienate man from God and thereby destroy man. He is motivated by envy and hatred. He is described by Jesus as a liar and murderer. His method is deception and his purpose is the eternal death of the soul. We have two classical examples of man versus Satan in the Bible: one is the temptation of Adam and Eve, the Fall of Mankind, the second is the temptation of Jesus Christ, the Fall of Satan!

Satan comes when man is alone and weakest. Both Eve and Jesus encountered him alone. Our first parents' relationship with God depended solely on their humble obedience to the command of God. It did not matter whether they saw the wisdom of His command or felt the need for it. It was a matter of the creature submitting his will to the Creator. Satan endeavored to turn this will from God. His methods were subtle. He came in disguised form. He spoke about God and created doubt. He lied. He asked, "Did God really say that?" All that remains before the tempted is the Word of God. The Word of God alone must see the tempted through the temptation. Our first parents were not weak. They later became weak! They had the grace to resist. The grace was not in their minds to give them light – it was not in their emotions to give them a liking for the commandment – it was in their wills. They had the power to cling to the Word of God. Satan encouraged them to follow their own lights and feelings. He seduced them to follow their own lights and feelings. He seduced their wills away from the Will of God. In turning their wills from God, they alienated themselves from God – the source of light and love and life! Turning from God who made them stronger than their adversary, they now faced an adversary, by creation, stronger than themselves. The strong plunder the weak! They had surrendered the freedom of God's children for enslavement to Satan. Mankind, the Prince of the World by God's design, fell and Satan became the victor and Prince and Ruler of this world. What God had given to man, Satan now took from man. Independent of God, man would never be able to overcome his enemy. The children of Adam, confronting the temptation of the Evil One, will always be overcome. He will always question in his heart and doubt; "Has God really said?" For man to meet Satan in the strength of his own flesh is not to know victory, but certain defeat.

The second great temptation story is the encounter between the New Adam, Jesus Christ, and the ancient enemy, Satan. It is not without purpose that the Evangelists note that the Holy Spirit was poured into the humanity of Jesus before the temptation. Certainly, it is to warn all disciples that without this same spirit operative within their humanity during temptation, defeat is inevitable.

Matthew and Luke relate the nature of the temptations suffered by Jesus in the wilderness. The temptation of Jesus and His answers define the true character of His mission. It is the Word of God that directs the defense of Jesus. We are told that during the entire forty days, Jesus was tempted by

Satan. In all that time, He ate nothing, so that He was hungry when it was over. The Devils said to Him *"If you are God's Son, order this stone to turn into bread."* Jesus was tempted to test the words He heard at His baptism. This is called the temptation of the flesh. Satan planned to make the flesh rebel against the spirit. Satan knows that the flesh is afraid of suffering. Why should the Son of God suffer? Were Jesus to withdraw from suffering in the flesh, all flesh would be lost. Jesus did not fulfill His mission by providing for basic physical necessities, but by proclaiming the Word that is life. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and suffers the loss of his eternal life? Jesus responded to Satan, *"The Scripture says, 'Not by bread alone does a man live!'" (Deut. 8:3)* The flesh, too, belongs to the Word of God, and if it must suffer, then man does not live by bread alone. Jesus will suffer if it is the Will of God! Then the Devil took Jesus to the Holy City, set Him on the highest point of the temple, and said to Him:

> *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, because Scripture has it, "He will bid His angels watch over you;" and again "With their hands, they will support you, that you will never stumble on a stone!" (Lk. 4:9)*

The second temptation is directed against the faith of Jesus – a temptation of the spirit. Jesus was tempted to produce a spectacular and convincing display of power that would compel the belief of men. The appeal to the spectacular sign sought to impose demands upon God that God had not promised to fulfill even to His beloved Son. It is not this way that God has chosen to reveal His love for men nor to bring about the salvation of men. The mission of Jesus would be accomplished only by His submission to the Father's will. Faith, which demands more than the Word of God, becomes a temptation of God. Jesus answered, *"But the scripture also says, 'You must not put the Lord, your God, to the test!'" (Deut. 6:16)* Then the Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him all the Kingdoms of the world, in all their greatness. *"All this I will give you," the Devil said, "if you kneel down and worship me."* In this temptation, Jesus was offered the power of this world to accomplish His mission. It was a temptation to become a political Messiah. Since the power of this world is under the dominion of Satan, it implied a submission to him. In this offer, Satan appeared undisguised as the Prince of this World and he demanded open apostasy from God. Jesus addressed him directly, *"Away with you, Satan! Scripture has it, 'You shall do homage to the Lord your God; Him alone shall you adore.'" (Deut. 6:3)* When the devil had finished all the tempting, he left

Him to await another opportunity. ***(Lk. 4:13)***

Jesus was tempted in His flesh, His faith and in His allegiance to God. He clung to the Word of God. To each temptation He replied, *"Scripture says..."* The Word of God robs Satan of his power. Only by clinging to God's word are such temptations overcome.

Jesus left an example and a warning to His Church and His disciples. We are pilgrims in this world. It is our wilderness. If we have received the Holy Spirit into our lives, we may expect to encounter Satan. Only by humble submission to the Will of God can the victory of Christ be ours.

Be assured that when God calls a man to follow Him, He expects him to go forward in the Abraham faith. The Lord permits the winds of temptation to blow. The ship of that man's life is tossed and hammered. If the course is maintained, even the evil spirit may enter the winds. The winds may assume gale and even hurricane force. The poor soul is forced to blindly hold its course into a night of frightful disturbances. There is no consolation to be given, for nothing can console the soul. The soul is reduced to absolute zero. It maintains its course by a sheer will, clinging to the call of God. Angels and ministers of grace can only encourage the spirit to persevere and hope. When the storm passes, the soul will never be the same. It has weathered a force that has tested its very being – it has withstood and conquered the winds of adversity and temptation. In so doing, the soul finds a strength it never possessed – it has a power to follow God and accomplish good never dreamed possible. God permits His children to be tested that they may become men and women of God – Soldiers of His Kingdom!

CHAPTER 3

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

The days in the desert prepared Jesus for His public mission. His confrontations with Satan and temptations clarified and confirmed His life as the Messiah. His talents and powers would not be used to serve any personal interest, not even to conserve His own life. The Will of God directed His life and not His physical and psychic needs. He demanded no more of God as a directive for His faith, or to confirm His confidence in His Sonship and loving relationship with the Father, than the revealed Word of God in the Scriptures. In faith, He would walk from the desert to Calvary. He would use no means to fulfill His mission other than those given and willed by the Father. All Jesus did and said would flow from the workings of the Holy Spirit. Jesus lived His earthly ministry in absolute docility to the Spirit of God. He emptied Himself out and became the slave of God. This total obedience of the humanity of Jesus to the will of God inaugurated the Kingdom of God on earth and ushered in the redemption of the human race. Indeed, it was a very good time for mankind. God, whose personal presence had so long been alienated from His creation, once again entered into His creation to redeem it. The final act of God, on this earth, had begun and will continue until the Kingdom comes in fullness.

The Redemption of man follows the Reparation of man. The sin of mankind is disobedience. All sin becomes truly one sin – the sin of disobedience. All evil on earth flows as a result of disobedience. Breaking the commandment of God is but the external manifestation of disobedience. At the heart of sin is man's personal rejection of God. Man tells God that he prefers to do it his way! Man will direct his life by his own lights and achieve his fulfillment through the exercise of his own powers and abilities. Man is free, as God is free. God made him in His image. Man is free to serve or reject God. For man to reject God is to reject his proper good. When man sins, he chooses

an apparent good – a good of his own nature. In the reality of things, he chooses evil. It is a choice that ultimately leads to deterioration and death. Disobedience alienates man from God. The Person of God is no longer free to flow through the life of man. Man relegates God to standing outside his door where God can only knock. Evil consequences flow from this alienation from God. These consequences fill many a life to the brim in bitterness. Many men come to regret the evil consequences of sin in their lives. They regret the evil that befalls them, but not the sin causing it. They are not sorry for the evil they did. They never truly repent for their sins. True repentance demands not only a turning from evil, but a turning to God with one's whole mind, heart and soul. Man has reached such a sad state that he is unable, by himself, to turn his heart from self to God. Man can no longer love God more than himself. Only the merciful grace of God makes it possible for a human being to rise to a love of God above the world and all it offers. This grace comes through Jesus Christ!

In this life, we will never understand all that Jesus has done for us. One thing is certain – without Jesus, all mankind would be lost and without Jesus in their lives, men and women are being lost!

When the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became man, He assumed the effects and results of a nature alienated from its Creator. He was able to be tempted because He was truly our brother in the flesh. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus suffered, without sinning, all the temptations that befall human beings. ***"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned." (Heb. 4:15)*** **Day-by-day, Jesus confirmed Himself as God's Son by clinging in mind, heart and spirit to the Will of God. It was not easy. He knew anger, fear, sorrow, disappointment, frustration and apparent failure – but He never knew sin. Nothing, not even a most horrible death, could turn Him from accomplishing the Will of God. Clinging to God's Will committed Jesus to a life of hardship and suffering, but it likewise opened Him, as a human being, to a most marvelous relationship with God. Jesus established, within the earth of His own being, the Kingdom of God. This He accomplished by a complete, humble submission to God's Will. God filled the humanity of Jesus with His Holy Presence. The Power of God's love filled the humanity of Jesus. Through the exercise of this power, Jesus**

would accomplish His mission. Jesus would draw men, by love, into the Kingdom of God.

From God alone, we learn that to love is to leave free. God will use no power other than love to draw men back to Himself. Jesus will not force nor manipulate men to turn to God. Jesus will make known the unexpected favor that God offers through Him. He will preach the *"Good News."*

Jesus knew from experience what submission to the reign of God demands. On the one hand, He knew the sufferings it entails; but on the other, He knew the indescribable joy of being the beloved Son of the Father. Because of this, He did not hesitate to encourage men to bear the cross. In light of what man wins by his love of God, the hardships entailed are of little consequence. As Teresa of Avila once said, *"Life, at worst, is but a night spent in a bad inn!"* This same feeling St. Paul expressed to the Corinthians:

> ***We do not lose heart, because our inner being is renewed each day even though our body is being destroyed at the same time. The present burden of our trial is light enough, and earns for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. We do not fix our gaze on what is seen but on what is unseen. What is seen is transitory; what is unseen lasts forever. (2Cor. 4:16-18)***

For this reason, Jesus put this question before the minds of men, *"What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his life?"* This is why He teaches that a man should be willing to cut himself away from any temporal good or blessing if it threatens the eternal good of his soul!

The public ministry of Jesus began after the arrest of John. By this teaching, Mark illustrates that the work of John had ended and Jesus of Nazareth appeared – the principle character in the divine drama. *"Jesus appeared in Galilee preaching (or proclaiming) the good news of God." (Mk. 1:14)* The Greek word "to preach" or "to proclaim" meant literally to act as a herald, to be the official town crier who announces, to the public, news of great importance. During a time of war the herald's position was extremely important as he announced to the people victory or defeat – life or death!

Mark sees Jesus as God's Herald going from city to city announcing *"good news"* and that *"this is the time of fulfillment."* The "time of fulfillment" for the Jews signified a time decreed in the counsel of God for the final entrance of God into human history. It was expected that in order for the present evil situation to be altered, God must enter human history and eradicate the forces of evil and establish His reign bringing peace to men. This would be the "time of fulfillment" and the end of the ages! The very next words of Jesus announced, *"The reign of God is at hand."* Mark understands the reign of God to be in Jesus of Nazareth. God offers freedom from evil and membership in His Kingdom through Jesus, the Christ. Jesus is God's beachhead in humanity – a beachhead never to be lost from which God would begin His reign and from there, spread His reign into men through the ages. It was the announcement of God's return and victory in Jesus – a victory that all men would be invited to share. Indeed, Jesus was the herald of *"good news – preacher of the Gospel!"*

Mark tells us that Jesus repeated the preparatory message of John, *"Reform your lives." (Mk. 1:15)* This emphasized the importance of repentance as (conditio sine qua non) a necessary condition for the reign of God. With repentance must come faith in the Gospel, *"Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel!"* Faith in the Gospel is the second stone in the foundation of salvation. Faith gives direction and purpose to repentance. The Gospel brings the Presence and Power of the Holy Spirit into the life of the believing penitent. When Jesus asks us to have faith in the Gospel, we must not think of this as believing solely in a message of truth, but primarily as a belief in the Person – Jesus Christ. The Good News is that God came to man in and through the sacred humanity of Jesus. Through man's union with Jesus, God reconciled the world to Himself. Faith in the Gospel implies a permanent personal relationship between the penitent and the Person – Jesus Christ. Everything else in the Christian life – prayer, the Mass, the Sacraments, the Scriptures, the Christian Community – are but means to bring about a union between Jesus and the believer. When we properly understand this to be the mission of Jesus, we will easily see why so much of the work of Jesus among men was a failure. He was never able to bring many men to this point. Jesus' failure emphasizes the mystery of human freedom and the deep hold sin has over man. Men flocked to Jesus to have

the consequences of their sins removed. Out of His tremendous compassion, Jesus reaches to touch men where they will to be touched, in their sick bodies and disturbed minds. He did this when He lived on earth and He does it still. He is our Brother and He has a loving compassion for His little brothers and sisters even if they have no true love for Him. The love of Jesus is Divine Love expressed through the nature of man. And so, Jesus loves those who do not love Him; He loves His enemies and prays for those who do evil. The love of God is not conditional upon our love for Him. He loves because it is His nature to love. If a man is lost, it is not due to a lack of God's love, but the choice of the man. Salvation is a free, divine gift offered to us through Jesus. Salvation will never be forced upon man. Heaven is loving union with God. If man rejects this union, he must be left to his choice – Hell! Hell is eternity without God. Man must freely accept the gift of salvation God offers. This man does when he accepts the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The preaching of Jesus proclaimed to Israel that God, in the fullness of time, had inaugurated His Kingly rule. The powers of evil were about to be destroyed. The time of waiting was ended. God awoke from rest and a new world was being created. Man must be the willing partner of God for the achievement of a new order, a new earth! For this reason Jesus said that *"if you are not with Me, you are against Me!"*

The idea of the Kingdom is absolutely central to the teachings of Jesus. The concept appears 104 times on the lips of Jesus. In the Synoptic Gospels, the term *"Kingdom of God"* is frequently used to describe the central theme of Jesus' mission. The concept is rarely found in the other Books of the New Testament. The Jewish concept of the Kingdom of God was not easily understood by the Gentile world and was therefore subject to serious misinterpretation.

Generally, when a man speaks of a "kingdom," he thinks of a territory with set boundaries, officials and institutions. In the ancient world, a man's kingdom was equated with the extent of his rule – what he was able to

govern by his laws and power. The scriptural words *"basileia"* (Greek) and *"malkut"* (Hebrew) mean a "reign" and not a kingdom. The basic meaning of the concept is the Reign of God and not the Kingdom of God. In the teachings of Jesus, the primary emphasis is on God's rule.

In the Old Testament, the Kingdom of God appears in two main ways: First, Israel saw the Kingdom of God as present here and now by Yahweh being the King of Israel. Samuel says to the people, *"Yet, when you saw Nahash, king of the Ammonites, advancing against you, you said to me, 'Not so, but a king must rule us', even though the Lord your God is your King." (1Sam. 12:12)* In Isaiah, the Lord says, *"I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King." (Is. 43:15)* The Prophet Jeremiah asks, *"Is the Lord no longer in Zion, is her King no longer in her midst?"* We see in Samuel that Kingship was equated with obedience to the commands of Yahweh and Yahweh's reign was called into question by disobedience and disloyalty. Samuel warns the people, *"But if you do not obey the Lord and if you rebel against His command, the Lord will deal severely with you and your king, and destroy you." (1Sam. 12:15)* Jeremiah speaks of the reign of Yahweh extending beyond Israel:

> *No one is like you, 0 Lord, great are You, great and mighty is your name. Who would not fear You, King of the nations, for it is your... domain, there is none like you. (Jer. 10:6-7)*

The Psalmist breaks forth in song of the Kingship of Yahweh:

> *Let all your works give you thanks, 0 Lord, and let your faithful ones bless You. Let them discourse of the glory of Your Kingdom and speak of Your might, making known to men Your might and the glorious splendor of Your Kingdom. Your Kingdom is a Kingdom for all ages, and your dominion endures through all generations.*
>
> *(Ps. 145:10-13)*

On the other hand, the Prophets of Israel spoke of the Kingdom of God as a future expectation and hope,

Sing and rejoice, 0 daughter Zion! See, I am coming to dwell among you, says the Lord. Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and they shall be His people, and He will dwell among you, and you shall know that the Lord of Hosts has sent Me to you. The Lord will possess Judah as His portion in the Holy Land, and He will again choose Jerusalem. Silence, all mankind, in the Presence of the Lord! (Zech. 2:14-17)

The Lord shall become King over the whole earth; on that day the Lord shall be the only one, and His name the only one. (Zech. 14:9)

Your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, called God of all the earth. For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great tenderness I will take you back. In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; but with enduring love I take pity on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer. (Is. 5:7-8)

We may often find the expression "the Kingdom of Heaven" used in place of "the Kingdom of God." Among the rabbis of our Lord's time, there was a tendency to avoid mentioning the Divine Name or using verbal expressions of God. They would substitute abstract nouns. Instead of saying *"Kingdom of God,"* they would speak of *"Kingdom of Heaven."* They would substitute *"the Lord shall reign"* with *"the Kingdom of Heaven stands firm."*

The Kingdom of God, preached by Jesus, does not mean the area or the people over which God reigns – but simply the rule of God. When Jesus surrendered to the Will of God, the reign of God came. We can identify the Kingdom of God with the Person of Jesus. It is intimately connected with His own Person. It is in His words, and works, and Being that the Kingdom came upon His contemporaries. In Jesus, it had come near and upon those to whom He was speaking. It was truly in their midst! For this reason, while Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom, the Apostolic community proclaimed Jesus. No further in-break of God's rule into this world is promised beyond the mission of Jesus and the living continuation of His life and mission in the Church. Jesus Himself and His Church become the Kingdom of God on Earth. It is at once the fulfillment and the means by which it moves toward

a future fulfillment.

> *Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the Reign of God would come, He replied, "You cannot tell by careful watching when the Reign of God will come. Neither is it a matter of reporting that it is 'here' or 'there'. The Reign of God is already in your midst."*
>
> *(Lk. 17:20-21)*

At present, God's Kingdom is, in a real sense, hidden. Men are presently in a position to decide whether they will receive or reject it. It is urgent that men decide to receive God's Kingdom for a day is coming when it will be clearly manifested. On that day, those who have rejected God's rule will find themselves eternally outside God's Kingdom *"where there will be the weeping and grinding of teeth."*

It is not a matter of the Kingdom of God coming in a fuller way in the future. In Jesus, the Kingdom has come in its fullness. *"It pleased God that absolute fullness should reside in Him."* In the future, that which is now veiled will be fully revealed. The Scriptures can speak of the Kingdom as having come and as yet to come because Jesus has come and He will come again. The petition within the "Our Father... The Kingdom come" is equivalent to St. Paul's *"Maranatha"* (O Lord Come!). What the Church awaits is not something more complete than Christ Himself, but rather Jesus manifested in glory. That day assent will be unavoidable for then every knee shall bend at His name and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord! As long as the Kingdom remains veiled, men may still make a free personal decision for Jesus.

The Kingdom of God presents a challenge to every person. Each person must decide whether he will accept the authority of God in his life. The coming of God's Kingdom on earth is equivalent to His Will being done on earth as in Heaven. Each man is a part of this earth. He alone is "lord" of a particular bit of the earth known as "self." He, and he alone, decides whether God's Kingdom will come in his earth or not. God makes no conquest of the soul. He only offers a challenge and an invitation – man on his part must freely surrender to the reign of God. Needless to say, it

demands not a reform, but a radical change that is nothing less than a revolution.

Jesus tells us the Kingdom of God is a gift, ***"It has pleased your Father to give you the Kingdom." (Lk. 12:32)*** **Jesus encourages us not to seek the temporal things of this earth but** ***"Seek out instead His Kingdom over you, and the rest will follow in turn." (Lk. 12:31)*** **Jesus warns men to strive to enter the Kingdom,**

> ***Someone asked Him, "Lord, are they few in number who are to be saved?" He replied, "Try to come in through the narrow door. Many, I tell you, will try to enter and be unable. When once the master of the house has risen to lock the door and you stand outside knocking and saying, 'Sir, open for us,' he will say in reply, 'I do not know where you come from.' There will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets safe in the Kingdom of God, and you yourself rejected. People will come from the east and the west, from the north and south, and will take their place at the feast in the Kingdom of God." (Lk. 13:23-29)***

THE CALL OF DISCIPLES

Jesus encourages us to make any sacrifice necessary to enter the Kingdom:

> ***The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant's search for fine pearls. When he found one really valuable pearl, he went back and put up for sale all that he had and bought it. (Matt. 13:45-46)***

Jesus calls us from the deep personal conviction of His own life. Jesus can tell us to follow Him with the absolute assurance that His way leads to life and will bring us into an intimate relationship with God, our Father. This Bible Study is much more than academic. Jesus confronts each of us in this study. For each it is a time of grace – an hour of salvation. May we not harden our hearts. Grace does have its day! ***"If you hear the voice of God today, harden not your hearts."*** **We ought to sincerely pray –** ***"Maranatha!"***

In Mark's narrative, one of the first acts of Jesus was the call of the disciples. Mark demonstrates the power of Jesus over the lives of men. Mark gives no background about the disciples except their occupations. He merely relates,

> ***As He made His way along the Sea of Galilee, He observed Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea: they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, "Come after me; I will make you fishers of men." They immediately abandoned their nets and became His followers. Proceeding a little further along, He caught sight of James, Zebedee's son, and his brother John. They too were in their boat putting their nets in order. He summoned them on the spot. They abandoned their father Zebedee, who was in the boat with the hired men, and went off in His company. (Mk. 1:16:20)***

In the picturesque reference to the leaving of the nets and James and John abandoning their father Zebedee, the effects of repentance are intentionally stressed by Mark. When he writes, *"they became His followers,"* he describes their personal attachment to Jesus, a personal surrender to His summons and the acceptance of His leadership. We are told that Jesus "observed" these men. We are not told what He beheld in them. Later, He reminded them, *"You did not choose me – I chose you."* God informed Jeremiah that He had been observing him for a long time; *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you." (Jer. 1:5)*

Mark clearly demonstrates the demands of discipleship. One must be willing to leave one's economic security, the comfort and ease of a chosen lifestyle. Peter and Andrew immediately left their business; John and James immediately left their father and the family business. If God calls us – we must at once respond regardless of the material or emotional consequences. This same lesson appears clearly in the Old Testament in the call of the Prophet Elisha:

> ***Elijah set out, and came upon Elisha, son of Shaphat, as he was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen; he was following the twelfth. Elijah went over to him and threw his cloak over him. Elisha left the***

oxen, ran after Elijah and said, "Please, let me kiss my father and mother goodbye and I will follow you." "Go back!" Elijah answered. "Have I done anything to you?" Elisha left him and, taking the yoke of oxen, slaughtered them, He used the plowing equipment for fuel to boil their flesh and gave it to his people to eat. Then he left and followed Elijah as his attendant. (1Kings 19:19-21)

The prophet Amos described his vocation to the priest Amaziah:

I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. The Lord took me from following the flock, and said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel. (Amos 7:14-16)

The same was said of David; that the Lord took him from following the ewes to become the shepherd of Israel. Discipleship calls man to a new life. That Jesus could have such an effect on men demonstrates the Divine Power operative in Him. Self-love and attachment are too strong for human nature to make such renunciations unaided by grace.

Some men were naturally attracted to Jesus and desired to be His disciples. Jesus did not call them for He knew they could not meet the demands of discipleship. Others He did call, but they desired to delay their vocation; one because of marriage – another because of business – another because of family obligations. Jesus rejected all of these as being unworthy of His call. (Lk. 9:57) Some people like to play with religion and dabble in it with a contribution of a few hours here and a few dollars there. Jesus is not interested in contributions, but commitments. In the early Church, there was no difference in the commitment made by the married couple, Aquila and Priscilla, than that made by Peter and Paul. The commitment was the same - the ministry was different!

One thing we note about the men God called: they were all busy working at the tasks life had assigned to them. He called workers. It makes one wonder how we have ended up with so many drones in the Kingdom. Mark makes it clear we are called to work. Jesus said to them, *"Come after Me; I will make*

you fishers of men." There is no doubt which is the more difficult and arduous task. Jesus calls men to a life of service. He gives you a destiny! A cause worthy of the investment of life! It demands the rising above self-interest to a point of dying to self. It demands all this in order that a person may find his or her self and come to life. The famous psychiatrist, Carl Jung, once wrote:

> *To be normal is a splendid ideal for the unsuccessful, for all those who have not yet found an adaptation, but for people who have far more ability than the average – for whom it was never hard to gain success and to accomplish their share of the world's work – for them restriction to the normal signifies the bed of Procrustes, unbearable boredom, infernal sterility and hopelessness. As a consequence, there are many people who are neurotic because they cannot become normal.*

Again he writes:

> *What, in the last analysis, induces a man to choose his own way and so climb out of unconscious identity with the mass as out of a fog bank... it is what is called "vocation." Who has a vocation hears the voice of the inner man; he is called.... Now, vocation, or the feeling of vocation, is not perchance the prerogative of great personalities, but also belongs to the small ones.*

Men and women who seek to discover themselves in ceaseless searches for self-fulfillment and expression end as lost souls. An acorn does not discover itself by entering into its shell to analyze its golden substance, but by breaking out of its shell and involving itself in the life around it. Jesus had some hard things to say about unprofitable disciples. For a disciple of Jesus, the only safe way to be caught dead – is at work!

God prepares men for their vocation. John the Baptist was sent precisely to prepare the hearts of men to receive Jesus. Many things enter a man's life that bit by bit lead him to repentance and to a readiness to accept God. The Portuguese have a proverb: *"God writes straight with crooked lines."*

Mark's call to the disciples demonstrates the response demanded by a vocation and what true repentance can mean. No doubt these men had been prepared by the ministry of John the Baptist as indicated in the Fourth Gospel. They probably had already encountered Jesus and had listened to Him. Their hearts were open to His call. We read in St. Luke's account that the call came after Jesus' activities in Capernaum. The disciples had listened to His sermon in the Synagogue and witnessed the power of His miracles. Jesus had accepted an invitation to dine at Peter's house and had cured his mother-in-law. Perhaps when these good men listened to Jesus, their hearts burned within them, but they would have considered themselves unworthy to be closely associated with one so holy as Jesus of Nazareth. Luke expresses Jesus' initiative in extending an invitation to discipleship. He teaches humility needed in discipleship by Peter's response to Jesus, *"Peter fell at the knees of Jesus saying, 'Leave me, Lord I am a sinful man.'" (Lk. 5:8)*

When Peter and his companions accepted Jesus' invitation, their vocations had only just begun. There would be no end. They were being called into an intimate relationship with God through Jesus. They would never become Masters themselves, but forever be disciples of the One Master - Jesus Christ. In time, they would grow in knowledge of His greatness and their nothingness. As He increased in their eyes, they decreased in their own eyes and their relationship with God grew deeper – Christian discipleship matured. It is not easy for men to be a disciple of One who says, *"Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls."* Anyone who accepts the call of discipleship may expect many restless days before the calm of a perfect peace arrives.

24 HOURS IN THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST

After the call of the disciples, Mark presents his readers with twenty-four hours in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In a summary picture, he captures the public ministry of Jesus. Jesus began this day – His ministry – in the synagogue on the Sabbath, the Lord's Day. The synagogue was the soul of the Jewish Community. If a man had a message from God to His people, he

would deliver this message where God's people normally met to hear the word of God. In our Lord's time, it was not the Temple in Jerusalem but the local synagogue.

The Law decreed that a synagogue must be established in any place where ten or more Jewish families dwelled. The synagogue (meaning assembly) came into being after the destruction of the first Temple in 587 B.C. and the subsequent scattering of the Jews beyond Israel. Since religious worship in the Temple was not possible, the synagogue was established to preserve a unity of faith among the Jews. After the destruction of the second Temple in 70 A.D., the synagogue was responsible for the survival of the Jews as a religion and as a people. By the time the final destruction of the Temple occurred, the Jews had already experienced the reality of being able to exist as a faith and way of life without a Temple and its worship.

The synagogue was a lay institution. It was a meeting house for prayer and the study of the Law. Socially speaking, it was the meeting place for the Jewish Community. The government of the synagogue was committed to the elders of the community. The maintenance of the synagogue and the order of services were under the "ruler of the synagogue" (archisynagogues). Services were held each Sabbath. The Lord's Day began with the setting of the sun and concluded twenty-four hours later with the appearance of the first three stars in the sky. Services were likewise held on Jewish feast days. Men and women were separated during the services. This separation was achieved by having galleries on the side and in the rear where women were seated. Each Synagogue was furnished with an ark, or chest, where the scroll of the law was kept. This ark of the law occupied the central position against the front wall, which was heavily decorated with colorful tapestries and lamps. This honored position illustrated that the Torah – the law which comprises the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) was the most sacred thing in the world. The Torah was absolutely holy and binding upon all Jews. It was said that any man who held that the Torah was not from God had no part in the future world. For the Jews, it was the supreme rule of faith and life. It contained all that was necessary to guide and direct their lives. In order for these guidelines of faith and life to become evident,

the Torah must be seriously and conscientiously studied. What is implicit in the Torah must be made explicit. What is hidden must be manifested. The general laws and principles must expressed in rules and regulations. This obligation created the scholars of the Torah who occupied an important place in Jewish society. These were the Scribes and the most famous scribes were called Rabbis – Teachers of the Law.

Joining the main room of the synagogue were smaller rooms for work and storage. One storeroom was called the *"genizah."* Here, damaged and incorrectly written scrolls were stored, as it was forbidden to destroy them. In the "genizah" in the Synagogue of Old Cairo, a large number of old and valuable manuscripts were discovered. (While visiting this synagogue, one may have the opportunity of seeing scrolls that date back three centuries before Christ and some even valued at several million dollars.)

The ruler of the synagogue also had the duty of distributing alms to the poor. An offering was taken daily from the people for distribution to the poor. A poor family received food for fourteen meals a week. To assist the ruler of the synagogue there was a minister, or a Chazzan, whose duty it was to take out and store the sacred scroll, to clean the synagogue, blow the silver trumpet announcing the Sabbath and give religious education for the children.

The synagogue service began with the recitation of the "Shema," the Jewish profession of faith:

> ***Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.***
>
> ***(Deut. 6:4-9)***

The "Shema" was followed by a long prayer recited by one of the congregation. These prayers had once been improvised but later assumed a set recorded form. Following the prayer, a portion of the Torah was read in Hebrew followed by a translation into the vernacular. It was so arranged that the entire Torah would be read in a three-year cycle. Later, the reading of the Prophets was added to the reading of the Law. An impromptu homily was then delivered on the reading by a member of the congregation at the invitation of the ruler. The service was expanded by the recitation of other prayers and the singing of psalms. If a priest was present, the service ended with a priestly blessing such as recorded in Numbers:

> ***The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to Aaron and his sons and tell them, 'this is how you shall bless the Israelites.' Say to them, 'The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let His face shine upon you and be gracious to you! The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!' So shall they invoke My name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them." (Numbers 6:22-27)***

The importance and the influence of the Synagogue upon the early Church was significant. It was the place used by Jesus to preach the Good News. The Apostles later followed this example. Paul preached in Synagogues throughout the empire. The early Christian Community patterned itself on the Synagogue and in a sense were Christian Synagogues. The worship of the Christian Community was patterned after the Jewish worship of prayer and reading of the Scriptures. Christians added to this the celebration of the agape and the Eucharist. Here we have the essence of the Mass celebrated today in the Catholic Church. The early Christian Community was governed by elders and an overseer called the *"spiskopos"* – the bishop. He was assisted by ministers called "deacons" who aided in the service and in the management of the Community. The Jewish heritage of the Catholic Church still survives in its worship and government.

The Jewish rabbis taught by quoting the opinions of great teachers. Jesus did not teach in this way. He spoke as a prophet and the people sensed the power of His words. In the synagogue at Capernaum, *"The people were spell-*

bound by this teaching because He taught with authority, and not like the scribes." (Mk. 1:22) Here, Mark indicates the power of the preaching and teaching ministry of Jesus.

On this day in Jesus' life, Mark tells us that while Jesus was teaching, a wild disturbance interrupted the synagogue service. A man, diabolically possessed, entered the synagogue and shrieked, *"What do You want of us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are – the Holy One of God."* In this episode, Mark illustrates that the coming of the Kingdom of God is an assault upon the Kingdom of Satan! St. Paul understood this. He wrote to the Ephesians, *"Our battle is not against human forces, but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above." (Eph. 6:12)* All opposition against Jesus has this force as its source. There in the Synagogue, the presence of the devil was quite clear, but as Our Lord's Life went on, the opposition assumed tactics more subtle – it wears many faces – all human.

It was widely believed, in our Lord's time, that if one knew the true identity of a person, and could utter his name, power could be gained over him. The evil spirit attempted this in his encounter with Jesus. Jesus angrily rebuked the spirit, *"'Be quiet! Come out of the man.' At that, the unclean spirit convulsed the man violently and with a loud shriek came out of him." (Mk. 1:25)* Jesus rejected the testimony of such an evil source regarding His nature. The only testimony acceptable to Jesus is that given by His Father.

It was customary at this time for exorcists to drive out evil spirits with lengthy rituals of prayers, incantations and spells. When Jesus drove out the devil with a simple command, the people were indeed impressed:

> *All who looked on were amazed. They began to ask one another. "What does this mean? A completely new teaching in a spirit of authority! He gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey!"*
>
> *(Mk. 1:27)*

Mark's purpose for presenting twenty-four hours in the life Jesus of Nazareth is to illustrate the tremendous power in the words and Person of

Jesus, and how it was manifested during Jesus' earthly ministry. The exercise of this power reveals a great deal about the character of Jesus. [In the next lesson, we will discuss, at greater length, the existence and nature of evil spirits and their effects upon men. For the remainder of this lesson we will give our attention to the other deeds performed by Jesus during this twenty-four hour period.]

Mark teaches that tremendous power flows through the humanity of Jesus. His very presence and invitation so moved the hearts of men open to God that they left all to follow Jesus. When He speaks, at the sound of His voice, the hearts of men leap for joy. They know in spirit that they are not listening to a mere man, but the voice of God. When the power of Jesus encounters people adamant and confirmed in evil, it emerges as the wrath and anger of God. When Jesus encounters men and women suffering because of human frailty, afflicted because they live and act in ignorance, crushed because they live in a world alienated from God by sin, He moves toward them with overwhelming compassion and mercy. The power of God's love flows in a healing way from His words and His touch, from even the material things that touch Him.

Immediately following the Synagogue service, Jesus was invited to Simon Peter's house for the Sabbath meal, taken around 12:00 P.M. He came as a guest. Already, the disciples had learned to bring their problems and concerns to Him. They told Jesus that someone was sick in the household, the mother-in-law of Simon Peter. As a guest, the very first thing Jesus did was to go to the sick within the household. *"He went over to her and grasped her hand and helped her up, and the fever left her. She immediately began to wait on them." (Mk. 1:31)* They had invited Jesus to their home to share the Sabbath meal and they immediately received from Him a special blessing. The anecdote of Peter's mother-in-law gives all those healed by the Lord a wonderful example. Gratitude should lead those restored to health to give service to Jesus and His Church. Let us note, *"She <u>immediately</u> began to wait on them."* We are healed in order to serve!

With the setting of the sun and the end of the Sabbath, the people could

legally carry the sick through the streets. They hurried to the door of Peter's house for they knew Jesus could be found there!

> ***They brought Him all who were ill, and those possessed by demons. Before long, the whole town was gathered outside the door. Those whom He cured who were variously afflicted, were many, and so were the demons He expelled. But He would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew Him. (Mk. 1:32-35)***

Mark teaches that this power of Jesus was not a power exercised in isolated cases. The Power of Jesus possesses a universal characteristic and expresses a Divine love and compassion toward all afflicted human beings.

Mark throws light upon a particular healing because of the extraordinary nature of the illness. He relates the healing of a leper by Jesus. No physical disease carried such terror or horrible consequences. Not only was he inflicted, slowly disfigured and corrupted, but the leper became the living dead – totally cut off from all social contact with other human beings. Depending on the type of leprosy, an individual could suffer a horribly progressive death lasting from nine – up to even thirty years. The rabbis taught that it was easier to raise a man from the dead than to cure leprosy. The Old Covenant could do nothing for the leper. It could only protect society from him. It made him an outcast. We read in Leviticus:

> ***The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard, he shall cry out, 'unclean, unclean!' As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, since he in fact unclean. He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp. (Lev. 13:45-46)***

Breaking the Law, a leper approached Jesus, kneeling down as he addressed Him, *"If You will to do so, You can cure me." (Mk. 1:40)* He knew Jesus had the power to cure him. What he really asked was, "If you love me, You can cure me." Since the Law made him an outcast, in his own eyes he perhaps felt himself an outcast of God. He was an unlovable man in the eyes of men. It is so easy to project what we receive from men around us to God. Cer-

tainly he doubted if God could love anything as unlovable as a leper. The immediate response of Jesus was to stretch out His hand and touch him – the untouchable. Jesus said, *"I do will it – Be cured."* In other words, 'I do love you.' The touch of love not only creates – it cures. Be firmly convinced that only those who love can heal. Many do not have a healing ministry because they do not "will to do so." They do not love! It takes more than faith to heal – it takes love for the afflicted. In this tender encounter, the love of God, through the ministry of Jesus, demonstrates to the outcast, to the lonely, to the alienated of society, that God cares for them.

It is an emotionally charged situation. Several of the words used in this narrative express anger and violent action. It is interpreted that the anger is directed toward the unclean spirit that has so reduced an image of God to such an unlovable sight, to such a pitiable state. God not only loves man, but hates all that destroys God's loveliness in man!

Jesus instructed the man cured of leprosy, *"Go off and present yourself to the priest and offer for your cure what Moses prescribed. That should be a proof for them." (Mk. 1:44)* Jesus did this to comply with the Mosaic Law and to assure a proper interpretation of the miracle. The priest would recognize this as a messianic sign. One had come who could heal the leper, as difficult as raising a man from the dead. Surely, the reign of God had begun.

The miracles of this day – and those of His ministry – were misinterpreted. The people saw in Jesus merely a miracle worker – not a Messiah or Savior. They came to be freed from the evil effects of their sins rather than their sins. They were looking for a healer not a Savior. They came to receive the Gift of God without becoming involved with God. *"As a result of this, it was no longer possible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He stayed in desert places; yet people kept coming to Him from all sides." (Mk. 1:45)*

Mark closes the twenty-four hours in the life of Jesus with: *"Rising early the next morning, He went off to a lonely place in the desert, there He was absorbed in prayer." (Mk. 1:35)* St. Luke wrote: *"He often retired to deserted places and prayed." (Lk. 5:16)* Mark tells us that Jesus was *"absorbed"* in prayer. His total being was absorbed in God. It was here He rested and nourished His

soul and found His strength renewed to walk the arduous path God's Will marked out for Him – a path filled with so many disappointments, difficulties, demands and frustrations. Simon and his companions managed to track Him down, and when they found Him, they told Him, *"Everybody is looking for You!"* Mark does not refer to this "everybody" as disciples. At this point, the twelve were no different in their relationship, expectations and hopes than the "everybody" else looking for Jesus. Our Lord said to them, *"'Let us move on to the neighboring villages so that I may proclaim the Good News there also. That is what I have come to do.'"*

[It was in prayer that Jesus found the power to accomplish this task.] So He went into their synagogues preaching the Good News, expelling demons throughout the whole of Galilee. *(Mk. 1:36-39)*

The Scriptures record the prayerful habit of Jesus to remind the members of the Church that no matter how involved they may be in a ministry of service to God or man, they must withdraw to be alone with God in prayer. The man or woman too busy to pray is too busy just spinning wheels and not going anywhere. Prayer is needed to recharge our batteries with Divine energy and power. No person truly seeks the Kingdom of God unless he often enters within his spirit to meet the Divine Guest who abides in the soul. The Kingdom of God is within man. Teresa of Avila was fond of saying, *"If you do not enter into the Heaven that is within you, you will never enter into the Heaven above you!"*

CHAPTER 4

SATAN, SIN AND SICKNESS

SATAN

The Scriptures come to us from people who lived two thousand or more years ago. To read such works today with no reference to the theology or psychology of the inspired authors is to fail to grasp fully the message intended. To assist our understanding, we need to compare the ideas and beliefs of these people with ours today. Many words and ideas, as understood by us today, were seen by the Evangelists in a different light. Many concepts have traveled unchanged through the centuries. We sometimes have the tendency to dismiss concepts and ideas different from our own as a product of primitive ignorance and superstition. The presumption being that more 'modern' is more enlightened. Unfortunately, some of our 'scientific' knowledge has been as enlightening as the findings of the three blind men who expounded on the nature of the elephant after their personal examination. Daily, we revise some scientific opinions because they were based on too little evidence, too little light. Let us reflect now upon the three ancient concepts of Satan, Sin and Sickness in order to enrich our study of the Gospel.

The belief in evil spirits is indeed primitive and universal. Ancient texts substantiate that men have always believed in the existence of unseen powers that affect human lives and destinies. Men personalized these powers calling them spirits – some evil and others good. When a belief is so ancient, so universal and persistent for so many centuries, it is worthy of serious reflection. It certainly expresses that something within the human experience of mankind has sponsored and nourished the belief.

The Hebrews, along with the Roman Empire, were influenced by the well-developed demonology of Mesopotamia or Babylonia. In Mesopotamia, the

personal evils of life were attributed to the evil influence of demons. Their number was almost without limit. The ancient literature contained large numbers of demonic names. It was believed a sorcerer had to know the name of the demon in order to counteract its evil influence. Many of these ancient rituals were directed against a group of seven devils believed to attack men. Demons were sometimes called the children of Anu, the god of the sky. Demons haunted graves, lonely and deserted places especially at night. Some spirits were believed to be good and were invoked against evil spirits. These good spirits were represented as guardian genii at the gate of temples and palaces.

Ancient men believed there to be personal forces of good and evil. They divinized these powers. These two gods were conceived as warring against each other. Some demons were worshipped as gods. Paul attributes all pagan sacrifice to be offerings to demons and the eating of the sacrifice as a communion with demons.

When the belief in demons passed into Judaism, the concept of the two divine principles was unacceptable. The chief evil principle – Satan, meaning "Accuser" or "Adversary" – was presented as a servant and creation of Yahweh and obviously no friend of mankind. The Hebrews avoided any reference that could possibly lead the Jews to believe that Satan was a being independent of Yahweh or equal to Him. Sorcery and witchcraft were forbidden in Israel because of theological implications. We do see that King Saul consulted the witch of Endos. Having received no reply from God through dreams of prophecy, Saul consulted this medium to recall the spirit of Samuel. Samuel appeared and prophesied doom for Saul and his family. Isaiah speaks of the satyrs, *"demons of goatlike form dwelling in ruins" (Is. 13:21)* and *"lilith,"* a female demon thought to roam about the desert. *(Is. 34:14)* Israel held a belief in demons but it was very much curtailed in the Scriptures for theological reasons.

Scriptures affirm the presence of Satan and demons and their effect upon men, but present a balanced picture. They do exist and they do affect men and the world around them, but men have free wills and are responsible for the good or evil they do! Paul says demons are responsible for false

teachings. (iTim. 4:1) They are essentially lying spirits. They seek to take the truth out of the hearts of men. Jesus identified Satan as a liar and murderer. The Book of Wisdom attributes the presence of death in the world to be the work of Satan – motivated by envy of mankind. The New Testament presents him as the Prince of this World whom Jesus has conquered by His life and death.

The Book of Revelation presents the popular belief about the origin of Satan and his demons:

> ***Then war broke out in Heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. Although the dragon and his angels fought back, they were overpowered and lost their place in Heaven. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent known as the devil, or Satan the seducer of the whole world, was driven out; He was hurled down to earth and his minions with him.... But woe to you, earth and sea, for the devil has come down upon you! His fury knows no limits, for he knows his time is short. (Rev. 12:7-9,12)***

We are told that Satan wars against those *"who keep God's commandments and give witness to Jesus." (Rev. 12:17)*

Unless one desires to see Jesus as some Don Quixote tilting at windmills, one must accept the presence of Satan and demons. The teachings of Jesus and His angry reactions to insinuations of being in league with Satan can certainly not be brushed aside by saying Jesus accommodated Himself to the beliefs of the day. The reaction of Jesus was too violent to accept such a solution.

The Christian Community does have a safe guide in matters of faith and morals in the Bishop of Rome, the successor of St. Peter. Pope Paul, at a General Audience on November 15, 1972, preached,

> ***Evil is not merely a lack of something, but an effective agent, living, spiritual being, perverted and perverting. A terrible reality...***

mysterious and frightening. To refuse to recognize the existence of such a reality, or to regard the Devil as a principle in itself which does not draw its origin from God, like every other creature, or to explain him as a pseudo-reality, a conceptual and fanciful personification of the unknown causes of our misfortunes, is contrary to the teaching of the Bible and the Church.... For a correct Christian understanding of the world, life and salvation, it is important to recognize the real evil.... That it is not a question of one Devil, but of many, is indicated by various passages in the Gospel. But the principle one is Satan, which means the adversary, the enemy; and with him many, all creatures of God, but fallen, because of their rebellion and damnation; a whole mysterious world, upset by an unhappy drama, of which we know very little. We know many things, however, about this diabolical world, which concerns our life, and the whole history of man.... From the fall of Adam, the Devil acquired a certain dominion over them, from which only Christ's Redemption can save us. It is a story that is still going on. He is the enemy number one – the tempter par excellence.... The question of the Devil and the influence he can exert on individual persons, as well as on communities, whole societies or events, is a very important chapter of Catholic doctrine which is given little attention today – though it should be studied again.

Men and women who have truly kept the Commandments of God and given witness to Jesus know the reality of these spiritual forces from personal experience. The lives of great saints (and they were the most sane of men and women) are filled with testimonies of personal encounters with Satan and his demons (St. Anthony of the Desert, Catherine of Sienna, Theresa of Avila, John Vianney the Cure of Ars). Satan is content to leave the rest of us in the dark concerning his presence and power. If we have no spiritual life, we lack any true spiritual vision – how can we "see" spiritual realities whether good or evil. If we lack faith, we are doubly blinded. We cannot see ourselves, nor will we accept the vision of those who can see. It is a comfort for us who accept the reality of these spirits to know that the Scriptures tell us, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

SIN

In the Scriptures, many words express the concept of sin. One of the most common is *"het"* which means "to miss the mark." It signifies a mistake in judgment resulting in a failure to obtain a goal or objective. Sin rises from a lack of knowledge, *"My people perish for want of knowledge! Since you have rejected knowledge, I will reject you." (Hosea 4:6)* Biblically, knowledge implies union with God – to reject knowledge is to reject a personal relationship with God.

When the Scriptures speak of *'iniquity'* (awon), the word implies a deviation or a distortion. By iniquity, reality becomes what should not be – what was not intended by the Creator! 'Guilt' is the distortion which remains as an effect or result of an iniquitous deed. Guilt is what remains after the hurricane hits; after two cars collide. Scripture speaks of guilt being a burden too heavy for men to bear, *"For my iniquities have overwhelmed me; they are like a heavy burden, beyond my strength." (Ps. 38:5)*

Several Hebrew words indicate sin as rebellion against Yahweh. Rebellion involves a personal offense; for man purposefully severs his relationship with God. According to Deuteronomy 5:9, man incurs the anger of God by his rebellion.

Our first parents sinned because they sought what they did not possess: *"to be like gods knowing both good and evil."* The serpent led them to doubt God's love by suggesting that God held out on them. Adam and Eve desired to substitute themselves for God in deciding what was good and evil. They refused to depend on God who created them. They chose to depend on themselves. They perverted the relationship that existed between creature and Creator. It was a relationship not only of dependence, but of friendship. By sin, the initiative is taken by man to withdraw from God. Man seeks to hide and withdraw from God. The expulsion from Paradise was only what man willed – to be separated from God. Separated from God, man can have no access to the "tree of life." Isaiah proclaims, *"It is your crimes that separate you from your God." (Is. 59:1)* Genesis stresses that as man seeks to build his life by himself, he only brings ruin and breakdown of society. As

man seeks to build independently of God, he will often do so at the expense of others – the small and weak! The Old Testament teaches that there is no disaster or affliction in the personal lives of men or in nature which is not attributed to the sin of man. Man's fall in Chapter Three of Genesis is but an introduction to the next eight chapters illustrating the destructive and corruptive force of sin. Sin spreads until all flesh is corrupted and Genesis records, *"the desires of man's heart are evil from the start." (Gen. 8:21)*

The Deluge, as recorded in Genesis, teaches that God punishes sin. Death is the dominant result of sin. Each sin moves man further away from God, the source of life – man dies a little each time he sins. Each sin makes man less than he should be. The sins of Abemelech, David, and Ahab released forces that ultimately destroyed them. For Ezekiel, sin is like rust, which eats into a metal vessel. *(Ez. 24:6)* Jeremiah speaks of sin being engraved on the heart like an inscription on stone. *(Jer. 17:1)* Yahweh asks, *"Is it I whom they hurt... Is it not rather themselves, and to their own confusion?" (Jer. 7:19)* If God prescribes laws and demands obedience, it is not for Himself but, as we read in Deuteronomy, that man may have a prosperous and happy life. *(Deut. 6:24)* Sin robs God of the glory that should be His in man. Sin destroys not only man – but society. The world is worse for what we have become because of sin. Reparation for sin demands atonement to God and man!

Israel re-enacted the sin of Adam and Eve. The "original sin" of Israel was its refusal to believe in God and to abandon itself to Him. They did not desire to walk with God, but rather they desired a god to walk with them. They wanted a god of their own hands – one made in their image and likeness and controlled by them. Hosea writes of Israel:

> ***There is no fidelity, no mercy, no knowledge of God in the land. False swearing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery! (Hosea 4:2)***

The Prophets proclaimed the fall of Israel as a necessary consequence of national guilt. Sin releases the most destructive force of all – the anger of God!

The mystery of sin goes beyond the human world. Between God and man, Satan has entered upon the scene. The appearance of the Temptor does not change the basic teaching that man is responsible for his sins. There is never any question that sin is a deliberate and willful act for which man must bear full responsibility. Compulsions, neuroses and failures of society excuse no individual from moral responsibility for his sins. We find no echoes in the Scriptures of this "Psychiatric Folksong" written by Anna Russel:

At three I had a feeling of
ambivalence toward my brothers
And so it follows naturally
I poisoned all my lovers.
But now I'm happy; I have learned
The lesson this has taught;
That everything I do that's wrong
Is someone else's fault.

According to Jeremiah, sin rises from an evil heart rather than a sick mind.

RELIGIOUS LEGALISM

Dr. Glasser used to teach that we become sick by doing sick things. We do not do sick things because we are sick! The penitential psalms teach that the sinner experiences disaster until he repents and asks for deliverance. When the voice of the prophecy grew silent in Israel, the concept of sin changed. God no longer dealt personally with Israel due, no doubt, to the hardness of their hearts. Sin took on an impersonal aspect. It was no longer seen as destroying a personal relationship existing between God and man, but of breaking a Law of God. It became an indirect offense against God. God was no longer the loving Creator of mankind, but the Supreme Lawmaker. Man gave obedience to those laws or suffered the consequences. It was all so clear-cut and terribly dehumanizing for religion. The Law became Israel's fig leaf behind which it endeavored to hide its sinful heart from self and God. With the rise to power of the Pharisaic Party in Israel, the Law truly appeared to have replaced God. Legalism dominated the religious spirit of the Jews. As the Law, an impersonal thing, became the supreme religious guide and source of religious security and conscientious peace, religion itself

became impersonal. Charity grew cold. Man's relationships with each other became as cold as the tablets on which the Law was written. Legalism makes sin so much easier. It is easier to break a law than a friendship. It is easier to pay a fine than reconcile oneself with an injured friend!

The Pharisees sought refuge and security in the Law. They taught that perfection and righteousness came from a perfect observance of the Law as interpreted by themselves. The Law became their God! All who did not keep the Law were, ipso facto, clearly and manifestly sinners. Those who observed the Law, as the Pharisees prescribed it, were the saints and righteous. The sons of God! Judaism was no longer a religion of the Spirit, therefore, it was no longer a religion with the spirit of love and life. According to the Pharisaic measuring rod, all non-Jews were sinners and damned because they failed to observe the law as interpreted by the Pharisees. All Jews whose life styles made it impossible for them to fulfill these Laws, namely the people of the land, were likewise branded as sinners and reprobates.

St. Paul himself had been a Pharisee and lived by this doctrine until he encountered Jesus Christ. Then Paul knew the Law had not brought him perfection or righteousness but had led him to oppose God. His view of sin deepened and he understood that sin was not an inherited human condition – it was an enslaving condition that led men to do wrong even when he wished to do right. He saw that the purpose of the Law was to prove men sinners since no man could keep the whole Law and to break one law was to be guilty of breaking the whole Law. He understood that Jews and Gentiles alike were sinners and there was no escaping the power of sin in their lives except by a personal return of men to God through Jesus Christ, the appointed Savior of the World! Paul understood the need of Divine Deliverance.

The rabbis of this time taught that God Himself could not and did not forgive sin from free grace, but required every sin to be atoned for by sacrifice or paid for by good works. It was their teaching and belief that a sinner could not be forgiven by God until he had achieved merit by works of the Law. Legalism created a terrible caricature of religion with evil

consequences; in those who could not keep the Law, it created a spirit of hopelessness and religious despair; in those who kept the Law, it caused spiritual pride and complacency.

With such a religious attitude dominating the minds and consciousness of men, it is understandable that the attitude of Jesus toward sin and sinners was revolutionary. Jesus was the return of the Spirit and personalism to religion; the return of the Spirit of God's love! Jesus had wide acceptance among the people yet in the end He was rejected terribly and murdered. Mark indicates the rejection of Jesus did not come from the people but from the Jewish leaders. It centered around a clash between the spirituality of Jesus and the spirituality of the Pharisaic Party. Pharisees were the most powerful political and religious group in the land.

Beginning in Chapter Two, Mark presents five narratives in a row that summarize the opposition of these Jews to Jesus. Perhaps these five narratives originally existed together in the oral teachings of the Church as a collection of stories illustrating why the leading Jews rejected Jesus. Many men must have asked, "If Jesus was the Messiah, why did the leaders not accept Him?" Perhaps we read here in Mark the Church's answer to this question....

JESUS AND THE SINNERS

The first narrative relates the cure of the paralytic and forgiveness of his sins. It is such a well-constructed narrative that many scholars feel it is a good example of the method by which the early Church argued against its Jewish critics. For Jesus to heal the paralytic was normal behavior, but for Him to directly speak of Himself as the Son of Man and to declare sins forgiven, was not in character. These elements are more in keeping with the Church after the Resurrection. The Church then clearly understood that the death of Jesus had atoned for the sins and the Church had the mission to preach the remission of sins and serve as ministers of reconciliation of sinners with God. This ministry was fulfilled by the power of the Church to forgive sins through the Holy Spirit and in the Name of Jesus. When Matthew relates this narrative, he concludes with, *"a feeling of awe came over the crowd, and they praised God for giving such authority to men." (Matt. 9:8)* We

study in the Gospel of St. John that the Resurrected Jesus imparted the power to forgive the sins of men to the Apostles: "Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound they are held bound." (Jn. 20:22-23) A fuller explanation of this verse and the power to forgive sins can be found in Lesson 22 of our study of St. John. Even if Jesus did not forgive sins of men prior to His death, He certainly declared a forgiveness of sins and a reconciliation with God through Himself. Jesus could have forgiven sin in anticipation of His sacrifice on the Cross. What is accomplished in time is always present before God! Jesus taught that sin was the wandering of the son from the house of his Father and the sinner had but only to return to the Father for forgiveness. He tells us that there is joy in Heaven at the return of the sinner. This is indeed one of the revolutionary teachings in religious history!

Jesus' attitude toward sin and sinners certainly was the crux of His problem with the Jewish leaders. It attacked their whole theology of religion. Their life and power were constructed upon this theology. Jesus was shaking the very foundation of their house. He threatened their position and security. The acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah would demand a radical change – a revolution in their religious life. We have only to look at the life of the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus to see what accepting Jesus entailed for such people.

Mark pictures in this narrative the silent and internal opposition to Jesus within the hearts of the Pharisees. In the light of their doctrine, they considered the actions of Jesus blasphemous. They looked upon Him as a mere man. The logic of Jesus' presentation that sin and sickness were the two sides of the same coin, silenced and confused them, but did not convince them. (The Jews considered all sickness the result of sin.) His teaching kindled their wrath. But they felt they must wait until they had something concrete to charge Him with, at which time they could give expression to their pent up frustrations and hostilities. As we will see in the next four narratives, they began to criticize and find fault with His behavior and that of His disciples.

We often witness this same type of behavior in the lives of people around us. When people are unhappy with an interpersonal relationship with another – when they feel another has failed them, not lived up to their expectations,

not given them their due or rejected them – they begin to pick and criticize all the external actions of the other. Usually, it ends by destroying the personal relationship, for few can stand the constant rejection and punishment of not meeting up to someone else's expectations of them. Husbands and wives have driven their marriages apart by it; parents have driven their children up a wall with it and, often, over the wall because of it. Remember, these are projections of inner and unverbalized hostilities toward others. There are two obvious signs that this is taking place in the life of a person: first, when the actions of another upset us – which actions previously, when our relationship was more satisfactory, had not bothered us at all, or else was easily overlooked and excused; and the second, when the anger we project toward another is irrational – in other words, is out of proportion.

The first criticism directed against Jesus concerned the company He kept. We read:

> ***Another time, while He went walking along the lakeshore, people kept coming to Him in crowds and He taught them. As He moved on He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus at his tax collector's post, and said to him, "Follow me." Levi got up and became His follower. While Jesus was reclining to eat in Levi's house, many tax collectors and those known as sinners joined Him and His disciples at dinner. The number of those who followed Him was large. When the scribes who belonged to the Pharisee party saw that He was eating with tax collectors and offenders against the law, they complained to His disciples, "Why does He eat with such as these?" Overhearing the remark, Jesus said to them, "People who are healthy do not need a doctor; sick people do. I have come to call sinners, not the self-righteous." (Mk. 2:13-17)***

Jesus reached out to touch those whom the Pharisees considered untouchable. The Law demanded complete obedience. It demanded tithing and many ritual acts. Men who failed to fulfill these legal prescriptions were public sinners and, according to the Scriptures, to be avoided by the pious.

Some men by their very profession were considered sinners, such as tax collectors, shepherds, donkey-drivers, peddlers and tanners. It was forbidden to eat with them for fear of becoming ritually impure. It was forbidden to socialize with them for fear of becoming like them. The tax collector was one of the most hated. He not only worked to collect the taxes levied by the hated Romans, but used his power to rob the people while enriching himself. When Jesus admitted such a one to His company of disciples it shocked the Pharisees.

They were truly scandalized by the scene that followed. Levi immediately brought his "sinful" friends to Jesus and Jesus sat down to a banquet with them. Banqueting at table with others was a gesture of friendship toward them. Jesus was offering, to these sinful people, His friendship – in truth, He offered them reconciliation with God. He did not avoid the sinners as prescribed by Law but sought them out as a shepherd seeks a lost sheep.

The attitude of Jesus toward sinners is God's attitude! When the scribes asked why Jesus accepted such people as table companions, they were expressing their disapproval; they were implying that He was an irreligious man, and warning His followers not to associate with Him. He defended His action by defining His mission to be that of saving sinners. He appeared as the Divine Physician healing the wounds of sin. Just as a good doctor does not spend his time only with the healthy, but much of his time with the sick, so Jesus must associate with sinners in order to save them. Jesus tried to help His opponents understand that the rules that govern them did not, in this case, govern Him. It is true that healthy people at times are forbidden to associate with the sick having a contagious disease, but this restriction certainly does not apply to the physician. Jesus told the Pharisees, *"People who are healthy do not need a doctor; sick people do. I have come to call sinners, not the self-righteous." (Mk. 2:17)* All men are sinners and need salvation. Many sinners are like sick people who suddenly die; medical attention could have saved them but they believed themselves to be well. It is not good to be ill, but in most cases it is better to be ill and know it than to be ill and think yourself well. Spiritually, it is always a healthy situation to be aware that you are a sick sinner. It should be a great comfort to know you have the very best physician with the perfect remedy. He is always IN

and never minds making a house call! In another place, Jesus warned the Pharisees, *"I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the Kingdom of God before you!" (Matt. 21:31)*

In the next two narratives, the Pharisees direct their criticism against the disciples of Jesus: they were failing to keep a prescribed fast and they were reaping grain on the Sabbath. Since these men were disciples of Jesus, their behavior reflected on Him. The criticism is indirectly aimed at Jesus. The Law prescribed only one yearly fast but there was pious custom at the time to fast twice weekly – on Monday and Thursday – in atonement for the sins of Israel. During the fast, one was to take neither food nor drink from sundown of one day until sundown of the following day. During the summer months this was quite heroic.

Jesus defended the behavior of the disciples. He implied that a new spirit had entered into religion. His disciples were not to be measured and judged by the old conventions – *"No man pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does so, the wine will burst the skins and both wine and skins will be lost. No, new wine is poured into new skins." (Mk. 2:22)* Wineskins grow brittle in time and fresh grape juice, as it ferments, would easily burst them. It would later prove impossible for the Gentile Christian Church to express its religious life through the ancient forms of Judaism. The new wine was the religion of the Spirit and it could not be contained by a religion of legalism or fear!

JESUS AND THE SABBATH

The fourth and fifth narratives deal with the problem of Jesus and the Jews over the Sabbath. [Some are inclined to believe it also reflects the problem of the early Christian Community with the Jews over changing the Lord's Day from the Sabbath to Sunday.] All four Gospel accounts emphasize that Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath was a major cause of Jewish hostility toward Jesus. In John, we have this accusation by the Jewish leaders, *"This man cannot be from God for He does not keep the Sabbath." (Jn. 9:16)*

We read these two accounts in Mark:

> ***It happened that He was walking through standing grain on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to pull off heads of grain as they went along. At this the Pharisees protested, "Look! Why do they do things not permitted on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his men were hungry? How he entered God's House in the days of Abiathar the high priest and ate the holy bread which only the priests were permitted to eat? He even gave it to his men." Then He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. That is why the Son of Man is Lord even on the Sabbath." (Mk. 2:23-28)***

He returned to the synagogue where there was a man whose hand was shriveled up. They kept an eye on Jesus to see whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, hoping to be able to bring an accusation against Him. He addressed the man with the shriveled hand, *"Stand up here in front!"* Then He said to them, *"Is it permitted to do a good deed on the Sabbath – or an evil one? To preserve life – or to destroy it?"* [Jesus implied that they were observing Him to see if He would do a good deed on the Sabbath, while in reality they plotted and planned evil on the Sabbath.] At this, they remained silent. He looked around at them with anger, for He was deeply grieved that they had closed their minds against Him. [The rejection of Jesus is not a light matter and it is not taken lightly by the Lord – it grieves and angers Him!] Then He said to the man, *"Stretch out your hand."* The man did so and his hand was perfectly restored. When the Pharisees went outside, they immediately began to plot with the Herodians how they might destroy Him. *(Mk. 3:1-6)* They who criticized Him for healing a man on the Sabbath now plotted on the Sabbath how to kill the Healer!

The Sabbath was a most important religious observance for Jews. As the Book of Leviticus prescribed:

> ***For six days works may be done; but the seventh day is the Sabbath rest [Sabbath means rest], a day for sacred assembly, on which you***

shall do no work. The Sabbath shall belong to the Lord wherever you dwell. (Lev. 23:3)

Keeping the Sabbath was not always understood in the same way. In the early days of Jewish history, the emphasis was on a day of rest for man. It was stressed in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 as a workless day for man and beast. The theology of the Sabbath rested upon the teaching that God rested from labor of creation on the seventh day as all was completed. The rabbis granted that since men continued to be born and to die and therefore be judged on the Sabbath, God did continue to actually work on the Sabbath. In the time of Jesus, there was a complete change of emphasis. The Sabbath was essentially a day dedicated to God and only incidentally a day of rest for man. The rabbis enumerated thirty-nine forbidden activities that in essence made men virtually a prisoner of the Sabbath. We have an example of how ridiculous, but deadly serious, the Sabbath had become when men could be accused of reaping a harvest by eating a few grains of wheat in a field. When Jesus said, *"the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27),* He stated the proper spirit of the Sabbath Law. He defended Himself against the accusation of breaking the Sabbath by showing He had the true spirit of the Law. He taught that men truly violate the Sabbath by their refusal to do good to others on the Sabbath. The Gospel of John carries the argument much deeper – Jesus' work on the Sabbath is equated with the work of the Father on the Sabbath, thus identifying the operations of Jesus as Divine. Therefore, Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath! The changing of the Sabbath to Sunday implies that the Lord has risen from rest and has resumed His work of creation.

At the heart of the Jews' problem with Jesus was their refusal to believe Him to be the Messiah and their insistence that He was a mere man subjected, as all others, to the Torah. *"They had closed their minds against Him." (Mk. 3:5)* If they had been willing to see Him as the Messiah, they would have expected His behavior to be exceptional and somewhat revolutionary. It was expected that a Prophet like Moses would come and he would be a lawgiver. We read in Deuteronomy:

And the Lord said to me... "I will raise up for them a prophet like

We read these two accounts in Mark:

> ***It happened that He was walking through standing grain on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to pull off heads of grain as they went along. At this the Pharisees protested, "Look! Why do they do things not permitted on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his men were hungry? How he entered God's House in the days of Abiathar the high priest and ate the holy bread which only the priests were permitted to eat? He even gave it to his men." Then He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. That is why the Son of Man is Lord even on the Sabbath." (Mk. 2:23-28)***

He returned to the synagogue where there was a man whose hand was shriveled up. They kept an eye on Jesus to see whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, hoping to be able to bring an accusation against Him. He addressed the man with the shriveled hand, *"Stand up here in front!"* Then He said to them, *"Is it permitted to do a good deed on the Sabbath – or an evil one? To preserve life – or to destroy it?"* [Jesus implied that they were observing Him to see if He would do a good deed on the Sabbath, while in reality they plotted and planned evil on the Sabbath.] At this, they remained silent. He looked around at them with anger, for He was deeply grieved that they had closed their minds against Him. [The rejection of Jesus is not a light matter and it is not taken lightly by the Lord – it grieves and angers Him!] Then He said to the man, *"Stretch out your hand."* The man did so and his hand was perfectly restored. When the Pharisees went outside, they immediately began to plot with the Herodians how they might destroy Him. *(Mk. 3:1-6)* They who criticized Him for healing a man on the Sabbath now plotted on the Sabbath how to kill the Healer!

The Sabbath was a most important religious observance for Jews. As the Book of Leviticus prescribed:

> ***For six days works may be done; but the seventh day is the Sabbath rest [Sabbath means rest], a day for sacred assembly, on which you***

shall do no work. The Sabbath shall belong to the Lord wherever you dwell. (Lev. 23:3)

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And the Lord said to me... "I will raise up for them a prophet like

you from among their kinsmen, and will put my words into His mouth; He shall tell them all that I command Him. If any man will not listen to my words which He speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for it." (Deut. 18:17-19)

Regardless of rejection by the leaders, the popularity of Jesus continued to grow:

A great crowd followed Him from Galilee, and an equally great multitude came to Him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, Transjordan, and the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon, because they had heard what He had done. In view of their numbers, He told His disciples to have a fishing boat ready for Him so that He could avoid the press of the crowd against Him. Because He had cured many, all who had afflictions kept pushing toward Him to touch Him. Unclean spirits would catch sight of Him, fling themselves down at His feet, and shout, "You are the Son of God," while He kept ordering them sternly not to reveal who He was. (Mk. 3:7-12)

As we have seen in the cure of the paralytic, the Scriptures imply a relationship between sin and sickness. Men believed that evil spirits caused sickness. The Jews attributed sickness to sin. The rabbis held a man could not be cured of illness until he expiated his sins. In the Gospel of John, we read that Jesus cured a man and warned him not to sin again lest something worse befall him. In the case of the man born blind, Jesus said the blindness did not result from the sins of the man nor of his parents. Jesus did seem to imply that a relationship existed between sin and sickness. Some put forth He did not really believe this, but accommodated Himself to the general beliefs of the day. This implies the theory of sin causing sickness to be erroneous. When mankind entered the so-called *"Enlightened Age,"* he certainly refused to believe that sin and Satan caused sickness. With the passing of time, men began to give second thought to the old theory. Many men would agree that "sin" can cause sickness whether or not they are willing to admit that evil spirits have a hand in illness.

The theologian Paul Tillich writes,

> ***Have the men of our time lost a feeling of the meaning of sin? Do they realize that to be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation? Separation may be from one's fellowmen, from one's own true self and/or from God.... Separation is another word not only for sin, but for mental illness, for crime, for non-functioning, for aggressions, for alienation – for death.***

One of the leading medical men and psychiatrists of our day, Dr. Karl Menninger, recently published a book called, "Whatever Became of Sin." He writes,

> ***If there is more awareness, more sense of responsibility in the world today, there will be less self-destruction. There is "sin" among us, in us, called by various names.... Some sins have been forgotten, repressed into unconsciousness. The clinical process of psychoanalytic "treatment" aims at penetrating and recovering this material, bringing to mind previously repressed, nearly forgotten offenses. Once these reminiscences, which entailed so much distress, are made conscious and the guilt feeling attached to them realized, both the offenses and the guilt can be more rationally dealt with.***

Dr. Menninger understands that destructive tension is created by these suppressed sins and the guilt from them. How does he suggest that this destructive tension be dealt with?

> ***The logical, reasonable, effective solution for tension reduction in such a circumstance is to make <u>atonement</u>, as theology calls it, or amends, as we say, by restitution, acknowledgment and revised tactics.***

There is no sweeping of it under the rug of unconcern! Dr. Menninger continues,

> ***My proposal is for the revival or reassertion of personal responsibility***

in all human acts, good and bad.... I believe that all evil-doing in which we become involved to any degree tends to evoke guilt feelings and depression. These may or may not be clearly perceived, but they affect us. They may be reacted to and covered up by all kinds of escapism, rationalization and reaction or symptom formation (usually in a form of some psychosomatic illness).

These are the words of a man of science, after a half-century of dealing with the mentally and physically ill.

Medical science operates on the principle that organic disturbance in the body causes illness and ultimately death. Medical science seeks to cure the illness by correcting the organic problem. It recognizes some patients are physically sound, but mentally disturbed. This mental disturbance interferes with the patients' living a normal social life. Often it has been discovered that psychic problems stem from some chemical imbalance within the system.

Normal behavior can be achieved by remedying the chemical imbalance within the system. For a long time, certain illnesses have been recognized to be psychosomatic. Some physical illness results from mental disturbances rather than from bacterial or viral infection. Modern scientists are discovering, more and more, a connection between what goes on in the mind with what goes on in the body. The mind of man is not to be equated with the brain of man.

Dr. Wildis Penfield, a famous neurosurgeon, writes in "The Mystery of the Mind" that he began his medical career believing the mind to be but a part and extension of the brain, but, after many years of research, he came to see that "the mind must be viewed as a basic element in itself," distinct from the brain. He writes,

The mind is aware of what is going on. The mind reasons and makes new decisions. It understands. It acts as though endowed with an energy of its own. It can make decisions and put them into effect by calling upon various brain mechanisms. It does this by activating neuron-mechanisms. This, it seems, could only be brought about by

expenditure of energy.... There is no place in the cerebral cortex (the brain) where electrical stimulation will cause a patient to believe or to decide! The mind seems to act independently of the brain in the same sense that a programmer acts independently of his computer, however much he may depend upon the action of that computer for certain purposes.

He declares that nothing discovered in the brain can explain the mind. *"The mind remains a mystery."* Dr. Penfield writes, after a professional lifetime spent in trying to discover how the brain accounts for the mind.

For myself it comes as a surprise now to discover, during the final examination of evidence, that the dualistic hypothesis (man is composed of body and spirit) seems the more reasonable. What a thrill it is, then, to discover that the scientist too, can legitimately believe in the evident of the spirit! Where did the mind – call it the spirit if you like – come from? Who can say? It exists!

Dr. Penfield adds, *"No scientist, by virtue of his science, has the right to pass judgment on the faith by which men live and die."*

The mind, in effect, looms more prominently in the whole field of sickness and health. Scientific research proves more and more the effect of the spirit over the body. It has been stated by Doctor Barbara Brown in "New Mind, New Body" that no scientific proof exists to show that the mind does not control the entire operation of the body. She writes,

No experiment yet has proved that our minds do not control our bodies. Quite the opposite: objective analysis of the mass of research evidence literally explodes with undeniable signs of direction by the mind.

It has been scientifically demonstrated that the mind has the power to control the electrical activity of a single cell. The major medical problems of our day are being tied more and more with the operations of the mind or spirit. Cardiovascular disorders, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, migraines,

hypertension, arteriosclerosis, respiratory diseases are all mind or spirit-related illnesses. Dr. Kenneth Pelletier, in his work "Mind As Healer – Mind As Slayer," offers much information that these major illnesses are stress and tension-related. He writes,

> *The most important fact is that generalized, prolonged and unabated stress places persons in a state of disequilibrium which increases his susceptibility to a wide range of diseases and disorders.*

Stress has a marked effect upon the balance of our biological makeup. It can cause the suppression of antibiotics preventing cancer cell growth; it can cause the release of glandular secretions destructive to the body causing ulcers and arthritis. As research proceeds it becomes clear that a particular personality type tends to get certain illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, arthritis, etc. Dr. Pelletier writes,

> *Issues of personality and psychosocial factors always need to be considered when serious illness occurs if it is to be treated effectively and prevented from recurring.*

Studies must be made on how an individual handles change, stress and tension. People are programming themselves daily for certain illnesses.

The prophets of science are more and more proclaiming that we must see man as a whole – a being well integrated biologically, psychically and spiritually. They are calling for a holistic approach to medicine--when a man is sick, the whole man must be treated – body and spirit. We are discovering more and more that physical illness, which expresses itself in serious organic breakdowns, can have a spiritual source.

Are we moving back to an old belief that certain spirits cause sickness? The organic disease may be cured, but if the spiritual or mental disturbance is neglected, it will only be a matter of time before a new illness develops or the old returns. This spiritual influence can so dominate a person that it causes resistance to any healing processes and ultimately produces the death of the organism – human life. Perhaps this is why Jesus asked the man by the pool

of Bethsaida, who had been sick for thirty-eight years, *"Do you want to be healed." (Jn. 5:6)* If proper spiritual or mental force can be brought to bear on a sickness, it will not only hasten the effects of medical treatment, but at times produce healing within the organism. Dr. Brown writes,

> *Many illnesses are psychosomatic, caused almost exclusively by emotional distress and that faith and belief can relieve and ameliorate the distress as well as, if not perhaps better than chemical... the mind or the will can be just as effective in relieving illnesses as... in causing illnesses... the will can affect and perhaps correct disease processes of largely organic origin.... Mind-body is not divided. Many sufferers suffer because of emotional deceptions, and if so, they can recover the same way – faith can act as a catalyst for the will power.*

Experience suggests that there is a healing energy within the body that is subjected to the spirit. Or, as Dr. Brown states, *"It appears that mental or psychologic energy is in some way transformed into physical energy."* This energy can be released with marvelous results for physical well-being. This releasing of healing energy remains a mystery, but its presence is being verified by scientific study. Experience verifies that certain individuals can transfer this energy from their bodies into the body of another resulting in certain physical cures. In religious circles, we refer to such people as healers. The greatest of healers, Jesus of Nazareth!

We must understand that spirit, sin and sickness are still very mysterious. Our Lord indicates that in some cases there is a connection between personal sin and sickness and in other cases there is no connection between the sickness and personal sin. Accumulating scientific data indicates more and more a connection between the spirit of a person and sickness. Sickness is not necessarily a result of an "evil" spirit, it is often a result of an ignorant and unknowing spirit or a foolish and careless spirit. And the spirit is most always the spirit of self! We need understanding and knowledge; we need more light on the relationship between the spirit and the body. At times, good people become ill simply because they cannot cope with the environment they must live within, a personal world filled with stress,

tension and evil. It is no small wonder – for God made man for a delicate environment. Man was made for Paradise and not this veil of tears!

> ***What is science trying to say to us in works like "The Mystery of the Mind," "New Mind, New Body" and "Mind as Healer – Mind as Slayer?" If we substitute the equivalent word "spirit" for "mind," the message becomes clearer: The Mystery of the Spirit, New Spirit, New Body, Spirit as Healer – Spirit as Slayer! It is but confirming the ancient Scriptural message: A certain kind of spirit – call it dumb, call it ignorant, call it foolish, call it evil – begets death! A new spirit cannot only heal and create a new body, but create a New World! Every spirit of man needs to hear those words of Jesus, "My son – my daughter – your sins are forgiven." (Mk. 2:5) Forgiveness of sins is a foundation for a new life!***

Someone once wrote that the history of salvation is nothing other than the tirelessly repeated attempts of God the Creator to draw man away from his sin – and we might add – to draw him to life. In summary we can safely say, for man to live without sin – in other words, to live in peace with self, his neighbor and his God – is not just good sense, it can mean good health!

CHAPTER 5

THE NEW ISRAEL

INTRODUCTION

The mission of Jesus of Nazareth to preach the Gospel is summed up in these words to Peter and his companions, *"Let us move on to the neighboring villages so that I may proclaim the good news there also. That is what I have come to do." (Mk. 1:38)* His mission was evidently successful:

> ***Jesus withdrew toward the lake with His disciples. A great crowd followed Him from Galilee, and an equally great multitude came to Him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, Transjordan, and the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon, because they had heard what He had done. (Mk. 3:7-8)***

These crowds may well have symbolized for Mark the future mission of the Church. Jesus knew that popularity with the people was like the rising and falling of the waves of the sea. John best expresses Jesus' reaction to popular support:

> ***For His part, Jesus would not trust Himself to them because He knew them all. He needed no one to give Him testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what was in man's heart.***
>
> ***(Jn. 2:24-25)***

Mark indicates Jesus' prudent caution in dealing with the crowd when He ordered a boat to stand by *"lest the crowd crush Him."* He was ready to withdraw from them if their adherence to Him threatened or inhibited His real mission. Jesus prudently conserved His life – no one was to take it away from Him. When it was time, He would lay it down. There is a message of prudence here to the Christian Community! The people professed support

for Jesus but the leaders of the Jews *"had closed their minds against Him,"* and were plotting and intriguing to destroy Him. As Luke writes, *"They became frenzied and began asking one another what could be done to Jesus." (Lk. 6:11)* Already the death knell for Jesus was sounding in the land. His time on earth was growing short. He must prudently act to insure the success of God's reign on earth, in order that the mission given to Him by the Father would not die with Him, but would continue through the ages. As always, Jesus sought His direction from the Will of God. Luke writes, *"Then He went out to the mountain to pray, spending the night in communion with God." (Lk. 6:12)* Where else was there to turn? Luke indicates that in this night of prayer, in this mysterious communion with His Father, the Divine plan became clear. Jesus would establish a New Israel – He would found His Church.

THE OLD ISRAEL

How well Jesus knew the history of His people and God's dealing with them! A people that was no-people – slaves in the land of Egypt with nothing to recommend them to man or God. He whose eye is upon the sparrow chose these people as His own. It was divine predilection flowing from the merciful love of God. From the first book of the Old Testament, we see that the People of God – called in Hebrew *"qahal"* – came into being by divine choice and command. When the word "qahal" was translated into the Greek Septuagent Bible, it was rendered *"ekklesia"* meaning "church" in English. The true meaning of the word "church" is the Assembly of the People of God. The Church can be in the desert, on a hill, by the sea, in a building or in a hole called a catacomb. The Church is not brick and mortar, wood or stone – the Church is a unique kind of people.

While they were in slavery, God called the Hebrews to Himself. He called them to meet Him at Mt. Sinai. They responded to His word, but it was not without monumental difficulties and hardships that they arrived at Sinai to keep a Divine destiny. Even after leaving Egypt, it was an arduous three months' journey to Sinai. Three days after their arrival:

> *On the morning of the third day there were peals of thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and a very loud*

trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. But Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stationed themselves at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, for the Lord came down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The trumpet blast grew louder and louder, while Moses was speaking and God answering him with thunder. (Ex. 19:16-19)

When Moses came to the people and related all the words and the ordinances of the Lord, they all answered with one voice, "We will do everything that the Lord has told us." Moses then wrote down all the words of the Lord and, rising early the next day, he erected at the foot of the mountain an altar and twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Isreal. Then, having sent certain young men of the ect. Israelites to offer holocausts and sacrifice young bulls as peace offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in large bowls; the other half he splashed on the altar.... Taking the book of the covenant, he read it aloud to the people, who answered "All that the Lord has said we will heed and do." Then he took the blood and sprinkled it on the people saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of His." (Ex. 24:3-8)

God spoke His words to Israel and they responded in faith to what they heard. The response of faith unified them and they became one. The assembly of God became a reality, the "qahal" – the Church – was born. God responded by entering into a covenant with them. God prescribed a sacrifice to ratify and confirm the covenant and to give visible expression to the union of faith and the Hebrews' submission to the Word of God.

In the times of religious crisis, these general assemblies of the people would be convoked. As a result of the preaching of the first prophets, the qahal was convoked under King Josiah, for the promulgation of the Book of Deuteronomy. In 2 Kings we read:

The King then had all the elders of Judah and of Jerusalem summoned together before him. The King went up to the temple of the Lord with all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem: priests, prophets, and all the people, small and great. He had the entire contents of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the Temple of the Lord, read out to them. Standing by the column, the King made a covenant before the Lord that they would follow Him and observe His ordinances, statutes and decrees with their whole hearts and souls, thus reviving the terms of the Covenant which were written in this book. And all the people stood as participants in the covenant.

The King issued a command to all the people to observe the Passover of the Lord, their God, as it was prescribed in that of the Covenant. No Passover such as this had been observed during the period of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, until the eighteenth year of King Josiah, when this Passover of the Lord was kept in Jerusalem. (2Kings 23:1-3/21-23)

Again we see, after the destruction of the first Temple and the years of exile, those who returned from Babylon and were to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem were convened in a third Assembly in which the entire Pentateuch – the Torah – was read. The people fasted in sackcloth, covered their heads with dust, *"stood forward and confessed their sins and the guilty deeds of their fathers."* They entered again into a firm pact with Yahweh, putting it into writing, which the princes, the Levites and the priests signed. Since there was no Temple, no sacrifice could be offered, but the people celebrated with a banquet:

Then all the people went to eat and drink, to distribute portions and to celebrate with great joy, for they understood the words that had been expounded to them. Ezra, the priest-scribe... said to the people, "Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength!" (Neh. 8:12,9,10)

These three solemn assemblies mark a progressive segregation of the People of God, first from Egypt, then from the Canaanite people whose corruptive and idolatrous practices they adopted, and finally within Israel itself, as it separated itself as the faithful "remnant" from the rest of Israel. In the days of Isaiah, the faithful remnant became identified with the Servant of Yahweh. This faithful remnant will be gathered not only out of Israel, but from the elect gathered out of the world. We read in Isaiah 49:3-6:

> *You are my servant, He said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory. Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly spent my strength, yet my reward is with the Lord, my recompense is with my God. For now the Lord has spoken who formed me as His servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to Him and Israel gathered to Him; and I am made glorious in the sight of the Lord, and my God is now my strength! It is too little, He says, for you to be My servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*

THE NEW ISRAEL

It was the Will of God that Jesus fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah. He would select the final remnant and with them establish a New Israel. Mark relates,

> *He then went up the mountain and summoned the men He Himself had decided on, who came and joined Him. He named twelve as His companions whom He would send to preach the Good News; they were likewise to have authority to expel demons. He appointed the twelve as follows: Simon to whom He gave the name Peter; James, son of Zebedee; and John, the brother of James (He gave these two the name Boanerges, or "Sons of Thunder"), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thadaeus, Simon of the Zealot party, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him. (Mk. 3:13-19)*

When Luke speaks of Jesus going into the mountain for Communion with God, he certainly recalls to mind Moses' ascension into Mt. Sinai to speak with God before the formation of Israel as the People of God. Jesus is more than Moses. He is the living Mt. Sinai into whom God has descended. Mark, placing Jesus upon the mountain and calling the Twelve to Himself, is reminiscent of Yahweh calling the people to Sinai for the formation of the First Israel. The calling of the Twelve was the birth of the New Israel. This time there was no thunder, lightning and soul-shaking sounds. Jesus established His covenant in love and not fear. Jesus gave a command to hearts that responded to His love, He *"summoned the men He Himself had decided on, who came and joined Him."* They had been captured by His spirit of love. The birth of the Old Israel and the birth of the New demonstrates clearly the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The New Covenant was established through the Incarnation of the Son of God. The Incarnation, God made flesh, is the essence of Divine Love. As expressed in the fourth Gospel, *"God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son."* All the activities within the life of Jesus express Divine Love. Love is the power Jesus uses to draw men to God. If Jesus has little effect upon the lives of most men, it is only because love has so little appeal to men – men committed to lives of selfish fulfillment! How opposed the Incarnate life of God's Son is to that of mankind!

The men called by Jesus had already been led from Egypt, the slavery of sin, by their repentance and belief in the Gospel. Jesus called them into a unique personal union with Himself. Like the waves of the sea, the crowds would come and go, but the Twelve must remain. They had to identify their lives with Jesus. They would share in His agony and glory. The New Israel consisted of people filled with faith in Jesus; people opened to receive and to grow in the Spirit of Jesus – a people destined to become the incarnated body of Jesus. Many minds filled with His truth, many lips preaching His Gospel, many hands to serve, many feet to carry over unknown mountains the Good News; many hearts to channel Divine Love into the earth and thereby establish the Kingdom for the Glory of God! Many would become one through faith and obedience. The One-in-many would be the Body of Jesus – the Church. As the Father established the Old Israel, so now Jesus established, with the call of the Twelve, the New Israel. It too, in a short

while, would celebrate and seal the New Covenant with a sacrificial banquet.

In the Old Testament, the People of God consisted of Twelve families called tribes. These families sprang from the twelve sons of Jacob whose name had been changed to Israel. Jacob was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. The descendants of Jacob's twelve sons are called the Twelve Tribes of Israel. We read that Moses erected an altar and twelve pillars at Sinai for the twelve tribes of Israel, signifying that each of the Twelve Tribes had entered into the Covenant with Yahweh. *(Ex. 24:4)* These Twelve Tribes were the foundation stones of Israel. Jesus selected twelve men, symbolic of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, as the foundation stones of the New Israel. When the Book of Revelation describes the new Jerusalem, we read, *"The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." (Rev. 21:14)* Jesus declared to these Twelve:

> *I give you my solemn word, in the new age when the Son of Man takes His seat upon a throne befitting His glory, you who have followed Me shall likewise take your places on twelve thrones to judge the Twelve Tribes of Israel. (Matt. 19:28)*

Some believe this refers to the members of the New Israel.

The Twelve were Disciples and Apostles, but they were more than Disciples and Apostles. We see that others in the New Testament were referred to as Apostles. The Twelve formed a unique and elite group around Jesus, to whom He entrusted His mission and power, *"Who hears you, hears Me, and he who rejects you, rejects me. And he who rejects me, rejects him who sent Me." (Lk. 10:16) "I assure you, whatever you declare bound on earth shall be held bound in Heaven, and whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be held loosed in Heaven." (Matt. 18:18)* As Moses had been the acknowledged leader among the Twelve Tribes of Israel, Peter was the accepted leader among the Twelve. Jesus had said to him,

I for my part declare to you, you are "Rock" and on this rock I will build My Church, and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it. I will entrust to you the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

(Matt. 16:18-20)

It was Jesus who gave Simon the name Peter, *"Rock"*. The word signifies the type of rock used for the foundation of a building. The word "Church" in this text represents the Hebrew "Kahal," the sacred community of Israel. The metaphor used by Jesus clearly implied that Peter has a leadership in the Church not shared by the others. Peter is mentioned much more frequently in the Gospel than any other Disciple, which indicates there was special interest in him in the Gospel traditions. Jesus told Peter,

Simon, Simon! Remember that Satan has asked for you, to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may never fail. You, in turn, must strengthen your brothers. (Lk: 22.31-32)

The unique role of the Twelve is illustrated when the Eleven were faced with the sad task of replacing Judas, who had betrayed the Lord by handing Him over to the Jewish leaders, and who then later betrayed himself by suicide. It is a striking tribute to the historical fidelity of the Gospel that the presence of the traitor among the Twelve is so frankly disclosed. It was considered essential by the Eleven to replace Judas:

Peter stood up in the center of the brothers; there must have been a hundred and twenty gathered together. "Brothers," he said, "the saying in Scripture uttered long ago by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of David was destined to be fulfilled in Judas, the one who guided those that arrested Jesus. He was one of our Number and he had been given a share in this ministry of ours.... It is written in the Book of Psalms.... May another take his office. It is entirely fitting, therefore, that one of those who was of our Company while the Lord Jesus moved among us, from the baptism of John until the day He was taken up from us, should be named as witness with us to His resurrection." The choice fell to Matthia, who was added to the Eleven Apostles. (Act. 1:15-26)

The replacement of Judas was indispensable so that the image of the New Israel might be found in the infant Church. According to the Acts, it was the unique responsibility of the Twelve to testify that the Risen Jesus was the same Jesus with whom they had closely lived.

According to Mark, the appointment of the Twelve was for a two-fold purpose: (1) that the Twelve may enjoy close relationship with Jesus, (2) that Jesus might send forth the Twelve to preach and to have authority to cast out demons. The Apostolic Commission to go forth and proclaim the Gospel is not given until Chapter Six. Mark intends, by this, to suggest an interval during which the Twelve are in intimate contact with Jesus.

Jesus made the Twelve responsible for the continuation of His mission. Christianity is a community from its very conception and foundation. Jesus continues in community. In the Christian Community, Jesus comes to us, *"Where two or more are gathered in My name I am with you."* Jesus established an interdependence among His disciples. The identification of Jesus with the community is so strong, that to be cut off from the community is to be cut off from Jesus. When Paul persecuted the Church, Jesus asked him, *"Why are you persecuting Me?"*

From the selection of the Twelve, we see that the Christian Community is composed of divergent individuals. The Lord loves variety. The Twelve chosen by Jesus were naturally as adhesive as Jews and Arabs today. There was Matthew who lived outside the Law as a hated tax collector serving the Romans – and Simon, who belonged to the Party of the Zealots, a group fiercely dedicated to the observance of the Law and committed to violence in order to free Israel from foreign rule. There was impetuous and imprudent Peter, and cautious and legalistic James. There was ambitious James and John who were not beyond manipulating their mother to achieve their goals. We see a doubting and uncertain Thomas and a divided and avaricious Judas. For a community to exist, composed to such men, demanded they rise above themselves. These Twelve lives could not be centered upon their own Twelve lives, but upon the one life and Person – Jesus. Jesus called the Twelve to Himself. He invited them to follow Him. This demanded that

they keep their eyes on Him and forget themselves. Whenever they took their eyes off Him – their fellowship or community deteriorated. They fought among themselves as to whom was the greatest. They even carried their squabbles to Jesus and asked,

> *"Who is of greatest importance in the Kingdom of God?" (With infinite patience) Jesus called a little child over and stood him in their midst and said, "I assure you, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of God. Who ever makes himself lowly, becoming like this child, is of greatest importance in that heavenly reign." (Matt. 18:1-4)*

Jesus turned their eyes from themselves to Him, for He was like the little child. During the Last Supper, the old fight over who was greatest broke out again. This time, Jesus put a picture before their eyes which they would never forget. He got up from the table, and got on His knees and, as a slave, washed their feet. He told them,

> *If I washed your feet – I who am Teacher and Lord – then you must wash each other's feet. What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do. (Jn. 13:14-15)*

Again, He brought their eyes back to Him, the source of Christian Community.

Each person has his own will, his own vision, his own ambitions, his own needs. Of necessity, at times they will conflict and contradict those of others. If these people form a community, there may be tensions. When one has to submit his will to another, it often causes frustration, anger and depression – and in the dominant party indifference, pride and selfishness. Such ingredients do not make a Christian Community. A Christian Community is formed when men and women honestly seek to know the Will of God and seek to accomplish it. When their eyes are upon Jesus, they will discover that their minds and hearts are not only one with His, but one with the other members of the Community. This is the material from which Heaven is made, and needless to say, the secret of true Christian marriages.

As for the Apostles, we do see from Acts that they learned the lesson of Christian Community and were able to teach others. We read:

> *The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his own; rather, everything was held in common. With power the Apostles bore witness to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great respect was paid to them all…*
>
> *(Acts 4:32-33)*

Scripture mentions little about the Twelve after this. It is believed they remained in Jerusalem until driven out by persecution begun by Herod Agrippa. Tradition tells us that Peter went to Antioch and later to Rome. James remained in Jerusalem as Bishop and later was replaced by Simon. Thomas went to India, John to Ephesus, Philip to Egypt, Bartholomew to Aremia, Matthew to Ethiopia, James the Lesser to Syria, Andrew to Asia Minor. They fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: *"I will make you a light to the nations, that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."*

With the choosing of the Twelve, the foundation of the Church was begun. In the subsequent months Jesus would continue to build His Church by the formation of His Disciples. The actual birth of the Church occurred at Pentecost with the sending of the Holy Spirit into the believing community, implying that the very life of the Church flows from its soul – the principle of its life – the Holy Spirit. Truly, all the good and godly works of the Christian Community are the effects and fruits of the Holy Spirit active within the Christian people. The members of the Church are but God's docile and willing instruments for God's work in this world and for the extension of His Kingdom. God willed to save the world through Jesus Christ. He willed to achieve His will on earth through the operations of the human nature of man. From the life of Jesus, we see this was accomplished by the Holy Spirit working in and through Jesus. According to the Divine Decree, the humanity of Jesus was essential for the carrying out of the Divine Plan. In a sense, we certainly can say the continuation of the Divine Plan for the salvation of the world depends upon the Mystical Body of Jesus – the

lives of each and every member of the Church. The normal means used by God, in this moment in time, to establish His Kingdom on earth is the Christian Community – you and me! We are the living arteries through which the Divine Blood, Divine Power and Energy flow into this world. It is all an overwhelming mystery, but it is profound truth! When we understand, there is a Divine dependence upon us, you and me, it puts an entirely new light upon our lives and the time of our life. We become sources of Divine Light, Love and Life!

Christians must struggle all their lives in order for the Holy Spirit to operate through and in their lives. We all know from bitter experience that only too often the spirit of self dominates our activities. At times, we fail to realize that we have come under the influence of the Evil One and his spirit dominates our activities. We can falsely appear as an Angel of Light. Many delude themselves into believing good operates within them, but, in reality, it is but self – or worse – Satan! Father Judge, the Founder of the Missionary Cenacle, said to the Cenacle Members in 1922,

> *I put to each and every one of you this question – How much are you under the influence of the Holy Spirit? Or again, how much are you under the influence of the Evil Spirit? This is a question that is ignored almost entirely by people, even the most devout. It is a pity that there is not more fear of the devil.... Therefore, my dear children, I counsel you: in no particular thing of moment, no, nothing outside the ordinary, in another, for example, that concerns your spiritual welfare, act on your own blind judgment, lest later on you find that the Evil Spirit has made use of sentiment, certain human emotions, of some kind of deceit either to entrap you, or to make you a tool in some of his horrid works, or to gain some power over your soul.*

In the life of Jesus, such never occurred. His every thought, word, deed and omission manifested the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus was

> *the refulgence of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the power of God, the image of His goodness, the pure effusion of the glory of*

the Almighty. (Wis. 7:25-26)

When we understand the sources of the activities of Jesus, we understand how terrible and blasphemous is the scene now related by Mark,

> *He returned to the house with them and again the crowd assembled, making it impossible for them to get any food whatever. When His family heard of this they came to take charge of Him, saying, "He is out of His mind," while the scribes who arrived from Jerusalem asserted, "He is possessed by Beelzebub," and, "He expels demons with the help of the prince of demons." (Mk. 3:20-23)*

THE UNFORGIVABLE SIN

Mark first indicates the continued acceptance of Jesus by the people and then records the negative reactions of two other groups. The first relates the reaction to Jesus by the people from back home. The Greek word used in Verse 21 can mean "followers," "neighbors," "friends," "parents" and other "relatives." Who is meant is not certain. It probably implies His relatives from Nazareth. The nicest thing to be said about them is that they were concerned over the way He neglected His health. We read that the situation was such that, at times, it was impossible for Him and His Disciples to eat. The reports of Jesus' activities and behavior disturbed His family and friends back home. For thirty years, Jesus lived the quiet and holy life of a pious young Jew. His life gave no appearance that He was an extraordinary character or a divinely appointed agent of God; men judge by appearances. Until the moment of His baptism, there was nothing that would have set Him externally apart from His fellow man. John the Baptist confessed that he had been unable to recognize Jesus as the Messiah until His baptism. The life of Jesus totally changed with the coming of the Holy Spirit. When the reports of His behavior reached Nazareth, His relatives reacted in a human way, displaying their disbelief in His Divine Mission. Jesus summed up the situation with these words, *"A prophet is not without honor except in his own home."* John recorded in the Fourth Gospel, *"Not even His brothers had much confidence in Him."*

The relatives of Jesus desired to dominate Him – to take charge of Him in order to control His activities. Their attitude indicated a lack of sympathy for His aims and purposes. Some commentators believe that saying His relatives considered Him mad is a little too strong. Being insane was equivalent to being possessed by a demon. The same expression used in this narrative is likewise found in Acts: *"As Paul went on defending himself in this way, Festus interrupted with a shout, 'Paul you are mad! And your great learning is driving me mad!'" (Acts 26:24)* Perhaps the best interpretation in the present passage would be that the relatives of Jesus believed Him to have lost His reason, and a proper sense of reality. Indeed their attitude was sinfully directed against the Son of Man. Perhaps Jesus spoke of their sin when He said blasphemies against the Son of Man would be forgiven. It is excusable, to a point, to fail to recognize the dignity of the One who hides Himself under the humble appearance of a man, but the blasphemies uttered by the scribes are another matter.

The scribes who arrived from Jerusalem asserted, *"He is possessed by Beelzebub, and He expels demons with the help of the prince of demons." (Mk. 3:22)* It is generally accepted that Beelzebub (Beelezbul) is equated with Satan. "Beelzebul" appears to be a corruption of the Hebrew word "Baalzebub" found in 2 Kings. There we read:

> ***After Ahab's death, Moab rebelled against Israel. Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice of his roof terrace at Samaria and had been injured. So he sent out messengers with the instructions: "Go and inquire of Baalzebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this injury." (2Kings 1:1-2)***

The pagans of Ekron worshipped *"Prince Baal"* – the name "Baalzebub" was a Hebrew derisive alteration of "Prince Baal" meaning "god of the flies" or "god of dung." When we know the meaning Beelzebub carried, we understand even more how offensive and evil the scribes' accusation was against Jesus.

When the scribes of Jerusalem asserted that Jesus was possessed by Beelzebub and expelled demons with the help of the prince of demons, they were not saying that Jesus was a helpless victim possessed by a demon, but that there was a willful alliance – a partnership – between Jesus and Satan. They asserted that healings and exorcisms performed by Jesus, flowed from the power of Satan and of themselves were evil fruits – sinful deeds. This was a total perversion of reality. The works of the Holy Spirit were identified as evil and the works of Satan as good. Satan was at work in the scribes. Mark indicates this terrible perversion flowed from the scribes *"closing their minds to Him"* or, as another translation reads, because of their *"hardness of heart."* For the ancients, the heart was the seat of understanding. This expression means intellectual blindness – a result of sin into which men are led by the supernatural forces of evil. Our Lord's attempt to cure such blindness was all part of His struggle against the forces of evil. This may explain Jesus' anger when He encountered their *"hardness of heart"* – their closed minds. A frequent complaint of the Old Testament Prophets was that the Word of God, which was meant to bring life and salvation, was so misunderstood and rejected because of sin and ignorance, that the Word of God became, in actual fact, an instrument of judgment and condemnation. *(Is. 29:13)* The scribes had completely closed their minds to the light of truth. Darkness became their light! Here, we have the answer to the question proposed by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: *"If your light is darkness, how dark will the darkness be?"* The goodness of Jesus' activities manifestly revealed the action of the Holy Spirit. To stand before these extraordinary and visible holy deeds and call them works of Satan was a deliberate denial of the power and presence of the Spirit of God. Jesus defined such a sin to be a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

The rabbis often declared certain sins so heinous that those who committed them *"have no part in the world to come."* We read in the Mishnah Sanhedrin:

> ***These are those who have no part in the future world: he who says,***

> *"There is no resurrection from the dead;" he who says, "The Torah is not from God," and the heretics.*

Scholars are not at all certain how seriously were intended these statements. Some believe it was a way of warning men against a too great trust in God's mercy, rather than a fixed limitation on the forgiveness of God. From the Christian standpoint, the one absolutely heinous sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. For Jesus decreed,

> *"I give you My word, every sin will be forgiven mankind and all the blasphemies men utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. He carries the guilt of his sin without end." He spoke thus because they had said, "He is possessed by an unclean spirit." (Mk. 3:28-30)*

Perhaps we have in this passage, the early Church's teaching about who will be excluded from the Kingdom of God – those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. The opponents of Jesus admitted the supernatural origin of Jesus' works. To the mind of the early Church, the failure to attribute these works to God, but rather to Satan, resulted from a conscious and deliberate opposition to God. He who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit has identified himself so completely with the Kingdom of evil, that for him evil is good, ugliness beauty and falsehood truth; and so the workings of the Holy Spirit appear to him as madness.

According to Dr. Vincent Taylor:

> *The sin is not any sin against the Holy Spirit, not even a railing judgment uttered in anger or ignorance; nor is it simply the deliberate rejection of better light, with full knowledge that it is light. It is a perversion of spirit which, in defiance of moral value, elects to call light darkness.*

Against the charge of the scribes, Jesus defended Himself with parables. He summoned them and said to them:

How can Satan expel Satan? If a kingdom is torn by civil strife, that kingdom cannot last. If a household is divided according to loyalties, that household will not survive. Similarly, if Satan has suffered mutiny in his ranks and is torn by dissension, he cannot endure; he is finished. No one can enter a strong man's house and despoil his property unless he has first put him under restraint. Only then can he plunder his house. (Mk. 3:23-27)

Jesus indicated the deeds performed by Him are exactly opposite of those of Satan, who causes madness, terror and disease. If the activities of Jesus were attributed to Satan, Satan would be working against himself – setting one subject against another and destroying his own kingdom. Whatever he may be, Satan is not stupid. But the real fact is that the scribes were witnessing the robbing and plundering of Satan's kingdom. "The Strong One" – Satan – had been overcome by a Stronger One – Jesus of Nazareth. This implied that Jesus won an initial victory in the desert when He confronted Satan – the exorcisms and healings were a follow-up and a result of the desert victory!

Jesus' strong reaction and defense of the Holy Spirit reveal another story, the great love in the heart of Jesus for the Holy Spirit and His desire that His disciples have great devotion and reverence for His Presence and Power. Father Thomas Judge said to the early Cenacle Members,

Doesn't it follow that if the Lord is so unrelenting in punishing sins against His Holy Spirit, surely He will be most generous to those who cherish a love for the Holy Spirit? You cannot think a good thought unless it be given you by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul said, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit has everything of which we feel the lack whether it be spiritual or corporal. You need the Holy Spirit because you have needs that are spiritual and corporal. You have great spiritual aspirations. You desire perfection. You desire to do much for Jesus. You seek health. The Holy Spirit is as wonderful in the body as in the soul. He is the Finisher and Perfecter. There is neither a tint nor a fragrance of a beautiful flower, but it

has been placed there by the Holy Spirit. He ripens the harvest. He gives form and shape and beauty and health to the body. The Holy Spirit is so disposed to listen to the innocent and pure of heart and those who love Him.

TRUE BRETHREN OF JESUS

In his next narration, Mark reveals the requirement for membership in the New Israel. Mark relates:

> *His mother and His brothers arrived, and as they stood outside they sent word to Him to come out. The crowd seated around Him told Him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you." He said in reply, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And gazing around Him at those seated in the circle He continued, "These are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the Will of God is brother and sister and mother to me." (Mk. 3:31-35)*

Whenever the Scriptures mention the "brethren of Jesus," it causes difficulty for certain Christians. As Catholics, we believe in the Perpetual Virginity of the Mother of Jesus. We do not believe that Mary had other children. To many, this belief appears contrary to the Scriptures. Those who accept the doctrine of the Virginity of Mary argue that the Greek word, "adelphos" has a meaning wider than blood brothers. The word certainly would apply to half-brothers and probably to cousins and other relatives. St. Epiphanius taught that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were children of Joseph by a previous marriage. This was held by many Fathers of the Church, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose and Cyril of Alexandria. St. Jerome believed these brothers and sisters to be the cousins of Jesus. The Anglican biblical scholar, Bernard, states:

> *It is difficult to understand how the doctrine of the Virginity of Mary could have grown up early in the second century if her four acknowledged sons were prominent Christians, and one of them Bishop of Jerusalem. The earliest Christian Traditions confirm that Mary was only the Mother of Jesus. Without reference to Tradition, it would be uncertain whether these men were blood*

brothers, half-brothers or cousins. For anyone to conclude from such references that Mary was definitely their mother would indicate a dishonesty or ignorance. Without a knowledge of Church Tradition, the most honest statement would be that the degree of kindred is uncertain! It is interesting to note that although the evangelists mention the brethren of Jesus, Jesus alone is referred to as the Son of Mary.

As we studied in our Introduction to Christian Discipleship, we have in this narrative the material used to create the Greek literary form called a *"chria."* A "chria" is a short, pointed saying with a general application. It is occasioned by a definite person responding to a definite situation with a quick, sharp thought. It grabs attention and stimulates thought because of its brevity and depth. In a sense, the thought expressed in the chria surprises the mind and encourages meditation. We read in St. Luke's Gospel: Jesus was told, *"Your mother and brothers are standing outside and they wish to see you."* But he said in answer, *"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the Word of God and act upon it." (Lk. 8:20-21)*

This is a good example of how we can get lost in the illustration and miss the point of the lesson. The point is not that Mary had other children, or that Jesus' mother and brothers were being rejected by Jesus. The real point of the text reveals the kind of men and women who comprise the New Israel. We know the Jews believed that they would inherit the Kingdom of God because they were the natural descendants of Abraham. Their Jewish blood made them God's people. Jesus teaches that membership in the Kingdom of God is not based upon blood relationship – being members of the same race as the Messiah. Not even those closest to the Messiah, His mother and brethren, could depend upon their natural relationship to Jesus to insure them a place in God's Kingdom. The early members of the Church knew themselves to be the brothers and sisters of Jesus, regardless of their ethnic background, for Jesus had said, *"Whoever does the Will of God is brother and sister... to me." (Mk. 3:35)* St. John expressed this truth in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel:

He was in the world, and through Him the world was made, yet the

world did not know who He was. To His own He came, yet His own did not accept Him. Any who did accept Him He empowered to become children of God. These are they who believe in His name – who were begotten not by blood, nor carnal desire, nor by man's willing it, but by God. (Jn. 1:10-13)

When Jesus said, *"Whoever does the Will of God is brother and sister and mother to Me,"* He proclaimed that love of God is essential for membership in the New Israel. Our love may be colored by emotions and feelings, but essentially, it is an operation of the will. We have often been taught that we reveal who we love by whose will we freely accomplish. Unfortunately, experience usually testifies that we love ourselves more than we love God or any other person. It is impossible to separate ourselves from our wills. A human being experiences his individual identity in terms of his will. A man's personal existence is identical with his capacity to express his will in the world. One is what one wills! Will always demands a choice; a choice means a sacrifice. We must be willing to give up something in order to will. Many men today cannot exercise their wills because they cannot bring themselves to give up any of their options. They were never trained to make sacrifices. External circumstances and the pressures of needs drive the ship of their lives. They never truly feel alive. They never feel the true joy of being. If you wish to destroy the personality of a child or prevent the child from realizing a unique personality, never let the child make a "will" decision. Decide everything for the child. You will destroy the child's chances of ever being a true Christian. Where will be the power to "do the Will of God?"

No human being can relinquish the right to will without, in time, ceasing to be a human being. Even when we obey the will of another, we must freely choose to obey that will. For our obedience to be healthy and virtuous, it must flow from a willed decision on our part.

At times, freedom of will is not consciously apparent in that we seem to have so little control over the day-by-day doings of our lives. Yet, do you not suspect the opposite to be the truth? The will may be so in command of our lives that nothing, not even God's grace, can touch us. Perhaps once a thing

is willed to be, it will be until consciously unwilled. It is like a lock that has been secured and, without the proper key, will never be altered. The will goes beyond conscious awareness. A conscious awareness that once aided the will to make a decision may no longer be present, but the willed decision remains and determines present activities. To change many present conditions, the forgotten willed decision must be discovered and unwilled.

The Will of God is no mystery. Jesus defines this will when the multitude asked Him,

> ***"What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus replied, "This is the word of God: Have faith in the One whom He sent."***
>
> ***(Jn. 6:28-29)***

> ***"Whoever puts faith in Me believes not so much in Me as in Him who sent Me." (Jn. 12:44)***

> ***My doctrine is not my own; it comes from Him who sent Me. Any man who chooses to do His will will know about this doctrine – namely, whether it comes from God or is simply spoken on my own. (Jn. 7:16-17)***

For man, the Will of God is to believe in Jesus Christ – The Word of God. As St. Luke writes, *"Hear the word of God and act upon it." (Lk. 8:21)* It is an obedient faith – in other words, a loving faith that constitutes a person as a true member in the Kingdom of God. Of such men, the remnant of God's People is composed.

It is because loving-faith is of the essence of Christianity, that being a Christian is a very lively and enriching experience. It calls us to life from the very essence of our being – we must choose, not only daily but hourly, to be a Christian – *"To hear the Word of God and put it into practice."* It is our free loving choice to do God's Will that forms and creates us, in heart and spirit, as true brothers and sisters of Jesus – Children of our Heavenly Father!

CHAPTER 6

MYSTERIES OF THE KINGDOM

INTRODUCTION

When Mary Magdalen encountered the Risen Jesus, she cried out, *"Rabboni"* – meaning, "My dear Teacher." This title the rabbis often gave to God. Mark, more than any of the Evangelists, beheld Jesus as our *'Dear Teacher.'* For Mark, it was characteristic of Jesus to teach. He taught in the synagogue, in the Temple, on the hills, by the sea – from a boat. Mark relates that Jesus taught the people because He had compassion for them. Even when Jesus was not teaching, it is customary, in Mark, for the disciples to refer to Him as Teacher.

From the beginning, Mark teaches that Jesus was not like any other teacher. He did not teach in the same manner as the rabbis. His words carried the authority and power of a prophet of God. In His very first miracle, Jesus spoke and shook the kingdom of darkness. His very command compelled a demon to surrender his control over the soul of a man. Purposefully, Mark ties this miracle with the first sermon given by Jesus. Mark desires his readers to realize the power of the words of Jesus. All His miraculous deeds testify to the power inherent in Jesus' words. In the cure of the paralytic, Jesus dramatically demonstrates the power of His word to forgive sin by healing the man by a single command.

The teachings of Jesus moved men. Men gave up everything to be His disciples. Crowds flocked to Him, hemmed Him in on every side, hungry to hear His words. Men could not be indifferent to Him. Indeed they were not. Many were offended and scandalized by what He taught. They refused to believe Him. According to Luke, they were in a frenzy over Him. Disbelief reduced the miraculous activity of Jesus, but it did not curtail His teaching: *"And He went about... among the villages teaching."* He persevered in

teaching until the very end. At His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemani, He said to the arresting soldiers:

> *You have come out to arrest me armed with swords and clubs as if against a brigand. I was within your reach daily, teaching in the temple precincts, yet you never arrested me. (Mk. 14:48-49)*

The final word spoken to Jesus by an apostle was *'Teacher.' "He* [Judas] *then went directly over to Him and said, 'Rabbi!' and embraced Him." (Mk. 14:45)* It was as teacher He went to His death!

Jesus spoke to real people in a realistic way. People related to what Jesus said, for He taught them with word pictures drawn from the experiences of daily life. His teaching was so simple and clear that at times a child could understand it and at other times, His illustrations demanded a serious reflection in order to discover the meaning. Some truths are not easily grasped. Jesus endeavored to express abstract ideas in a concrete fashion. For instance, a scribe expressed this abstract idea: *"To love our neighbor as ourselves, is worth more than any burnt offering or sacrifice." (Mk. 12:33)* This same concept Jesus expressed in this concrete fashion,

> *If you bring your gift at the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother. And then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:23-24)*

Jesus takes religious truth and discovers what in nature or the practical lives of people represent this truth or is similar to it. For example, the concept of God, the Divine Being, He referred to as your *"Father in Heaven;"* the attitude toward a sinner He described as a Good Shepherd seeking a lost sheep.

Apparently, Jesus saw not only a comparison or similarity between the natural order and the supernatural order, but He beheld a real kinship and affinity between them. There is a spiritual order and there is a natural order of things. Both proceed from the same divine source. The natural order

that is more familiar to us can give us true insight and illumination into the realm of the spirit. Jesus needed no artificial illustrations for teaching the truths about the Kingdom, for it was indeed like the processes of nature and man's life. The Church teaches that the supernatural builds upon the natural. They are not opposite poles, but rather one is the foundation of the other – one is the Alpha and the other is the Omega.

A good teacher not only makes his message clear, but keeps the capabilities of his listeners in mind. The story is told about a great Greek philosopher, one of whose disciples translated his beautiful and lofty thoughts into picturesque and simple language for the common man to understand. The great philosopher was exceedingly angry and dismissed the disciple from his company. He deemed the masses as being unworthy of his thoughts and ideas. Jesus picturesquely described these masses as, *"Sheep without a shepherd,"* and He had compassion upon them and He taught them.

One of the true evils of life is to live in darkness without truth. Again, Jesus described us as the blind leading the blind and everyone falling into the pit. Many evils and much suffering result, not because of ill will, but from ignorance. One is appalled at the ignorance of some parents in the handling of young people and the damage and tragedies resulting from this ignorance. The Lord knows that if we are going to sink our money and time into raising chickens, we would endeavor to learn the best way to raise a chicken. Having babies does not qualify a person to be a real mother or father. Having children and raising children are not the same thing. At times, so much suffering can be avoided by parents and children if the parents only understood some of the fundamental principles of child growth and development. One example: a child moves from a total, positive dependence upon his parents to a negative dependence, during which time the child expresses, unconsciously, his dependence upon his parents, but consciously expresses his need for independence and uniqueness (which is God given) by rejecting parental ideas, control, etc. If the parents can recognize that what is being experienced is not truly a rejection of them or their love, regardless of the emotional feelings expressed or involved, but a healthy assertion of growth and development, the parents can handle many of the situations arising with a sense of humor and a bit of common sense. Someone once

said, *"Jesus blessed children and taught adults."* Anna Freud once said that most adolescents do not need psychological help, but most of their parents do. Not to deprecate the time spent on educating children, one must realize that adult education today is even more important than child education. Almost seventy-five years ago, Father Judge, the Founder of the Missionary Cenacle Apostolate, said:

> *The laity is a sleeping giant that must be awakened and enlightened. An enlightened laity is the hope of the Church – it will save the Church!*

THE PARABLES

Jesus taught religious truths to men of flesh and blood. As was common with the rabbis of His time, He reached His audience with parables. Jesus was a man of His times, speaking the language of His people. A parable is a heavenly thought in earthly cloth. The Creator of parables artistically took an abstract truth and clothed it in images of daily experience. At simplest, a parable is a comparison of a spiritual truth with a fact in nature. *"Behold the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap."* It has its literary foundation in the Jewish "mashal" – a method of teaching that presents truths in the form of similes, metaphors, stories or riddles. The basic idea is probably that of comparison. A moral or spiritual truth is compared with the affairs of daily life on the assumption that what applies in the one sphere is relevant also in the other. The parable intends to simply manifest a truth. It catches the hearer's attention, but creates enough uncertainty as to its meaning to stimulate thought and meditation. It puzzles people and provokes them into reflection leading to enlightenment. Where the mashal or parable was used to provoke reflection, it was considered necessary for the uncovering of truth. (An obscure parable is an exception.) The general intent was to reveal truth and not conceal it. It was not created to be read – but heard, through to the end. As a whole, it would convey a truth. A typical parable presents one single point of comparison: *"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a buried treasure."* The details within the parable are not intended to have independent significance. This distinguishes the parable from the allegory. The essence of an allegory is that it must be interpreted point by point and

every single item in an allegory must represent something else. Allegory has been called description in code. In an allegory, we must ask what does each person, thing or event in the story represent.

The parables of Jesus arose from concrete situations within His life. Each was uttered during a vivid, living situation. They were created in conflict situations and used to correct, reprove, defend and attack. A parable calls for an immediate response in the hearer. They were often used in conflict as an art form for dangerous encounters. Bringing unpleasant truths to certain people can be dangerous. We have two examples of this in the Old Testament with Jotham in Judges and Samuel in 2 Kings. We have a good example in the New Testament when Jesus spoke to the chief priests and Pharisees about the Wicked Tenants of the Vineyard. *(Matt. 21:33-46)*

In the parables, we hear the authentic voice of Jesus. The parables have been called *"a fragment of the original rock of tradition." (J. Jeremias)* They transport us into the daily life of Palestine in which Jesus lived. Much scholarly research has gone into trying to discover the pure (as Jesus uttered them) parables in order to hear again His authentic voice. This is a complicated task. Between the time Jesus spoke the parables and they were written down, they lived as missionary preachings, liturgical assemblies and Christian instructions in the Christian Community. The Church collected and arranged the parables according to subject matter and created settings for them. As the parables passed from the Palestinian environment into a Greek-Roman world, some of these parables became allegories.

The parables are like little jewels, capturing the radiance of the Gospel. Jesus never tired of expressing the heart of His message in constantly changing images – a mustard seed, a pearl, a net, a lost coin, a lighted lamp, a vineyard, a banquet, a wedding, lilies in a field, or birds in the air. Some of the essential themes expressed in the parables of Jesus: the presence of the Kingdom of God and its new order, the mercy of God for sinners, the coming judgment, the requirements of discipleship, the Passion and the necessity for an immediate personal response to the Gospel – are the original themes in the teachings of Jesus. The early Church conserved these themes and brought them to the Gentile world. In these parables, the Church

perceived a meaning for its own life not explicitly stated in the original parables. Fr. John McKenzie feels that a search for the original parables as Jesus uttered them could be deceptive. In his opinion, one does not recover Christian teaching in a purer and finer form by removing the teaching from its content in the life of the Church.

The parables are works of art, possessing imaginative and poetic qualities. All serious works of art have meanings beyond that of original conception. For those who have *"ears to hear,"* the parables will speak to them of their own living circumstances. Their messages may be fruitfully applied to all sorts of new situations never contemplated when originally created. Needless to say, a proper understanding of the original meaning of the parable aids a proper application in new situations.

Although Mark, more than any other evangelist, emphasizes Jesus' role as a Teacher, he seldom relates the teachings of Jesus. We are told that Jesus taught, but we seldom hear what He taught. The only lengthy samples of His teachings are related in Chapters Four and Thirteen and possibly in Chapter Seven, verses one through twenty-three. It is highly possible that Mark intends this section in Chapter Four as a summary of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom. In this chapter, we find three closely related parables: the sower, the seed growing secretly, and the mustard seed – all of them reflecting variations of the same theme. Mark has Jesus prefacing these teachings with: *"Listen carefully to this." (Mk. 4:3)* He certainly intends his readers to seriously reflect on this message of Jesus.

Mark opens this passage with a most picturesque scene:

> *On another occasion He began to teach beside the lake. Such a huge crowd gathered around Him that He went and sat in a boat on the water, while the crowd remained on the shore nearby. He began to instruct them at great length, by the use of parables. (Mk. 4:1-2)*

We have already been told in Chapter Three that rejection and disbelief existed. Some had closed their minds to Jesus and others refused Him

belief. With Jesus in the boat and the people on the land, we see a symbolism of the growing separation between them. Mark does note that it is from this time that Jesus began to speak in parables to the people. On the other hand, we see a growing intimacy between Jesus and His disciples. He told the Twelve:

> *To you the mystery of the Reign of God has been confided. To the others outside it is all presented in parables, so that they will look intently and not see, listen carefully and not understand, lest perhaps they repent and be forgiven. (Mk. 4:11-12)*

In the ancient world, a mystery was not something that could not be understood, but a thing that was hidden. Those who had been initiated into the mystery, completely understood it, while it remained completely hidden from the uninitiated. This saying of Jesus has caused many problems for scholars and non-scholars alike. Jesus is recorded as quoting from Isaiah. It is possible that Jesus was impressed by the similarity between the results of His ministry and the experience of Isaiah and so He made use of the ironic words of Isaiah.

As the meaning now appears in Mark, it indicates that to those not disciples of Jesus, the purpose of the parables is to conceal the truth from them and to prevent repentance and forgiveness. This interpretation of the purpose of the parables is so intolerable that, from the earliest times, it has been questioned. Luke omits the phrase, "Lest perhaps they repent and be forgiven" and, as quoted in Matthew, the emphasis is upon the hearer excluding himself from understanding the truth rather than God hiding it from him.

> *Sluggish indeed is this people's heart. They have scarcely heard with their ears, they have firmly closed their eyes; otherwise, they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn back to me, and I should heal them. (Matt. 13:15)*

The quotation from Isaiah as it appears in Mark is not exact. Many scholars believe that the harsh wording that appears here does not express the real intent of the author. They believe that the word that has been translated

"lest" or "lest perhaps" should be rendered "unless." The translation should read:

> *To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God; but to those who are without, everything is obscure in order that they may see and yet not see, may hear and yet not understand, unless they turn and God will forgive them.*

The other translation and interpretation appear not to be in keeping with the spirit of Jesus in the rest of the Gospel. St. Paul expresses something of the same concept when he writes to the Corinthians concerning the unbelieving Jews:

> *Their minds, of course, were dulled. To this very day, when the old covenant is read the veil remains unlifted; it is only in Christ that it is taken away. Even now, when Moses is read a veil covers their understanding. But whenever he turns to the Lord, the veil will be removed. (2Cor. 3:14-16)*

The first parable related in Chapter Four is the Sower of the Seed. We read:

> *"Listen carefully to this. A farmer went out sowing. Some of what he sowed landed on the footpath, where the birds came along and ate it. Some of the seed landed on rocky ground where it had little soil; it sprouted immediately because the soil had no depth. Then, when the sun rose and scorched it, it began to wither for lack of roots. Again, some landed among thorns, which grew up and choked it off, and there was no yield of grain. Some seed, finally, landed on good soil and yielded grain that sprang up to produce at a rate of thirty- and sixty- and a hundred-fold." Having spoken this parable, He added, "Let him who has ears to hear me, hear!" (Mk. 4:3-9)*

This parable is indeed drawn from daily life in Palestine. The sower seems to be quite careless with the seed, sowing it in all the wrong places. We are accustomed to the concept of plowing before sowing. In Palestine, plowing

followed the sowing. The sower would liberally sling the seed over the entire field – deliberately meaning to sow on the path people had made and into the thorns. Later, as he plowed over the paths and weeds, he would discover that he had also sown over a rocky area only thinly covered by soil.

This is a parable about the earthly life of Jesus. That life met with opposition and lack of response. So many of His efforts were apparently futile and useless as in the words of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah:

> *Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, yet my reward is with my God. For now the Lord has spoken who formed me as His servant from the womb... I will make you a light to the nations, that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. (Is. 49:4-6)*

Although the life of Jesus may have appeared to be a losing cause, it would not be so in the end. His life would produce an unspeakably rich harvest. He warned His hearers not to judge by what they saw.

It is indeed possible that Jesus desired to give encouragement to His disciples faced with frustrations and setbacks in their own apostolic works. They were not to be discouraged; the sowing had taken place and the harvest would inevitably come. They were to have confidence in Jesus and continue sowing the seed, confident that in the end the harvest would come. Certainly, they were disappointed that the Kingdom had not come as they had expected. They were to learn from their disappointments. Their disappointment was not due to the fact that the Kingdom had not come, but that it had come but not as they expected. They were to learn that man's way is not God's way! What appears failure in the eyes of man may be but God's method for success.

In the following narration, the parable of the Sower of the Seed is presented as an allegory. As mentioned earlier, a parable has but one point and the allegory has as many points as features in the story. The allegory was a popular literary form among the Greco-Roman world. Most scholars feel this allegorical interpretation is a product of the Eastern Church. Truly the

Risen Savior through the Holy Spirit created an allegory from the Parable of the Sower. It is certainly possible that the Apostles discussed, with Jesus, the causes for people failing to believe in Jesus or to persevere in discipleship.

They certainly later had to face the reality that one of the Twelve betrayed Jesus. No doubt many of their own friends and relatives refused to follow Jesus. Jesus may have used this parable as an allegory to explain the mystery of His rejection and man's failure to persevere in discipleship. Certainly, the early Church was faced with these problems. Mark may have received this explanation from Peter.

GROWTH IN THE WORD

Before we read this allegory, we ought to note that the parable of the Sower begins with these words: *"Listen carefully to this"* and ended with, *"Let him who has ears to hear me, hear!"* After the allegory, Mark records these words of Jesus:

> *Listen carefully to what you hear. In the measure you give you shall receive, and more besides. To those who have, more will be given; from those who have not, what little they have will be taken away. (Mk. 4:24)*

Men are encouraged to discover the mysteries of the Kingdom. Since Jesus is the Kingdom, men are invited to know Jesus. It is indicated that a continual growth in the knowledge of Jesus is vital. As one grows in knowledge, his commitment to Jesus should increase. As a disciple gives himself more to the study of Jesus and to following His Way, the disciple grows firm in Jesus. He will persevere and reap a great harvest. A warning is being given about being superficial and careless in one's relationship with the Lord.

Those who are content with what they know and where they are, are in danger of losing the faith they possess and their relationship with the Lord. Life is never a standstill! One goes forward or one goes backward. One increases or decreases. It takes time to reveal growth or deterioration. Mark uses the words of the Lord to warn Christians about their indifference to

growing in the knowledge and love of God and His Beloved Son:

> *To those who have, more will be given; from those who have not, what little they have will be taken away.*

Let us now read this divinely inspired allegory revealing why men do not believe in Jesus, why men who do believe in Jesus fall by the wayside and are lost and why others persevere until the end:

> *He said to them, "You do not understand this parable? How then are you going to understand other figures like it? What the sower is sowing is the word. Those on the path are the ones to whom, as soon as they hear the word, Satan comes to carry off what was sown in them. Similarly, those sown on rocky ground are people who on listening to the word accept it joyfully at the outset. Being rootless, they last only a while. When some pressure or persecution overtakes them because of the word, they falter. Those sown among thorns are another class. They have listened to the word, but anxieties over life's demands, and the desire for wealth, and cravings of other sorts come to choke it off; it bears no yield. But those sown on good soil are the ones who listen to the word, take it to heart, and yield at thirty- and sixty- and a hundred-fold." (Mk. 4:13-20)*

The sower in the parable is not Christ, but anyone who seeks to teach the Gospel. The "Word" is Jesus – the "Word" is the Kingdom. The activity of sowing is presenting allegorically the mind, heart, and spirit of Jesus to men. The seed is sown in the hearts of men – in their inner spiritual being. Satan is immediately identified as the archenemy of Jesus and the spreading of the Gospel. His presence is the supreme cause for men failing to believe in Jesus. Every teacher of the Word must realize that the number one source of opposition to the reception of the Word is Satan. Since Satan is the great enemy of Jesus, those who are sent to preach and teach in His Name must also be endowed with power over Satan if their ministry is to be successful.

Satan is always subtle and deceptive. He immediately creates doubts in the minds of those who hear the Word. He asks his age-old lying questions,

"Has God really said?" "Does God really say at all?" "Is there a God to really say?" He has success because men's hearts are hardened by their indifference to the spiritual – to the holy – to the godly. The opposite of love is indifference. In the human heart where there is no love of God, Satan has a field day! St. Paul describes this well in Romans. Our Lord tells us in Verses 16 and 17 that the Christian life of some people is like the flower in the cranny wall. Its joyous life and growth are extremely curtailed by its environment. It suddenly springs up and blossoms beautifully, but will never have strength and endurance because it has limited nourishment – the root system has no depth from which to seek its nourishment. When the external environment becomes difficult – when the initial enthusiasm wanes, when sun scorches and the wind chills, the flower in the cranny wall fades and dies. When a person comes to Jesus through some sudden spiritual experience with little or no previous spiritual development, his Christian fervor and commitment may not endure without good spiritual direction. That person must develop good and healthy spiritual exercises permitting the development of roots – for growth in faith and love. Without this, the person will identify the spiritual life with the emotional feeling accompanying the initial spiritual experience and conversion. When these things fade and they are no longer spiritual or holy – or close to God – a feeling of "so what's the use" many develop and the person falls away. This last state is worse than the first – they have tried religion and it didn't work.

Our Lord teaches that pressures and persecutions will come to us because of our commitment to Him. We will be bothered by things that never concerned us before. The Evil One has a whole bag of tricks to destroy our commitment to Jesus. Most of these tricks are completely unknown to new converts to the spiritual life. This is why spiritual direction is important. One of the first tactics of Satan is to fill the spirit of the person with pride. The person begins to believe that the Gifts of God are really the effects of their own goodness or reward for their virtue. They begin to believe they are holier and better than others. They begin to exalt themselves above others. They disdain their spiritual leaders, they refuse spiritual direction – they direct the directors – they slam shut the door of the confessional! When you are so intimate with God, who needs man to reconcile one with God? Who needs to be reconciled with God? Perhaps some wretched sinner who doesn't

know Jesus, but certainly not Holy, Holy, Holy Me!

God resists the proud! He withdraws from them. The spiritually exalted have become so out of touch with the meek and humble Jesus that they are not even aware God has abandoned them. They begin to identify their own proud spirit with the Holy Spirit. They may consciously believe they are under the influence of the Holy Spirit, when in reality, they are under the influence of the Evil Spirit. The evidence for this is that the spirit of pride rules – which manifests itself in inability to seek and accept direction from spiritual authorities and in a general spirit of rebellion against the Church, manifested by spirit of criticism against the Church. Unfortunately, these people may maintain a facade of Christian spirituality for years, but in reality, the true Christian spirit has long since faded and died. Normally, true charity has grown cold and a great deal of hostility can be detected underlining their spirit. At times, such people are shocked into some kind of awareness of their spiritual state by falling into some type of gross immorality. The Scriptures do confirm that God does deliver up the proud to the lust of their flesh – others are merely delivered up to the pride of their minds. God help them, for neither God nor man can convince them of sin – they have become too much like their true master – Lucifer!

To endure as a Christian, one must learn to pray correctly. This is more than saying prayers and singing hymns. Prayer and meditation are the essential spiritual works of our lives. As we grow in prayer, we will necessarily grow in humility. As we grow in humility, the very roots of Christian holiness, we grow in God. We become deeply rooted in God – the enduring source of Christian growth and strength.

THE FALLEN AWAY

Our Lord tells us that some Christians begin well – but end badly; they bear no fruit. "Anxieties over life's demands" – worries – "and the desire for wealth" and cravings of the flesh choke to death their spiritual life. Worries and anxieties often stem from a poverty of faith. They really do not have true confidence in God's providential care for them. They trust too much in their own efforts and abilities. God promised He would provide for those

who put Him first in their lives. If they would seek first His reign, the rest would come to them. *"Your Heavenly Father knows you need these things."* When people spend too much time and energy in making sure they are secure, they really do not trust the Heavenly Father to provide. Do they really doubt that He has a personal love for them? Time and life go by and God has been crowded out of their lives. They are spiritually barren. Jesus warned that if first things were not put first, the first would end up last in life. You only have to look around and see the number of people with no concern for religion and who never see or feel the importance of God in their lives. Jesus taught that you cannot serve both God and money. You will end by loving the one and hating the other. As you become totally concerned with the one, you become totally indifferent to the other. Many people do not hate God – they are in a worse state – they are indifferent to God. They do not love God. God was crowded out of their lives. No matter what may be the reason, Hell is life without God. We can end in Hell for many different reasons and the most common reason is <u>indifference</u>!

Some Christians become so enslaved to their bodily and emotional satisfactions that they live totally physical lives. They live as if they had no spirit but were merely glorified animals. When men become slaves to their passions, they have neither the strength nor the desire to follow the Crucified Lord. Their taste being only for the earthly, they find the spiritual distasteful. Things that free the spirit – such as prayer, religious worship, scriptural study – they find boring. They can only find satisfaction in what feeds the senses or gratifies the ego. *"The body only reflects the kind of relationship we have with the Father." (Dawn Q)* St. Paul speaks of such when he writes, *"The natural man does not accept what is taught by the Spirit of God. For him, that is absurdity." (2Cor. 2:14)* Paul taught that such men are "headed for destruction." Jesus said, *"Where your treasure is, there is your heart."* When St. Augustine was in this condition, he prayed, *"Lord make me chaste but not just yet!"* In his immortal "Confessions," he wrote,

> *I still hesitated to die to death and to live to life, for the ingrown worse had more power over me than the untried better.... My lovers of old, trifles of trifles and vanities of vanities held me back. They plucked at my fleshly garment and they whispered softly, "Do you*

cast us off? From that moment we shall no more be with you forever and ever!"

For such Christians, deliverance is needed!

PERSERVERANCE

Jesus teaches that there are Christians whose lives will bear abundant harvest, *"one thirty- another sixty- some hundred-fold."* Who are these Christians? They are those who "hear the word of God" and put it into practice. Those who love God above self – more than mother, father, wife, husband, children, home, country – who seek first the Kingdom of God. Those for whom Jesus is their Treasure!

For His disciples and friends, Jesus related the two following parables:

> *He also said, "This is how it is with the reign of God. A man scatters seed on the ground. He goes to bed and gets up day after day. Through it all the seed sprouts and grows without his knowing how it happens. The soil produces of itself first the blade, then the ear, finally the ripe wheat in the ear. When the crop is ready he 'wields the sickle, for the time is ripe for harvest.'" (Mk. 4:26-29)*

In this parable, our Lord teaches that the disciples are no more responsible for producing the Kingdom of God's reign, than a farmer is responsible for causing the seed in the ground to germinate and yield a harvest. The farmer does his job – he sows the seed and plows the field. When his work is done, he goes peacefully about his daily life. He is not anxious about the seed in the ground. Because of the mysterious power within the living seed, the seed silently germinates and grows. It bears fruit in time and then the farmer resumes his work. He reaps the harvest.

A disciple of Jesus must do his task, but he must be patient and not become anxious and worried over the results. He must have faith in the seed he has sown. What is to follow is out of his hands. Now it is the work of God. It is God who gives the increase and we are reminded by another metaphor: *"The*

mills of God grind slowly." We must be patient as things run the Divine course!

Jesus may have directed this parable to some of his over-enthusiastic followers, as the Zealots. Because of their false concept of the Kingdom, they believed the Kingdom of God would result from human effort. The disciples expected Jesus to become a political liberator establishing the Kingdom of God by political force and power. They were discouraged when Jesus' life did not bear the fruit they expected.

A disciple must not be discouraged when his labors appear to bear no fruit. He must not be over-anxious to see results. He must not feel guilty or defeated when his good efforts produce no immediate results. In God's own time, the harvest will come. In the meantime, the disciple must joyfully continue to sow the good seed. He may not live to see the harvest, but he confidently lives and dies knowing it will be!

In the last parable narrated in Chapter Four, Jesus relates:

> *What comparison shall we use for the reign of God? What image will help to present it? It is like a mustard seed which, when planted in the soil, is the smallest of all the earth's seeds, yet once it is sown, springs up to become the largest of shrubs, with branches big enough for the birds of the sky to build nests in its shade. (Mk. 4:30-32)*

THE MUSTARD SEED

In His utter humility, Jesus saw His life like a tiny mustard seed. The Kingdom of God had come in Jesus of Nazareth. His humble humanity houses the Presence of God. How insignificant Jesus appeared when compared with the Jewish expectations of the Messiah. His disciples were anticipating some sudden change in Jesus' status – a divine display of power would occur propelling Jesus into national leadership and kingly rule. They were certainly not anticipating His arrest and death. Jesus sought to encourage His disciples to accept the divine reality. The Kingdom had come

in Him even if He appeared in this world as no more important than a mustard seed. The Kingdom of God had a small, insignificant beginning – like a tiny mustard seed – but it is a divine seed and will produce a rich harvest. But, the seed would die before it would produce *"much fruit."* Jesus was not to be exalted as they expected, but thrust down to death!

These parables of growth were directed toward the disciples who were impatient and discouraged by the absence of immediate and rewarding results from their ministry and that of Jesus. We are given the divine example of how Jesus, with child-like confidence, trusted God and left the future in His Father's hands. Already Jesus had eyes to see that this future was present in Himself and through Him would one day be visibly and gloriously revealed. His disciples had also to learn that the coming of the Kingdom was not the work of their hands, but God's gift. They indeed had work to accomplish. Their failure to do their task would impede the coming of the Kingdom. Every achievement of love and faith, here and now, manifests the Kingdom –yet – only as a pale reflection of what is to come *"when God will be everything to everyone." (1Cor. 15:28)*

A LIGHT TO THE WORLD

Jesus spoke of the responsibility of His disciples when:

> *He said to them, "is a lamp acquired to be put under a bushel basket or hidden under a bed? Is it not meant to be put on a stand? Things are hidden only to be revealed at a later time; they are covered so as to be brought out into the open." (Mk. 4:21-22)*

The mysteries hidden from the beginning of time had been revealed to them; they had a solemn obligation to reveal these truths *"to men who sit in darkness."* Jesus told the disciples,

> *You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Men do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket. They set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your Heavenly*

Father. (Matt. 5:14-16)

As we have said, Mark, more than any other Evangelist, presents Jesus as Teacher. Certainly he considered that teaching is an important part of discipleship – knowledge of the mysteries of God placed a responsibility on the disciples to be a light in dark places. They were lamps enkindled by Jesus to impart light in this world and dispel its darkness. In Chapter Six, Mark concludes the mission of the Twelve with, *"The Apostles returned to Jesus and reported to Him all that they had done and what they had taught." (Mk. 6:30)* Mark understands that teaching is a vital responsibility of discipleship. He even indicates that the growth and the preservation of our own gifts of faith and love depends on our sharing faith and love with others:

> *In the measure you give you shall receive, and more besides. To those who have, more will be given; from those who have not, what little they have will be taken away. (Mk. 4:24-25)*

Mark leaves this picture of the Teacher before our eyes:

> *By means of many such parables He taught them the message in a way they could understand. To them He spoke only by way of parable, while He kept explaining things privately to His disciples. (Mk. 4:33)*

It may be more important for some to teach adults, but it is extremely important that most of us teach children and youth. During one five year study to establish a profile of the average Catholic student, it was found that forty-eight percent of the Junior class considered Religion as the most disliked subject in school. Thirty percent gave the reason: "It is boring." Only 3.6 percent of the entire student body considered it the most liked subject. Of the graduates, only a few still practice the Catholic faith today. They did not find it relative to their lives then nor now.

We cannot leave it to others to make Christians out of our children. In the end, only God can do that, but we must do our part. We must till the soil and plant the seeds. God will give the increase. Sometimes we feel we

haven't gotten the seeds into their hearts. Jesus *"taught them the message in a way they could understand."* Will we be excused for doing any less? As teachers of children, we need to keep in mind the advice of the great teacher, Booker T. Washington: *"What you are cries so loud, I cannot hear what you are saying... I would rather see a sermon than hear one!"* Also, we need to be aware of some of the psychological principles of education.

From birth to seven years of age, the child lives in a sensorial world of sight, sound, touch and taste. In this time of life, he needs *"to taste and see that the Lord is good."* He can be taught to see God in the beauty and goodness of creation. This goodness must especially be projected to him by a warm (touching), accepting, confirming feeling by the people who surround him. It is during this period he develops his feelings about self, about life, that stay with him a lifetime. From this period comes his "feeling" about God. He needs to experience that life is good and he is good. He will then have a foundation and background to know what we mean when we say, "God is Good!" Martin Luther had such a brutal and demanding father that the thought of God as his Father terrorized him night and day.

The social conscience of the child is created between the ages seven and twelve. He needs to be gently led out of the small world of self and introduced into the communal world. A sense of social justice is developed or retarded during this period. One does not awaken the conscience by talking about it. For social relationships to be real, practical experience is necessary. It is important to train the child in the corporeal works of mercy: Helping the poor, visiting and caring for the sick, concern for the aged and weak, respect for the opposite sex, and how not be socially offensive. Here, the child will learn to follow the demands of conscience and not that of others. It is in this willed experience that the personality grows. The performance of such deeds will create a new sense of dignity within the child. If the child fails to be trained in the corporeal works of mercy at this time, such deeds of Christian charity will never flow generously and spontaneously from his life. When you are old and gray, you can expect from your child no better than what you trained him for.

Too often we try to force-feed adult theology into young minds and hearts

which cannot digest such food. The ability to form and understand abstract ideas is a later development of childhood. Religion should be made quite concrete and down to earth from birth to twelve. You've heard the tale of the young man taught in the first grade that God was a Supreme Being. For at least two years he religiously worshipped a "string bean!" Unfortunately, it was before the Jolly Green Giant commercial – that would have given a more practical direction to the lad in worship.

It is essential in all stages of child development that there be a balance between theory and practice – teaching and action. The child must be able to express the theory in some kind of practical activity and experimentation, or else the truth becomes divorced from reality. The child may lose himself in a world of fantasy and the adolescent in the world of abstractions.

The adolescent is naturally personally and socially oriented at this stage of his development. Religious studies ought to be directed toward humanity – the Incarnation – toward human life and particularly toward men and women who have helped Christianity and civilization advance and develop. The adolescent seeks self-identity. It is extremely important at this stage he be able to incorporate being a Christian as part of his true identity. Most conversions to Christ come during this time or they do not come at all.

It is an essential principle of education that teaching details and facts only brings confusion; establishing the relationship between things will bring knowledge. Jesus spoke in parables and people understood His message. He showed the relationship of the spiritual and the supernatural with the created world and the things of everyday life. People understood His message that God was their Father, their Brother and their Advocate! *"My people are perishing for lack of knowledge,"* are words of Scripture. Our children and youth are not in need of fact for the most part, but knowledge. They need to know that God is their Father, Jesus is their Brother, the Holy Spirit is their Comforter. They need this knowledge in the Scriptural sense. In other words, they need to experience the reality of these divine truths. That is Christian Education – bringing people, small, medium and large – into a loving relationship with the Triune God – The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit!

CHAPTER 7

TOUCH OF FAITH

INTRODUCTION

In our study of the Gospel of Mark, we are now presented with a series of miracles by Jesus Christ. The ordinary term in the Synoptic Gospels for miracles is *'dynamis'* – an act of power. It has been logically stated that if the universe is dominated by a Spirit, miracles are possible. If the Spirit is a spirit of love, miracles are probable. Since this Loving Spirit incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, miracles are both possible and probable through Him. We have already noted in our study that in the first ten Chapters of Mark's Gospel, two hundred out of the four hundred and twenty-five verses are devoted to the miraculous. If almost one-half of this material is devoted to the miracles of Jesus, we can conclude that miracles essentially convey the message of the Gospel. As stated in our introduction to the study of the New Testament, "the message of the miracles is the message of the Gospel!" Before we begin our study of the four miracles narrated in Chapters Four and Five, let us review the New Testament concept of miracles.

Many of the miracles recorded in the New Testament demonstrate Jesus to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy. The prophets proclaimed the coming of a day when God would intervene with overflowing divine mercy in the lives of people. In the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus applied these words of Isaiah to himself:

> ***The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God, to comfort all who mourn. (Is. 61:1-2)***

Jesus told the people of Nazareth, *"Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk. 4:21)*

Not only did the miracles of Jesus fulfill scriptural prophecy, but in keeping with the spirit of the Old Testament, many of them were symbolic. As the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had done, Jesus also performed symbolic actions to illustrate His ministry – as in the multiplication of the loaves and fishes and the miraculous catch of fish.

The Evangelist pictures Jesus as a dynamo of Divine power that has entered into the human race. Fundamental to understanding the miracles of Jesus is the understanding of the reality of St. John's words: *"The whole world is under the Evil One." (1Jn. 5:19)* The Gospel presents a picture of man and nature subjected to evil control. There was dominion of Satan over men and nature that results in bondage. St. Paul teaches us that Satan had established a certain dominion over all creation and it awaited, in agony, its deliverance. The coming of Jesus into the world brought about a confrontation between the power of God and the power of darkness. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God confronts the Kingdom of Darkness. The miracles of Jesus were connected with the coming of the Kingdom and caused the Kingdom to come. Satan has dominion and would not yield it to God without a fight. In the public ministry of Jesus, the two Kingdoms were pitted against each other. The miracles of Jesus were weapons to overcome Satan and his reign. The coming of God's Kingdom would restore order to man and nature.

In the second century, the essential message of the miracles was obscured. The miracles in the Gospel were used to defend the divinity of Jesus and the divine origin of the Church. There is no question that the miracles worked by Jesus caused people to wonder, admire and believe in Him. Nevertheless, Jesus refused to perform miracles solely to prove Himself. He foretold that false prophets would come working miracles and deceive the elect. *(Mk. 13:22)*

In later church life, miracles became testimonies for the sanctity of the miracle workers. Introducing the sanctity of miracle workers into the

ministry of miracles only confused the message of miracles. The true message of miracles performed by Jesus is that the Kingdom of God has come in Jesus and the Kingdom of Darkness will be destroyed. The Scriptures tell us that the great struggle at the end of time will shake not only the souls of men but the very sun and stars. *(Mk. 13:24-26)*

STORM AT SEA

The first miracle we study today is an excellent example of Jesus meeting the power of Satan in nature. The story no doubt comes from the memoirs of Simon Peter. Jesus had spent a long day teaching the people by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. There had been such a crowd that he taught from a boat put out a little from the shore. Most probably the boat belonged to Simon Peter. As evening drew near, Jesus said to the Twelve, *"Let us cross over to the farther shore."* It was about a six-mile journey across the water. Jesus withdrew from the crowd with his disciples. Some other boats decided to accompany them. Jesus seated himself in the stern of the boat to rest from the toil of the day. He soon fell asleep. As they set out, it was a beautiful evening and the sea was calm. Suddenly, the weather changed drastically – the wind became hurricane force, whipping the sea into a violent storm. Because of the geographical location of the Sea of Galilee, sudden storms are not unusual. [There are many instances of this same effect – recently a tour group crossing the Sea of Galilee left the shore at Capernaum on a sunny day with the sea like glass. Within fifteen minutes, there arose such a bad storm the captain ordered all passengers below for fear the boat would capsize. Surely the passengers could not help but recall the night the Apostles battled their storm in a much frailer craft.]

The situation of those in the boat became serious. This storm was unusual – the waves pounded across the bow drenching the occupants – the boat began to take on water. The Apostles faced death; terror seized them. All during this time, Jesus slept like a baby bird under its mother's wing. Jesus' behavior disturbed the Apostles – death stared them in the face and Jesus' apparent indifference to their fate irritated them. Overcome with tension and fear, they awakened Jesus with the rebuke, *"Teacher, does it not matter to you that we are going to drown?" (Mk. 4:38)*

Jesus awoke and confronted the angry sea as if an evil force possessed it. He rebuked the wind (wind being the same word for spirit) and He said to the sea, *"Silence! Be muzzled!"* At His words, the wind ceased and the sea grew calm. And a different fear seized the hearts of the disciples, a deep religious feeling of awe – they sensed a Presence beyond their ability to express. They could only whisper to each other, *"Who can this be that the wind and the sea obey Him?" (Mk. 4:41)* In the quiet hours that followed they must have sought the answer to their own question. They had relived the verses of an ancient hymn of Scripture:

> *They who sailed the sea in ships, trading on the deep waters, these saw the works of the Lord and His wonders in the abyss. His command raised up a storm wind which tossed its waves on high. They mounted up to heaven; they sank to the depths; their hearts melted away in their plight. They reeled and staggered like drunken men, and all their skill was swallowed up. They cried to the Lord in their distress; from their straits He rescued them. He hushed the storm to a gentle breeze... and He brought them to their desired haven. Let them give thanks to the Lord for His kindness and His wondrous deeds to the children of men. (Ps. 107:23-31)*

The Scriptures make it clear that the ability to control the sea and subdue its storms displays divine power:

> *O Lord, God of Hosts, who is like You? Mighty are You, 0 Lord, and your faithfulness surrounds You. You rule over the surging of the sea; you still the swelling of its waves. (Ps. 89:9-10)*

> *Was it not You who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, Who made the depths of the sea into a way for the redeemed to pass over? (Is. 51:10)*

The image of a storm or overwhelming waters is a frequent metaphor in the Scriptures for evil forces afflicting the virtuous from which only God can

deliver them. We hear their prayer in Psalm 69:

> *Save me, 0 God, for the waters threaten my life.... I have reached the watery depths; the flood overwhelms me.... But I pray to You, 0 Lord,... Let not the floodwaters overwhelm me, nor the abyss swallow me up. (Ps. 69:2-3,14,16)*

According to the Scriptures, when a man has complete confidence in God, he does not doubt God's power to save him, even in the most terrible storm. We read:

> *Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. (Is. 43:1-2)*

> *God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress. Therefore, we fear not, though the earth be shaken and the mountains plunge into the depths of the sea; Though its waters rage and foam and the mountains quake at its surging. The Lord of hosts is with us. (Ps. 46:2-4)*

When we compare the behavior of Jesus on the stormy sea of Galilee against this background of Scripture, we know the answer to the question, *"Who can this be that the wind and the sea obey Him?"* The behavior of Jesus reveals the Divine Presence. It also presents the Twelve in an unfavorable light: Their fears reveal the immaturity of their faith. They did not trust in the Providential care of the Father. The holy words of the Psalmist find no echo in their hearts. Jesus very plainly expressed his disappointment in their lack of confidence and trust in God's Fatherly care and concern for them. Jesus rebuked the Twelve, *"Why are you lacking in faith?" (Mk. 4:40)* This rebuke refers to faith in God, not in the power of Jesus. The tone of the rebuke is sharp. It is the first of a series of reproaches addressed to the disciples for their lack of faith or understanding. When it comes to the essentials of religious commitment, Jesus is stern. The Lord chastises his disciples when they do not measure up to the necessary requirements for being men of God. If one did not have humility when one started following Jesus, he would

certainly grow in it if he persevered in discipleship. Jesus corrects and rebukes those He loves. He is not always nice, but He is always loving.

When Mark began his narration, he mentioned that other boats accompanied Jesus. There is no other mention of these boats. Either they were destroyed in the storm or they turned back. Only the barque of Peter carrying Jesus within it made safely to the other shore. Only this boat put out to sea at the command of Jesus. In the other boats, it was the will of men to follow Jesus. Mark retells the experience in order to help his own Christian Community in Rome. They began their Christian journey in calm and joy. But the calm was gone; the joy had been changed into terror. The winds of cruel persecution, inaugurated by Satan through his instrument Nero, were sweeping through the Christian Community. Christians hid in terror for their lives as they witnessed, one-by-one, their brothers and sisters in the Lord, dying upon crosses or dragged into a Roman arena to play starring roles in a bloody circus. Where was God's protective love for them? Doesn't Jesus have any concern for the sufferings of His brothers and sisters? The Jews of old used to say when they were being badly afflicted that their Lord had gone to sleep on them. They used to shout in their prayers, *"Awake 0 Lord! Rise from Slumber! Save your people!"* Mark seeks to encourage our faith by making us realize that Jesus is with us and we must have faith and courage in our sufferings and, above all, we must not fear. We will arrive safely on the other side. *"Do not be afraid of those who can kill only the body and then can do nothing more to you!" (Lk. 12:4)* Jesus demands the confidence of Job from His disciples.

MAD MAN OF GERASA

We see in the journey of Jesus and the Twelve, the future missionary journeys to be undertaken by the Church. If the task is in response to the Lord's command, Jesus goes with them. He is in their midst. They will have good days, but they must expect to hit troubled waters. The winds will blow – Satan will oppose the work inflicting hardship, trials, and sufferings upon the disciples. They may be faced with overwhelming forces of evil (as are many of our brothers and sisters today in countries where it is a silent crime to be a Christian), but no matter how great the problem, Jesus forbids fear.

He tells His disciples, *"But take courage! I have overcome the world!" (Jn. 16:33)* The wind and the sea and evil demons do obey Him. In the early days of the Cenacle, when the winds of persecution threatened to destroy all the work accomplished by Father Judge, he calmly went about his task with *"If it is not of God, let it perish! If it is of God, the work will go on!"*

The journey for Jesus and the Twelve ended in an area believed to be Gerasa, near Magdala, on the Eastern shore, where cliffs and ancient tombs can still be seen. It was primarily a pagan area as evident from the herds of swine in the territory. The Book of Leviticus forbade the eating of the meat of pigs and even the touching of their dead bodies. *(Lev. 11:7)* On their arrival, the group was immediately met by a man who lived in the nearby tombs. According to the description the man was more than mad – he was possessed. He was a most frightful character. He had a history of having been chained and handcuffed by men, but he had pulled the chains apart and smashed his bonds. We are told that no man had been strong enough to handle this man. Totally alienated from society and from himself, he spent his tormented and restless days and nights with the dead, beating his body with stones and filling the air with his screams of pain. The man was pitifully, but dangerously insane. He caught sight of Jesus in the distance. Even from afar he experienced the strange power of Jesus over him. This totally deranged and dangerous character ran toward Jesus and the disciples. Jesus stood on the shore quietly praying for the man, *"Unclean spirit, come out of the man!" (Mk. 5:8)* He fell down before Jesus, as in obeisance, and shrieked in a terrifying voice, *"Why meddle with me, Jesus, Son of God Most High."* Evidently a struggle – a battle between Jesus and this unseen power occurred. The evil spirit sought to gain control over Jesus by the use of His name and by the use of a Jewish formula or exorcism. He sought to drive Jesus away with his own weapons. *"I implore you in God's name, do not torture me!" (Mk. 5:7)* Indeed, this poor man had been tortured by both demons and men. Jesus demonstrated His great compassion for him and moved to free him. *"What is your name?"* Jesus asked him. *"Legion,"* expressed the inner turmoil of a man torn apart by numerous uncoordinated impulses and evil forces – no moral unity of will or personality existed to make him one person – he was an aggregate of many chaotic powers and forces. To know the name of a person meant to know the very heart of a

person "what makes them tick." Such knowledge does give one power over the person. Jesus sought this power in order to heal him.

Apparently, the demons were afraid of being prematurely condemned to the torment, which was no doubt to be their ultimate fate on the Day of Judgment. The demons admitted defeat to Jesus, but sought to establish their terms for departure.

> *"He pleaded hard with Jesus not to drive them away from that neighborhood." (It is believed that demons have special places and areas they are loathe to abandon.)*
>
> *It happened that a large herd of swine was feeding there on the slope of the mountain. "Send us into the swine," they begged him. "Let us enter them." (Mk. 5:10-13)*

He gave the word, and with it the unclean beasts and unclean demons were spiritually akin – they belonged to each other. Certainly pigs were a more appropriate habitation for demons than a man made in the image of God. It was common at the time of an exorcism for the departing spirit to give some visible and often destructive sign of their departure. When the spirits entered into the swine, we read: *"The herd of about two thousand went rushing down the bluff into the lake, where they began to drown." (Mk. 5:13)* The demons, by destroying the pigs, displayed the destructive dynamism of diabolic forces.

The miracle was well testified to and witnessed. *"The swineherds ran off and brought the news to field and village, and the people came to see what had happened."* They saw their fellow countryman now clothed and perfectly sane sitting with Jesus.

They heard the report of what had occurred. They saw the good Jesus had brought to this poor man, but they also foresaw the danger Jesus could become to their economy and way of life. What had happened to the swine convinced them that Jesus was a public danger. They had their priorities. The loss of their precious pigs meant more to them than the cure of the man.

"Before long they were begging Him to go away from the district." (Mk. 5:17) With this attitude prevailing among the people, no useful purpose would be served by Jesus remaining and so the Lord complied with their wishes. Indeed, they lost more than they gained with His departure. *"As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed was pressing to accompany him."* Perhaps Jesus was the only human being who had ever encountered him with a loving concern and now he responded with a devoted love for Jesus. Jesus refused to permit him to accompany Him. The answer to this man's prayer was *"No!"* If he loved Jesus, he must obey Him. Jesus had a work for the man – not what the man wanted, but what Jesus wanted – he was to be a missionary – a witness in the dark land of Decapolis and to prepare people, so that when Jesus returns again, they would be more willing to give up their pigs and let Him remain with them. Jesus told him, *"Go home to your family and make it clear to them how much the Lord in his mercy has done for you."* Jesus told him to go home and make it clear how much God had done for him but, instead, the man went off and began to proclaim throughout the Ten Cities that stretched from Damascus to the Arabian Desert what Jesus had done for him. We see in this the fullness of faith that the man had come to in Jesus. *"They were all amazed at what they heard."* Luke says the man became a preacher.

The point of the miracle is clear when Jesus told the man to proclaim God and the man proclaimed Jesus. This man who then proclaimed Jesus was a man *"no one had proved strong enough to tame." (Mk. 5:4)* Indeed, no man was strong enough to tame him!

The miracle was intended to enlighten and encourage later Christian missionaries who would one day be sent to pagan lands and people. They must be aware of the conditions that they would face. The man possessed by "Legion" represents the peoples and lands other Christians would encounter. They also would be possessed by Legions. No matter how entrenched and powerful the evil, missionaries have the power in Jesus' name to overcome and conquer these evil forces and bring the inhabitants to perfect sanity and peace of God. Not all men would accept His missionaries' gift because of the demands it would make on their lives. Jesus encourages His disciples to leave these men to Heaven and go instead to another area. They must never forget

Jesus' words to His disciples, *"I send you out like lambs among wolves." (Lk. 10:3)*

We see a good example of this very thing in the missionary activity of St. Paul in the city of Ephesus. So many people turned to Christ in Ephesus that Demetrius, a silversmith who made his living carving images of the pagan goddess, saw his livelihood threatened by Christianity. He stirred up the people against Paul and forced Paul to leave Ephesus. *(Act. 19:23f)* Later, we see Paul writing about another similar instance, *"Alexander the coppersmith did me a great deal of harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds." (2Tim. 4:14)*

The man of Gerasa was beyond the help of society – beyond helping himself. He lived in a veritable Hell. Only Jesus could help him. Jesus not only helped him, but He gave him a new life filled with grace and dignity. This man certainly symbolizes many helpless victims in our own society enslaved by drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, etc. They too, cling to their personal demons, because they cannot imagine life without them. They are imprisoned in their lives and their Hell. Only the Gentle Savior can save them.

Many men and women have only to look into their own lives and behold the alienation of their own souls – the countless uncontrollable urges and impulses that fragment their lives and personalities. If Jesus should ask, "what is your name?" how many would have to answer, "Legion is my name!" Will they ever be fully clothed and perfectly sane? Only the power of Jesus can free the souls from destructive and diverse demons.

Where Jesus is not wanted – whatever be the reason – He respects the freedom of man; He withdraws, but doesn't give up. He still sends His ambassadors – His messengers – hoping for a change of heart – an openness to His Friendship.

TOUCH OF FAITH

Jesus returned with His disciples to the West side of the sea and the crowds welcomed Him. A man named Jairus, one of the officials of the synagogue, came seeking Jesus. Jairus' little daughter was critically ill. The man had no thought at this time except for the welfare of his child. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and with an earnest prayer, *"My little daughter is critically ill. Please come and lay your hands on her so that she may get well and live." (Mk. 4:23)* Jairus had faith in Jesus as a healer. It was customary for healers to lay hands upon the sick as a means for healing an affliction. Even where the faith is not adequate, Jesus does not turn his back when human needs are presented to Him – even if the petitioner has only the faith of a mustard seed. Jesus went with Jairus to his home. A large crowd followed Jesus and Jairus.

In this multitude, stood one lone woman – a poor woman, lost in a sea of humanity. She peered anxiously toward Jesus; she was a deeply troubled woman. For over twelve years, she had suffered from continuous hemorrhage.

> ***She had received treatment at the hands of doctors of every sort and exhausted her savings in the process, yet she got no relief; on the contrary, she only grew worse. (Mk. 5:26)***

Her particular affliction compounded her sufferings. Such a disease made her ritually impure – anything she touched, or anyone who touched her, became ritually impure. She could not participate in public worship, nor could anyone who touched her, unless they ritually purified themselves in a manner prescribed by the Law. For twelve years, she had been socially and spiritually alienated from society. Only God knows the point of despair and desperation she had reached. Suddenly, a little glimmer of light broke in her dark world. She heard about Jesus of Nazareth. What she heard gave her hope and courage. He was before her, but He was about to depart. She knew she must act quickly. With desperation, she pushed through the crowd, for a mustard seed of faith had been enkindled:

> *"If," she thought, "I can touch but the hem of His garment, I shall get well." Secretly and fleetingly, her hand touched His tunic – as a seagull touches the tip of a wave in flight. Her body shook as if she had touched an electrical current – the feeling that she was cured of her affliction ran through her whole body. (Mk. 5:29)*

She stood still as the crowd moved on, secretly rejoicing in her great gift. She intended to silently and quickly go as she had come and no one but she would know her hidden cure and her secret 'sin.' Suddenly, Jesus stopped and quickly turned around. He looked intently at the faces staring at Him. *"He was conscious at once that healing power had gone out from Him." (Mk. 5:30)* He began to inquire, *"Who touched my clothing?"* A little vexed and irritated by the delay and the pushing crowds, His disciples replied,

> *"You can see how this crowd hems you in, yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" Despite this, He kept looking around to see the woman who had done it. (Mk. 5:31-32)*

She stood there, paralyzed with fear at becoming the center of so much unwelcome attention. She, a woman ritually impure, had pushed her way through the crowd – only God knew how many people she had touched – it was bad enough that she had ritually contaminated everyone she touched but, she had also touched the Holy Rabbi! She began to tremble all over and falling at Jesus' feet her story flowed out for all to hear. Her faith had made her His disciple and she could not hide her light: *"In the same way, your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your Heavenly Father." (Mat. 5:16)* Most tenderly, Jesus addressed her, *"Daughter, it is your faith that has cured you. Go in peace and be free of this illness." (Mk. 5:34)* Indeed, His eye is upon the sparrow. When the eye of the sparrow is upon the Lord, anything can be in the life of a sparrow. Many men touched Jesus, but her touch made a difference: she reached out and touched Him in hope and faith – she touched with the touch that heals. Tradition relates (this may be found recorded in an early Christian work called the Acts of Pontius Pilate) that the woman was called Veronica. It was she who reached out later from another crowd and touched

her veil to His bleeding face as He journeyed to Calvary and death.Spiritual power does indeed flow into the material and physical world. Both Jesus and Veronica experienced a physical experience as the great spiritual power within Jesus changed into a physically healing energy. The Touch of Faith served as the transformer and the conduit of Divine power into a physical-like energy and transmitted its healing force into the sick body. This power of Jesus lives on in the Christian Community. The Acts of the Apostles clearly reveal this. We read in Acts 5:

> *Through the hands of the apostles, many signs and wonders occurred among the people.... The people carried the sick into the street and laid them on cots and mattresses, so that when Peter passed by at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them. Crowds from the towns around Jerusalem would gather, too, bringing their sick and those who were troubled by unclean spirits, all of whom were cured. (Acts. 5:12,15-16)*

It is said that people touched handkerchiefs to Peter and carried them to be placed on the sick and they were cured.

It was believed that the clothing of a person and his very shadow were extensions of himself. People could be healed by Jesus if only His shadow fell upon them or they touched the hem of His garment.

What was Peter? What is any human being in comparison with Jesus of Nazareth? And yet, people were healed through Peter as through Jesus. We know the reason: Jesus lives on in His disciples. We are not all alike. Some of us may never be more than a shadow of Jesus. Others of us can be no more than the hem of His garment, dirtied as it drags itself through this world. Of itself, it is nothing – no more than a dirty cloth – but, if that cloth be part of His garment – it can be a source of healing power in this world. May we always have the grace, at least, to be the Hem of His Garment!

Desperate men and women who have come to the end of their resources – whatever they may be – must still know that there is cause for hope. God's

eye is still upon the sparrow – the man or woman lost in the sea of humanity – if they can but turn their eyes upon Him and touch His garment in living faith, in prayer, their secret sins and afflictions can be healed. They, too, may live in peace with no fear of relapse.

DAUGHTER OF JAIRUS

Veronica's delaying of Jesus had served a divine purpose:

> *He had not finished speaking when people from the official's house arrived saying, "Your daughter is dead. Why bother the Teacher further?" (Mk. 5:35)*

In other words, "It is too late for Him to help your daughter – no one can do anything for her now – save God!" Her life had ended. Jesus sensed the sinking despair within the heart of Jairus. Jesus then summoned Jairus to a higher plane of faith; *"Fear is useless. What is needed is trust." (Mk. 5:36)* In other words, "You have faith in God – have faith in me – I am the Resurrection and the Life!"

Long before Franklin Roosevelt made it famous in this country, Cicero said to the Romans, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!" Truly, fear makes spiritual cowards of us all and we defeat ourselves. Jesus stresses that in our relationship with God, fear not only cannot achieve anything, but impedes what can be. Fear turns us into spiritual clams and oysters, which tightly close up so nothing can enter into us. Fear projects into God our own limitations. It brings God down to our size. It robs us of hope. As St. James expressed: *"You do not obtain because you do not ask." (James 4:2)* Fear is but a child of unbelief. It reveals that we do not truly believe that God is a Father who loves and has care for us. *"What is needed is trust,"* says Jesus of Nazareth. Do not the Scriptures confirm, over and over, that no one who has truly hoped in God has ever been disappointed?

Jesus encouraged Jairus to ignore the messengers of death and trust Him. At this point, Jesus did not permit the crowd to follow Him. Apparently, their faith was not adequate to do so. He allowed only Peter, James and John to

accompany Him with Jairus. As they approached the house, they heard the sounds of death: *"people wailing and crying loudly on all sides."* This utter confusion and sorrow are the effects of death – death where there is no hope of life. To weep for the dead because of our loss is human and natural, and to a point, good, but to weep for the dead in Christ for their loss of life, is not Christian – it truly expresses disbelief.

Jesus entered the house of Jairus and said to the mourners, *"Why do you make this din with your wailing? The child is not dead. She is asleep."* ["Asleep" is an early Christian expression for Christian death. It is a death with a small 'd' which looks forward to an awakening. It is not the Death by which the pagan means eternal sleep.] *"At this they began to ridicule Him. Then he put them all out." (Mk. 5:39-40)* Jesus separates Himself from such disbelieving people. This is the fate of all those who refuse to believe in Jesus.

The unbelievers could not believe that death was not final – in their minds, resurrection from the dead was a ridiculous idea. When Paul preached in Athens, the Athenians listened to him until he mentioned the doctrine of bodily resurrection. We read in Acts: *"When they heard about the raising of the dead, some sneered, while others said, 'We must hear you on this topic some other time.'" They might hear about it at some other time, but not from Paul. The Acts record, "At that point, Paul left them." For good! (Acts 17:32-33)* Paul was not interested in idle curiosity. The only thing to do in the face of deliberate disbelief is separate yourself from it.

When Jesus was alone with his disciples and the parents of the child, He took the hand of the dead child.

> ***He said to her, "Talitha koum," which means 'Little girl, get up.' The girl, a child of twelve, stood up immediately and began to walk around. At this, the family's astonishment knew no bounds.***
>
> ***(Mk. 5:41-42)***

They had witnessed a resurrection from the dead!

The zenith of Jesus' power and victory over Satan is displayed in this miracle. The most powerful effect of Satan was undone by Jesus when Jesus restored life to the dead. The Stronger One is victorious. Paul sings of this victory when he exclaims, *"0 Death, where is your sting? 0 Death, where is your victory?"* Miracle by miracle, Mark has revealed the great power manifested in Jesus. The Kingdom has come and Jesus truly destroys the kingdom of Darkness.

Mark presents this resurrection of the little girl for the contemplation of the Roman Community. No doubt many were so lost in their sorrow over martyred children and friends, that they displayed a disbelief in a fundamental Christian Truth: Men and women having died in faithful union with Jesus Christ are at peace with the Lord. Their bodies sleep awaiting a resurrection. One day, Jesus will call them as He did this child and they too will once again *"stand up and begin to walk around."* The Christian Community should rejoice that they have run the race, kept the faith and won the crown. One fine day they will all banquet together again in the Kingdom with the Lord.

The last line of this narrative indicates how quickly Jesus moved from the supernatural to the natural. How truly Jesus is a man and a most loving man. Jesus reminded the parents that, *"She will need something to eat!"* Even the child's mother, it has been said, was not as motherly as Jesus!

Mark has demonstrated that the power of Jesus goes beyond death, it brings us eternal life!

From the Acts of the Apostles and the history of the Church, we know the healing ministry of Jesus continued in the Christian Community. Peter and Paul both worked healing miracles. Healing is a serious ministry demanding time and love. Apparently, few are called to this ministry or perhaps, truer still, few are willing to prepare themselves for this ministry.

In the miracles enumerated in this study, we have witnessed a variety of marvelous works and a variety of healing methods. By a single command,

Jesus ceased the storming of the sea. The mad man of Gerasa demanded much more than a prayer for exorcism. Jesus entered into dialogue with the man to determine the exact nature of the disturbance. A case history of the man is reported in the Gospel. It was not a simple task, even for Jesus, to bring this man from madness to sanity. The healing of Veronica occurred through a psychological preparation within Veronica herself – a leap of faith on her part and an actual physical contact with Jesus that resulted in a healing energy being transmitted from the body of Jesus into the body of Veronica. The final miracle actually imparted life to a dead child. Jesus took her hand and imparted life to her through His own Life. This miracle symbolizes Jesus' sharing His eternal life with His disciples. When such miracles as this occur in the Scriptures, as in the case with Elisha and Paul, the healer imparts the very life or breath in their own body into the body of the dead person – a real mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In other words, they give their life to the other. In truth, Jesus does this for us. He truly shares His eternal life with us by breathing into our dead spirits His own Holy Spirit. In order that we could live spiritually, Jesus had to die physically.

The prayer of the Christian Community – or intercessory prayer – is a very ancient practice in the Church. We are instructed in the Epistle of St. James:

> ***Is there anyone sick among you? He should ask for the presbyters of the church. They in turn are to pray over him.... This prayer uttered in faith will reclaim the one who is ill, and the Lord will restore him to health... pray for one another, that you may find healing. (Jam. 5:14-16)***

We are encouraged to pray "the prayer of faith." Experience proves this means more than just believing people praying for someone to be healed. From our Lord's behavior and the accounts in the Gospel, there are apparently laws and conditions that apply to healing through prayer. As in the case of Veronica, normally there must be an openness to be healed. Experience has proven it is easier to heal children than adults. Adults have built-in opposition to healing – adults often have to overcome prejudices, preconceived ideas, doubts, fears, inhibitions. Obviously, the people who

pray for the healing of another ought to have love for the afflicted person. To love someone, one must know them. That is why it is important to belong to a Christian Community in some intimate way. The concerted effort of a community in prayer for one of its afflicted members is very powerful. Firm attention must be given in prayer for healing – those who make intercession for healing must really concentrate on what they are doing. They need to visualize the person being healed through their prayer. As indicated by St. James, whenever possible they should be present with the sick person, placing their hands upon the sick person, seeking to permit God's healing energy to flow through the Christian Body into that of the sick person.

These things mentioned above are some of the characteristics of the prayer of faith. We are only beginning to relearn how to pray for the sick. As we understand it now, not all illnesses are cured by prayer. Prayer is only one way of cooperating with God to bring health to men. Prayer is an essential ingredient for the sick with faith, love and confidence – always knowing that we help them. The final outcome is not in our hands. St. James tells us that the *"Lord shall raise him up."* It may be the will of God to raise the sick person up to Himself. What could be better than to die and be with the Lord if that be His Holy Will? That is the Christian Success Story!

CHAPTER 8

PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

REJECTION OF JESUS

In Chapter Six, St. Mark relates the return of Jesus to His hometown of Nazareth. The trip was a disaster. Here we read:

> ***He departed from there and returned to His own part of the country followed by His disciples. When the Sabbath came He began to teach in the synagogue in a way that kept His large audience amazed. They said, "Where did He get all this? What kind of wisdom is He endowed with? How is it that such miraculous deeds are accomplished by His hands? Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, a brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters our neighbors here?" (As we have already noted previously, the brethren of the Lord were either the cousins of Jesus or children of Joseph by a previous marriage. In Chapter 15:40, James and Joses are said to be sons of another Mary. This woman is probably to be identified with Mary, the wife of Clopas, kinswoman of Jesus' mother, who stood with her at the Cross.) They found Him too much for them. Jesus' response to all this was, "No Prophet is without honor except in his native place, among his own kindred, and in his own house." (Mk. 6:1-4)***

St. Luke's account of the event relates that the brief sermon given by Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth had a total effect upon the audience:

> ***At these words the whole audience in the synagogue was filled with indignation. They rose up and expelled Him from the town, leading Him to the brow of the hill on which it was built and intending to hurl Him over the edge. But He went straight through their midst and walked away. (Lk. 4:28-30)***

What occurred in Nazareth had a profound significance for Mark. Nazareth symbolizes Israel. Here is told the mystery of Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. The mystery of why the Jews rejected Jesus and the Gentiles so eagerly accepted Him deeply perplexed the early Church. The Church was pressed to explain how Jesus could be the Messiah of Israel and yet be rejected by the majority of Jews. St. Paul *(in Romans Chapter 9-11)* best expresses the early Church's attitude toward this problem and its answer to the haunting question: "Why did the Jews fail to recognize their Messiah?"

How this terrible reality troubled Paul:

> ***There is a great grief and constant pain in my heart. Indeed, I could even wish to be separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen the Israelites. Theirs were the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law-giving, the worship, and the promise; theirs were the patriarchs and from them came the Messiah. (Rom. 9:1-5)***

Paul came to see this rejection of Jesus as part of the mysterious plan of God. A plan foretold in the Scriptures. Paul relates:

> ***Not all Israelites are true Israelites – Isaiah cries out, referring to Israel, "Though the number of the Israelites should be as the sands of the sea, only the remnant will be saved.... Unless the Lord of Hosts had left us a remnant, we should have become as Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah." (Is. 10:22, Rm. 9:27-29)***
>
> ***Do you not know what Scripture says about Elijah, how he pleaded with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have torn down your altars; I alone am left and they are seeking my life." How does God answer him? "I have left for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." Just so, in the present time there is a remnant chosen by the Grace of God. But, if the choice is by Grace, it is not because of their works – otherwise Grace would not be Grace. What then are we to say? Just this: Israel***

did not obtain what she was seeking, but those who were chosen did. The rest became blind. (Rm. 11:2-7)

How then shall we put this? That the Gentiles, who were not seeking justice, attained it – the justice which comes from faith – while Israel, seeking a law from which justice would come, did not arrive at the law? And why did it not? Because justice comes from faith, not from works. They stumbled the stumbling stone, as Scripture says, "Behold, I am placing in Zion a stone to make men stumble and a rock to make them fall; but he who believes in Him will not be put to shame." (Rm. 9:30-33, Is. 28:16)

Brothers, my heart's desire, my prayer to God for the Israelites, is that they may be saved. Indeed, I can testify that they are zealous for God though their zeal is unenlightened. Unaware of God's justice and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the justice of God. Christ is the end of the law. Through Him, justice comes to everyone who believes. (Rm. 10:1-4)

Brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery lest you be conceited: blindness has come upon part of Israel until the full number of Gentiles enter in, and then all Israel will be saved. As Scripture says, "Out of Zion will come the deliverer who shall remove all impiety from Jacob; and this is the Covenant I will make with them when I take away their sins…"

Just as you were once disobedient to God and now have received mercy through their disobedience, so they have become disobedient – since God wished to show you mercy – that they too may receive mercy. God has imprisoned all in disobedience that He might have mercy on all. (Rm. 11:25-32)

Justice is the virtue by which one gives to each person his due. Justice demands that God receive, from sinful humanity, infinite reparation and atonement for sins. Jesus is our Justice – He is our Justification before God.

He gives to God what is due to God from mankind. Jesus is Divine repentance and reparation. God will accept nothing other than the justice offered through Jesus. Only in Jesus is adequate atonement and reparation possible. For this reason, no man can come to God except through Jesus. Outside of Jesus there can be no salvation. The life of Jesus, culminating with the shedding of His Blood on the Cross, completed the demands of Divine Justice. His death opened the door for the salvation of all mankind. Jesus is the Savior of the World. This is why men must believe in Jesus. They must know what Jesus has done for them and they must accept the work done in His name. Men must see the inadequacy and futility of their own lives and works as means for satisfying Divine Justice. When we realize that Jesus is our Divine Justice, we are overwhelmed by the Infinite Mercy of Divine Justice. God's Justice is all Merciful!

The Messiah came not to satisfy men, but to satisfy God. Jesus came not to satisfy men, but to save them. Because of the infinite satisfaction Jesus gave to God, He saved us from damnation. Many men of Israel could not see this. Their pride led them to put faith in the works of Israel itself as fulfillment of Divine Justice. As Israel observed the Law, Israel was saved. Paul saw Jesus as the end of the Law – the fulfillment of the Law. Therefore, only through acceptance of Jesus could Israel fulfill the Law and find Salvation. Since Israel failed to see its need for Salvation through Jesus, it rejected Jesus. By so doing, Israel defied the Will of God. As Paul mentioned, *"God has imprisoned all in disobedience."* Their sin will one day convince them of their need for deliverance and salvation; the gates of Divine Mercy will be open to them through Jesus Christ.

When Paul contemplated these great mysteries, he only exclaimed, *"How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How inscrutable His judgments, how unsearchable His ways!" (Rm. 11:33 – Ps. 139:6-17)*

Mark sees no basis for the rejection of Jesus other than the willful blindness and prejudice of men. Even though they were confronted by the wisdom and the power of Jesus, they were unable to rise above the evidence of His being a tradesman and a man of lowly birth. Earlier, Mark indicates the rejection of Jesus by His own kin. They judged Jesus by what He had in

common with them – His ordinariness became a stumbling block for their faith in Him. Mark speaks of men taking *"offense"* at Jesus. The Greek word means to be scandalized by Him. In other words, they became tripped-up, trapped by what they saw. The humility and lowliness of the Messiah scandalizes the proud of heart. Such persons are tripped-up because of His humility and their pride. Satan uses the humility of Jesus as a snare, a stumbling stone for the proud. Certainly it was pride saying to them, "Can this carpenter, this Son of Mary, be the Messiah of Israel?" They heard the wisdom, they saw the wonders, but they did not want to believe. This led to a refusal to believe. They clung to their traditional dreams and fantasies – despite evidence to the contrary.

By relating this episode, Mark intends to show the true character and the superficiality of Israel's rejection of Jesus. The rejection began early in the ministry of Jesus and culminated with a death that only confirmed them in their error. Jesus' death on the Cross was the ultimate stumbling block to belief in Him. His death on the Cross revealed Him to be a man cursed by God. It is written in the Book of Deuteronomy:

> ***If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his corpse hung on a tree, it shall not remain on the tree overnight. You shall bury it the same day; otherwise, since God's curse rests on him who hangs on a tree, you will defile the land which the Lord, Your God, is giving you as an inheritance. (Deut. 21:22-23)***

If a man cannot see dignity, worth and Godliness in the common man, he too would be scandalized at the idea of a carpenter being the Messiah – not to mention being the Son of God. The Incarnation warns us we must see the dignity, the worth, the Godliness of the common man. Jesus warned us to stop judging by appearances, but rather to make honest judgments. We often judge a man by his wealth, his power, his social position – we judge by what he materially possesses – what physically he presents – rather than by what he is. When we fall in this trap, we are the type that God scandalizes. Without even knowing it, we then reject God because He does not meet our standards for acceptance and esteem. St. James teaches us: *"My brothers, your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not allow of favoritism."*

(James 2:1) **Jesus warns what we do to the least of His is considered done to Himself.**

[About seven years ago, at a meeting on the First Sunday of Advent, there was a discussion of the Second Coming of Christ and that night. Father had a dream. He reported: "I was in a room in which two women were present and a dead body lying on a slab. One woman said that the man would rise from the dead, for He is the Lord. I stared at the body intently and saw His eyes open and life returning to His dead body. He stood up and I was amazed to see He was such an unattractive person – neither old nor young. He was a dark man, like one I had once known in Puerto Rico, a mixture of Negro, Indian and Spanish. I thought 'this cannot be the Lord. Let me check His hands.' When I looked at His hands, I saw the old brown scars left by the nails. Then I knew He was the Lord and it did not matter His color, His lack of youth, His homeliness – these were but the externals. I was filled with joy to be in His Presence. He turned to the one woman and told her to follow in the footsteps of the other woman and she would truly come to Him. I was wondering what He would say to me. He turned and looked in my direction, but He looked at me as if I was not there – a stranger that He did not know. A terrible feeling of loss filled my spirit. I woke from the dream and immediately the significance became clear to me. I had no trouble seeing God in the young, the beautiful, the attractive – but I was failing to see Him in the common man, the lowest common denominator in humanity. In truth, Christ did not know me; I had failed to let Him know me. I understood very clearly those words spoken at the Last Judgment: *'I do not know you!' 'I assure you, as often as you neglected to do it to one of these least ones, you neglected to do it to me.' (Matt. 25:45)* I have considered this dream a great spiritual blessing. If Jesus must one day say to us, 'I do not know you!' – it will be our own fault."]

TRUE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Mark relates the sad consequence of disbelief,

> ***He could work no miracles there, apart from curing a few who were sick by laying hands on them, so much did their lack of faith distress***

Him. He made the rounds of the neighboring villages instead, and spent His time teaching. (Mk. 6:5-6)

The things Jesus longed to do for His people became impossible. Apparently, openness to the Power of Jesus is necessary for the Love of God to be demonstrated in the lives of men. Yet we see, even where disbelief generally abounds, there are individuals who can receive a Divine Blessing because their hearts are open to the Lord.

Some have attributed the inability of Jesus to work miracles to the fact that some people were not open to suggestion from Him. Normally, cooperation between the sick person and the healer is important. We certainly know very little about the healing ministry, but we do know that God made man free and God does not violate the freedom of man's will. If God wills to reconcile the world to Himself through Jesus Christ and if He wills to establish His Kingdom in the lives of men through Jesus, but men refuse to believe in Jesus and reject His power and presence in their lives – they have willfully rejected the Divine means of reconciliation and salvation. The Divine Power does not invade their dwelling. It withdraws and leaves the house desolate!

It should be noted that this lack of faith curtailed the ability of Jesus to work healing miracles. St. Cyprian noted, in the Third Century, as miraculous healing subsided, *"The sins of Christians have weakened the power of the Church."* As one historian recorded:

From the time of Cyprian onward, the Church was involved in controversy. The problems of Disciples and order... lands the Church in a battlefield. No longer has the Church all things in common.

No longer is it of one heart and mind. No longer is there the same degree of prayer – healing all but ceased.

Interestingly, one of the great Fathers of the early Church, Origin of Alexandria (185-253), wrote:

Such curative power is of itself neither good nor bad, but within the reach of Godless as well as of honest folk – the power of healing disease is no evidence of anything specially Divine.

(Contra Celsus – Bk. 3 Ch.25)

Indeed, one can heal without faith in Jesus Christ and one can have faith in Jesus without healing. Whether a person is healed or not healed throws no clear and certain light on the quality of that person's faith. Many modern-day healers place the full burden of being healed upon the faith of the person being healed. This may be neither right nor charitable. Such healers create guilt in the unhealed and their last state is worse than their first state. Certain Christians possessing an undaunted faith have remained unhealed. Others have been healed, not because they have faith, but because they have a high degree of suggestibility – they are open to suggestion.

Man should not assent to disease without doing whatever possible to gain health. It may be that man cannot yet attain the health that is God's Will for him. Adequate help may not be available. Religious efforts may not bring health, through no fault of the sick person. When this is the case, God wills that man should react in such a way as to gain spiritual good from sickness. God does bring good out of the evil we must unavoidably suffer if we trust and love Him. Physical and mental suffering have been the school of great saints. Their sufferings did not shake their faith, but their sufferings shook the Kingdom of Darkness.

Christian Faith is a magnificent gift and achievement. It is the Pearl of Great Price! It is a gift, but a gift one must fight to hold and to grow in. It is a gift increased or decreased depending upon the exercise of the Power of Faith. Suggestibility is something men have or have not. It is not our

achievement, but a condition fostered by early environment and temperament.

True Christian Faith is not merely an intellectual assent to the truths revealed by God, but rather the response of the whole man to God's revelation in and through Jesus. If it is the response of the whole man, it is

a thinking, feeling and willing response. By such a total response, man comes to a conscious, personal relationship with God. Maximum faith will only be reached when there is a maximum response and participation of these three powers in the act of faith – when thinking has penetrated into the mystery of faith as far as it can go, when feelings – particularly love and confidence – are as great as they can be and action is as courageous and dynamic as the will can achieve.

True Christian Faith can never be anti-intellectual. It certainly demands more than a faith in Santa Claus. The Christian mind must sincerely seek truth and be utterly loyal to that truth. Nothing that is true can undermine real faith in God who is the Source of all Truth. The Scriptures call the Holy Spirit the *"Spirit of Truth."* To reject truth, no matter where found or how contradictory to cherished opinions or ideas, is disloyal to the Holy Spirit, the God of Truth. Our minds are gifts from God. It is the work of the mind to discover truth. The First Commandment tells us to love the Lord thy God with thy whole mind. The true spirit of faith never encourages a mindless love or service of God. Faith indeed goes beyond human reason, but never goes contrary to right reason. When men insist upon blind faith when faced with intellectual difficulties about faith – they often "protesteth too much" as did Hamlet's mother. They often suppress serious doubts of faith.

Beneath the surface of their loud professions of faith, lies a fear that their faith would be destroyed by the power and light of a reasonable presentation. Christian faith follows to the end of the road of intellectual enlightenment – where it makes the leap of faith into the "no man's land" of Divine reality. Only the power of faith brings man to the full possession of the Divine truth available to man.

Scientific discoveries are manifestations of Divine Truth. We ought to welcome, with thanksgiving and praise, every discovery that combats, prevents or lessens human suffering and Christians ought to generously spread such knowledge. God's primary will for man is perfect health and man ought to be willing to use every device of science to regain lost or impaired health. Knowledge is a handmaid of faith!

Christian Faith ought not to be an emotionless projection of mind and will. Feelings are a vital part of human existence. Faith is greatly strengthened when we feel love, confidence and admiration for the Person who is the object of our faith. The object of our faith is the Triune God – Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We should relate to God as feeling human beings and not as cold robots. Seeing Jesus as He is presented in the Scriptures or revealed to us in the lives of great saints can do much to evoke our feelings and increase our faith. [While a nineteen-year-old sailor, the Father read about the personal relationship between Jesus and Teresa of Avila; it resulted in his conversion to Christ and his vocation.]

For healing and spiritual growth, it is important to carry a picture of Jesus in the mind, which produces feelings of confidence, trust, care and concern. It ought to be a picture that beholds the Divine love projected personally toward you. For instance, the Good Shepherd seeking you, the lost sheep; the Divine Physician attending you, His sick child; the beloved Teacher instructing you, His private pupil. It is very important for your health that you preserve an image of a Jesus who cares for you and seeks the very best for you.

The simple faith of the Gospel does not come easy. You cannot behold Jesus as the Apostles did. Jesus told them, *"Blessed are the eyes that see what you see and the ears that hear what you hear."* Today, Jesus must be seen with the eye of faith and heard with the ear of faith. What could have come in a moment by beholding the Lord must now come through study and meditation. This too may bring a great blessing and happiness: *"Blessed are they who have not seen yet believe."*

Faith must evoke the will to action. Faith without works is vain and as ineffective as a paper tiger. Faith demands an attitude of active trustfulness. Peter had to step out of the boat before he could walk on water. There was no change in the water. Abraham *"went out."* Jesus said, *"This <u>do</u> and you will live."* If fearful action so displeased the Lord, then indeed, faithful action is most pleasing to Him. Once a congregation, in the deep South, gathered to pray for much-needed rain. The minister addressed his

congregation thus: ***"Children, we have all come here to pray for rain. I have only one question to ask, 'Where are your umbrellas?'"***

Faith is the milieu – the environment – that enables God to draw near enough to man to do His work in man's life. It is the state in which God can exert His merciful love in our lives. Man must never feel that he overcomes God's reluctances by his faith, but rather man merely opens a door that enables God to enter his life.

MISSION OF THE TWELVE

When Mark mentions that Jesus continued His teaching ministry despite the unbelief, he prepares us for the next episode when Jesus sent out the Twelve Apostles. As Jesus more and more presented Himself as the Bread come down from Heaven for the life of men, the remnant of believers grew smaller. The reaction of the people made it even more important that Jesus gather to Himself those He Himself had chosen no matter how slow they would be in coming to full faith in Him. They are the remnant of Israel.

> ***Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two, giving them authority over unclean spirits. He instructed them to take nothing on the journey but a walking stick – no food, no traveling bag, not a coin in the purses in their belts. They were, however, to wear sandals. "Do not bring a second tunic," He said, and added, "Whatever house you find yourself in, stay there until you leave the locality. If any place will not receive you or hear you, shake its dust from your feet in testimony against them as you leave." With that they went off, preaching the need of repentance. They expelled many demons, anointed the sick with oil, and worked many cures.***
>
> ***(Mk. 6:7-13)***

We see the future mission of the Church in the sending of the Apostles. Jesus delayed sending them until they had spent some time in close relationship with Himself. Unlike Luke and Matthew, Mark does not have Jesus sending them to proclaim the Kingdom of God, but rather to preach repentance as had John the Baptist – a preparatory phase for the coming of

Jesus. In the mind of Mark, the Apostles were not yet ready to proclaim the Kingdom. This would come only after Pentecost.

The instruction of Jesus to His Disciples was intended to emphasize the need for total dependence upon God and the importance of an immediate response – there was a sense of urgency. They must travel light so they could travel fast. Such instructions were suitable for preaching in Palestine and described the customs among itinerant preachers of the time. As Paul was to make his way through the Gentile World, he did not follow these instructions. He would not have been able to make the progress he did if he had done so. Paul used whatever means available to spread the Gospel as quickly and as far as possible. Here we see an example between the spirit and the letter that the spiritually mature can discern.

DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Mark interrupts his narrative about Jesus and inserts a picturesque story about the arrest and death of John the Baptist. This he does for several reasons. Mark wishes to emphasize that Jesus did not perform any works without the presence of His Disciples. Jesus had called them to Himself in order that they would be witnesses of all He had done in the land of the Jews. Secondly, these instances in the life of John the Baptist serve as an example to the Apostles and future missionaries. They were to share in the mission of John the Baptist. In the Fourth Gospel, John describes this mission: *"There was a man named John sent by God, who came as a witness to testify to the light, so that through him all men might believe." (Jn. 1:6)* The Scriptures make a subtle distinction between John the Baptist and the Disciples of Jesus. We read in the Fourth Gospel that John came *"only to testify to the light, for he himself was not the light. The real light which gives light to every man was coming into the world." (Jn. 1:8)* Jesus tells His Disciples, *"You <u>are</u> the <u>light</u> of the world... your light must shine before men." (Matt. 5:14-15)* There is an obvious identification of the Disciples with Jesus. This is also being expressed when Mark relates that Jesus gave His Disciples authority over unclean spirits. The Disciples are His other Self – His alter ego. The Disciples of Jesus are not called Christians because they believed that Jesus is the Christ, but because in heart and spirit they have become

Christ. It was John's mission to proclaim Divine Truth. When this light of truth reveals the darkness of men's deeds, it evokes either repentance or reprisals. John's mission led him to death. It was the political power of the land that brought this about – stimulated by the personal hatred and cunning of one sinful woman. John was imprisoned in the fortress Machaerus, overlooking the east side of the Dead Sea and surrounded by deep ravines. Machaerus was one of the grimmest and most unassailable fortresses in the ancient world.

The dungeons, with its chains, may still be seen today where this man of the desert, this outdoor man, spent his last days on earth. When Jesus heard of John being imprisoned, there is no mention of His going even to comfort John. When John's followers went to Jesus to inquire in John's name if Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus responded only by telling them to relay to John that the Messianic prophecies were being fulfilled through His ministry. Jesus left John only his faith to strengthen and see him through his martyrdom. John went to his death with no intervention by God in this sad and evil affair. Such is God's way with the men and women of God. No doubt Mark intends this instance as an instruction to the Roman Community who, by fulfilling Jesus' command to be the Light of the World, had become the object of a state persecution. They were expected to die as men and women of faith and not to imprudently expect some Divine intervention to save them; it had not been forthcoming for John; it had not been so for Jesus. It will not be so for His Disciples and future Disciples.

John's death occurred around 30 A.D. The account given by Mark may have been the one whispered in the market place. Josepheus, the Jewish historian, relates that Herod arrested John, for he feared the power John had over the people. For Herod Antipas, it was a time of extreme political sensitivity. Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. He was not king as indicated by Mark. Herod was married to an Arabian Princess, the daughter of King Aretas. While in Rome on a visit, Herod Antipas met his niece Herodias, then married to her uncle (and Antipas' brother) Phillip. Herodias and Phillip had one daughter, Salome. Antipas and Herodias fell in love and divorced their spouses. Phillip made no objection, but the wife of Antipas fled to her father. Antipas and Herodias were married causing a

great scandal among the Jews, as such a marriage violated the Leviticus Law, *"You shall not have intercourse with your brother's wife, for that would be a disgrace to your brother."* And, *"If a man marries his brother's wife and thus disgraces his brother, they shall be childless because of this incest." (Lev. 18:16-20-21)* Herod's behavior likewise incurred the vindictive anger of King Aretas. In 36 A.D., King Aretas declared war over a border dispute and defeated Herod. The Jews, according to Josepheus, attributed this defeat to Divine punishment for the murder of John the Baptist. When Jesus stood before Herod Antipas, having been sent to Herod by Pontius Pilate, Jesus maintained a stony silence in the presence of Herod. Herod labeled Him a fool and sent Him back to Pilate. Later, Herodias' brother, Herod Agrippa, received the title of King from the Emperor Caligula. Herodias' jealousy made her urge her husband to go to Rome and seek the title of King for himself. It was their undoing. Caligula exiled Herod to Lyons in Gaul. By her own free choice, Herodias accompanied him into exile. With this, they disappeared from history. Salome, the daughter of Herodias, married her father's brother and her mother's uncle. It was a confusing affair – a marriage riddle – Salome was at the same time, the niece and grandniece of her husband. After his death (he was some thirty years older than Salome), she married her cousin Ristobulus, the son of Herod of Chalcis.

Let us now read the account of John's death given by Mark:

> ***King Herod came to hear of Jesus, for his reputation had become widespread and people were saying, "John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why such miraculous powers are at work in him." Others were saying, "He is Elijah" – still others "He is a prophet equal to any of the prophets." On hearing of Jesus, Herod exclaimed, "John, whose head I had cut off has been raised up!" Herod was the one who had ordered John arrested, chained and imprisoned on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Phillip, whom he had married. That was because John had told Herod, "It is not right for you to live with your brother's wife." Herodias harbored a grudge against him for this and wanted to kill him but was unable to do so. Herod feared John, knowing him to an upright and holy man, and kept him in custody. When he heard***

him speak, he was very much disturbed; yet he felt the attraction of his words. Herodias had her chance on a day when Herod held a birthday dinner for his court circle, military officers, and the leading men of Galilee. Herodias' own daughter came in at one point and performed a dance which delighted Herod and his guests. The king told the girl, "Ask for anything you want and I will give it to you." He went so far as to swear to her, "I will grant you whatever you ask, even to half my kingdom!" She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" The mother answered, "The head of John the Baptizer." At that, the girl hurried back to the king's presence and made her request, "I want you to give me, at once, the head of John the Baptizer on a platter." The king bitterly regretted the request; yet because of his oath and the presence of the guests, he did not want to refuse her. He promptly dispatched an executioner, ordering him to bring back the Baptizer's head. The man went and beheaded John, in the prison. He brought in the head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. Later, when his disciples heard about this, they came and carried his body away and laid it in a tomb." (Mk. 6:14-29)

RHYTHM OF CHRISTIAN LIFE

Mark picks up his narrative of Jesus with the return of the Apostles from their first missionary journey. He indicates the intimate and personal relationship existing between Jesus and his disciples when he records: *"The apostles returned to Jesus and reported to Him all that they had done and what they had taught." (Mk. 6:30)* They were like excited children relating to a loving parent the special events of an exciting weekend. With attention and interest, Jesus listened to their full report including, *"Master – even the demons are subjected to us in Your Name." (Lk. 10:17)* As a good teacher, Jesus desired them to realize the significance of their labor – it was not the 'here and now' effects that should engross them and cause such excitement. Jesus pointed to the enduring consequences of their ministry, *"Nevertheless, do not rejoice so much in the fact that the devils are subject to you as that your names are inscribed in Heaven." (Lk. 10:20)* To be a Disciple of Jesus has

infinite consequences. The Disciples received an eternal recompense for their labors. What is done in time, in the Name of Jesus, will be repaid in eternity where the rewards of labor cannot be lost.

Men are brought into discipleship not only to share in an intimate friendship with Jesus, but to also arduously work in His vineyard. People who are only interested in Jesus but not His work cannot be true Disciples of the Lord. They are not part of His intimate community, but part of the *"crowd,"* as Mark calls them. They are never hostile toward Jesus, but their attraction to Him is without depth or understanding. They came to Jesus. They bring the sick. They were excited about His teachings. They gathered around Him. They pressed around Jesus – even preventing Him from eating. They said of Him, *"He does all things well."* And, *"We never heard the like."* But, as John tells us, Jesus did not trust Himself to them. To them He did not reveal the secrets of the Kingdom. He did not enter into friendly intimacy. We should note the difference between being a friend of Jesus and being an acquaintance of Jesus. Jesus has few friends – lots of acquaintances. We cannot be a Disciple – a friend – unless we are willing to completely share in His life.

Jesus takes good care of His friends in time and in eternity. He said to the Disciples,

> ***Come by yourselves to an out-of-the-way place and rest a little. People were coming and going in great numbers, making it impossible for them to so much as eat. So Jesus and the Apostles went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place. (Mk. 6:31-32)***

There is a rhythm and a balance to Christian life. St. Benedict described the life in three words, *"Ore et Labore"* – Prayer and Work. Disciples must be careful of the heresy of action which says, "My work is my prayer." The Scriptures make it plain enough that the spiritually indolent and lazy will receive nothing but the Lord's displeasure. We are warned about burying our talents out of fear of failure – about receiving and not giving – about having responsibilities and living irresponsible lives. So many forceful teachings, coupled with our puritanical background that canonizes labor and

holds rest as suspect, could drive us into anxious activity. There is an ancient saying attributed to John the Evangelist: *"The bow always bent will break."* We note a rhythm of Christian life in Chapter Six: A Disciple does the work assigned by the Lord, he withdraws from the work to discuss the work with the Lord – he tells the Lord what he has done and taught in His Name – then, he remains silent before the Lord and listens. Jesus may tell him to withdraw to some deserted place and be alone with Him. He might even invite him to take a little boat trip or only a stroll along the seashore. Recreation is important for the Christian Disciples. A short rest enables the powers to refresh and recharge themselves. It may be easier for some to recreate if they remember the word really means, "to re-create." That is why it is important to recreate in the Lord. He alone is the Creator and the Re-Creator!

Apparently, the proposed rest for the Apostles and the Lord was wishful thinking. We read in Mark:

> ***People saw them leaving, and many got to know about it. People from all the towns hastened on foot to the place, arriving ahead of them. Upon disembarking, Jesus saw the vast crowd. (Mk. 6:33-34)***

MIRACLE OF THE LOAVES AND FISHES

Jesus taught His Disciples that the degree of their commitment to Him separated them from the crowd. It was ever important that they maintain their separate status, but the "crowd" was not to be rejected nor despised. The separation between the Disciples and the crowd was only one of degree. They were on different levels of relationship with Jesus. The Disciples were not to consider themselves as the elite or superior group. Jesus gave them the example of being a servant to the crowd. If the Apostles were entrusted with the mysteries of the Kingdom of God, it was in order that these hidden things be manifested through their lives and teachings. Jesus taught by His example what was to be their relationship with the crowd. *"He pitied them for they were like sheep without a shepherd, and He began to teach them <u>at great length.</u>" (Mk. 6:22)*

Sheep without a shepherd are bewildered; they do not know where to go to be nourished. They wander into dangerous areas and they possess no defenses against their enemies. How many human beings are lost in this world with no sense of direction to their lives? They live aimless and futile existences. They experience hunger and internal emptiness and have no awareness that it is the Bread of Life for which they long and vainly search. Obviously, if the Disciples of Jesus did not assume the responsibility of being good shepherds in this world, many men would be doomed to a desperate existence and perhaps to eternal misery. Disciples must be moved by the same pity and compassion as Jesus. Paul VI has said, *"We are all responsible for our times and our brothers!"*

One of the basic elements of love is responsibility. A loving person responds to the needs of those he loves. A Christian cannot be some Cassandra-like character who merely weeps over misfortune. Love responds to the need and assumes the burden. The Good Samaritan – the symbol of the loving Christian, did not run out to form a committee to aid unfortunate wayfarers, nor did he sit by the road and weep for the misfortune of a fellow human being. Neither did he run up and down the road shouting, "Why doesn't someone do something about this situation?" Those people who ask such questions, who do they think the Church is? They never seem to be aware of what they are really saying, "When will someone else do that which I should be doing?" We – you and I – we are the Church! As individuals, we are responsible for our time and brothers!

In the following scene, the Apostles displayed their lack of involvement and love for the crowd. Jesus did not let them escape their responsibility.

> ***It was now getting late and the Disciples came to Him with a suggestion, "This is a deserted place and it is already late. Why do you not dismiss them so that they can go to the crossroads and villages around here and buy themselves something to eat?"***

They wanted to send the sheep away to find their own shepherd – let them go pay for the help they need. The Apostles saw that the situation was more than they could handle. They had no intention of tackling the problem or

being part of the solution. It was their intention to remain aloof and to let someone else handle it. They thought that the best thing was to send the problem away. Jesus checkmated their intentions, *"You give them something to eat"* Jesus replied. At that, they said, *"Are we to go and spend two hundred days' wages for bread to feed them?"* They sought to point out the absurdity of Jesus' demand. Jesus then asked them, *"What do you have that you could give them?"* After a brief survey, they reported they had five loaves and two fishes.

> ***He told them to make the people sit down on the green grass in groups or parties. The people took their places in hundreds and fifties, neatly arranged like flowerbeds. Then, taking the five loaves and two fish, Jesus raised His eyes to Heaven, pronounced a blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the Disciples to distribute. He divided the two fish among all of them and they ate until they had their fill. They gathered up enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets, besides what remained of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. (Mk. 6:39-44)***

The Apostles did not have much to alleviate the situation, but worse was their lack of faith in Jesus. Even if one has a little, if he is willing and generous enough to put that little in the hands of Jesus, he may be surprised at the miraculous effect which that little can accomplish. How many Christians have followed this bad example of the Apostles and reasoned that since they had so little to offer, they would offer nothing? How much countless good has been left undone because Christians have refused to place their widow's mite into the hands of the Lord? When Teresa of Avila was asked how much money she had to establish a new convent, she replied, *"Two ducats."* When she was told it was an impossible situation, she replied, *"Two ducats and Teresa is nothing! Two ducats, Teresa and Jesus, that is sufficient!"*

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand took place in a desert region. It recalls to mind the story of the Exodus, when Yahweh fed His people with manna or bread from Heaven. It also recalls to mind when the prophet Elisha distributed twenty barley loaves among a hundred men so that they

all ate and had some left. ***(2Kings 4:42-44)*** **A belief existed among the Jews that the manna, having ceased to fall on the eve of Passover, would again, in the days of the Messiah, begin to fall again on Passover. The presence of green grass indicated it was early spring – the time of Passover. The miracle intended no doubt to signify that Jesus is the Messiah – the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.**

A banquet often symbolizes the messianic age at which the Messiah would preside as host to the elect. The actions of Jesus were those of a host entertaining His guests. The miracle was no doubt a prophetic miracle foretelling that Jesus was the one who would preside over that Messianic Banquet to come. Those who shared His table in His obscurity would also share in it in the time of His glory.

The early Christian readers would have noted that the actions of Jesus were precisely the same as His actions at the Last Supper. The story would have reflected their own Eucharistic worship, at which the deacons distributed, among the faithful, the loaves blessed and broken by the Celebrant. The miracle was an anticipation of the Last Supper and the Eucharist. It was a miracle to warm the hearts of believers. As God had not left the children of Israel hungry and abandoned in the desert, Jesus the Lord likewise fed His followers, pilgrimaging through the deserts of this life, the Bread of Heaven – His very Body and Blood.

As noted in the Fourth Gospel, the miracle was not lost upon the crowd. It stirred up national enthusiasm among them and they desired Jesus to assume the role of political liberator. It was their intention to force leadership upon Him. The intentions of Jesus had been misinterpreted. He immediately separated His Disciples from this worldly influence. He forced them to get in the boat and leave without Him. Mark says:

> ***He insisted that His Disciples get in the boat and precede Him to the other side toward Bethsaida, while He dismissed the crowd. When He had taken leave of them, He went off to the mountain to pray. (Mk. 6:45-46)***

The report in the Fourth Gospel carries a more dramatic impact: *"At that, Jesus realized that they would come and carry Him off to make Him king, so He fled back to the mountains alone." (Jn. 6:15)* Mark relates three instances in which Jesus went alone to pray – each time it is a moment of sorrow and disappointment for Him!

A WALK ON WATER

We read in St. Mark:

> ***As evening drew on, the boat was far out on the lake while He was alone on the land. Then, seeing them tossed about as they tried to row with the wind against them, He came walking toward them on the water; the time was between three and six in the morning. He meant to pass them by. When they saw Him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and they began to cry out. They had all seen Him and were terrified. He hastened to reassure them, "Get hold of yourselves! It is I. Do not be afraid!" He got into the boat with them and the wind died down. They were taken aback by these happenings, for they had not understood about the loaves. On the contrary, their minds were completely closed to the meaning of the events.***
>
> ***(Mk. 6:47-52)***

In this scene, Mark indicates that the Apostles had truly failed to understand the message of the miracles. They had closed minds. Their spiritual insights were no better than that of the crowd. The walking on the water clearly intended to reveal the Divinity of Jesus. When Mark writes that Jesus *"meant to pass them by"* – it recalls a holy history of memories. On Mt. Sinai, Moses saw the Glory of God passing by him. On the same mount, Elijah stood in the mouth of a cave where he was told, *"The Lord will be passing by." (1Kings 19:11, Ex. 33:21)* When the Apostles beheld this scene, they thought they were seeing a ghost – the presence of the Divine Reality escaped them. Even though they were the chosen Disciples, their spiritual condition was most serious. It led them to behave like frightened children,

rather than men who believed in the Lord. Jesus did not pass by, but entered into the troubled circumstances of the Disciples, bringing calm and peace - God of the Old Testament kept His distance from man, passed in front of man. Today, through Jesus, God enters deeply and personally into our personal lives.

No doubt Mark places this picture before the Roman Community as a reflection of their own image. In the midst of this stormy persecution, with their leaders dead, they behaved as if God had abandoned them to a terrible fate. Their behavior suggested a serious doubt in the reality of Jesus. They must need a reminder that Jesus is – *"I AM"* – Jesus lives! – and not as some ghostly phantom. He still speaks to His troubled people:

> ***Do not let your hearts be troubled. Have faith in God and faith in Me.... I am indeed going to prepare a place for you, and then I shall come back to take you with Me, that where I am you also must be. (Jn. 14:1-3-4)***
>
> ***Fear is useless. What is needed is trust. (Mk. 5:36)***
>
> ***Get hold of yourselves!... Do not be afraid! (Mk. 6:50)***

CHAPTER 9

MESSAGE TO THE GENTILES

INTRODUCTION

In a spirit of awe, St. Paul proclaimed in his epistle to the Romans, *"How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How inscrutable His judgments, how insearchable His ways!" (Rm. 11:33)* As the life of Jesus unfolded, He found Himself very much in opposition to the ways of men. More and more men rejected Him. *"They found Him too much for them."* How truly John the Evangelist expressed it by declaring Jesus to be the Judgment of God come into this world. He was the Divine Light revealing the darkness in the lives of men. As God's unsearchable ways manifested themselves as the Way of Jesus, the way of man clearly revealed itself not to be God's way. The way of man was manifested in all its error, darkness and sinfulness. Yet, Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, but to save it. *(Jn. 3:17)* Jesus is the Light of the World for the repentance of the World. John writes:

> ***The Judgment of condemnation is this: "the Light came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked. Everyone who practices evil hates the light; he does not come near it for fear his deeds will be exposed." (Jn. 3:19-20)***

Men not only hide evil from other men but even more often hide their own evil from themselves. They avoid the Light of grace cast upon the way they live because they do not want their consciences to convict them of sin. They have grown attached to sin and have no will to give it up. Rather than admit the error of their way, they deny the Light of the Way – they refuse to see their lives in the Light of Jesus' teachings or, worse still, they proclaim the Way of Jesus to be erroneous and evil. They sin against the Holy Spirit by calling light darkness and making darkness their light. Darkness becomes

the light of their world!

With the true light of the world incarnated within Jesus of Nazareth, the life of Jesus causes tension and struggle within the souls of men. Jesus disturbs the peace and tranquillity of the soul. Did He not say, *"I did not come to bring peace!"*? His life becomes a cause for repentance, or flight, or fight! Men come to love Jesus or hate Him. Those who love Him seek to draw near to Him and become as Himself. Those who hate Him either abandon Him or seek to destroy Him. They run from the light or seek to extinguish the light.

The general reaction to Jesus, painted by Mark, had been of vast crowds and great popularity. As far as Jesus with the common people is concerned, Mark leaves this scene before our minds:

> ***The crowds scurried about the adjacent area and began to bring in the sick on bedrolls to the place where they heard He was. Wherever He put in an appearance, in village, in towns, or at crossroads, they laid the sick in marketplaces and begged Him to let them touch just the tassel of His cloak. All who touched Him got well. (Mk. 6:55-56)***

Within the general picture painted by Mark, portraits of hatred and rejection frequently appear. In Chapter Three, the Pharisees plotted with the Herodians, the followers of Herod, as to how they might destroy Him. His family sought to *"take charge of Him,"* insinuating Him to be out of His mind. The Scribes defamed Him as being in league with Satan. Jesus alienated the sympathies of a large number of His followers when He refused to accept the role of political liberator. As noted in the Fourth Gospel, they abandoned Jesus after the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish. This abandonment left the way open for a growing group of enemies to confront Jesus more openly. Then the Pharisees openly challenged Him. Their sinister notes of murderous hatred grew louder.

The Pharisees were formidable enemies. As mentioned earlier, the name "Pharisee" indicated the "separate ones." No doubt they believed themselves to be the *"remnant of Israel"* – the true sons of God. The party had its beginning around 135 B.C. It was exclusive and politically powerful. Even

Herod the Great sought to keep them on his side. According to Josephus, himself a Pharisee, the party numbered about six thousand at the time of Herod. As a lay organization, they stood in opposition to the Sadducees, the priestly party.

Between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the major cause of opposition was the Law. The Sadducees held that only the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), imposed valid obligations upon the Jews. Over the years, an oral code of laws and legal prescriptions developed alongside the written law. This oral code of laws became known as the *"traditions of the ancient."* It was the work of learned experts known as rabbis, scribes and lawyers. These men publicly debated religious issues and made pronouncements on them. By the time of Jesus, these legal legislations formed a formidable body of 613 indisputable oral laws – all equally binding and of the same gravity. These traditions erected a fence about the Law – exact observances that safeguarded against any violation of the law itself. It was held that to break one point of the Law was to break the whole Law. The Pharisees accepted not only the Pentateuch, but insisted that the oral law – the traditions of the ancients – was equally binding and obligatory upon all Jews. [In the third century after Christ, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, 135-220 A.D., wrote down a summary of all these rules and regulations in a text called the *"Mishnah."* It still obligates the Orthodox Jews of today. Another such work called the *"Palestinian Talmud"* was written around 450 A.D. and the much larger *"Babylonian Talmud"* was composed around 500 A.D.]

Since the majority of the people of the land neither observed nor concerned themselves over the Pharisaical interpretations of the Law, the Pharisees considered them to be reprobates. According to the Pharisees, anyone who did not observe these oral laws was a sinner and certainly no man of God.

Among these laws were many prescriptions concerning ritual purity. Many laws in Leviticus *(12:6f and 15:13f)* applied only to priests, but had been broadened to include the laity. It is not easy for us today to grasp the moral situation of the times. We can appreciate today many of these ancient customs of ritual purity as good hygiene. Perhaps Divine Wisdom prescribed them as religious obligations to protect the health of the people.

Men of that time had no knowledge of gems and good hygiene. They observed these customs on religious grounds. They believed certain unclean things existed in this world. These things could contaminate a person and truly render him unclean and unacceptable in the sight of God. The Pharisees strove to always keep themselves consecrated to God by avoiding all sources of ritual impurity.

Unclean persons contaminated all they touched. A non-Jew, a Gentile, was unclean and all he touched became unclean. When a Pharisee returned from a market place, fearing he may have rubbed shoulders with a Gentile or accidentally touched something unclean, he immersed his whole body in pure water to take away any impurity unconsciously acquired.

This maze of religious observances became the very heart and essence of religion. To observe all these laws was to be pleasing to God – to break one was to be a sinner. For the Pharisees, this was the meaning of goodness and righteousness. Religion was a series of rituals, ceremonies, rules and regulations. This adherence to the letter of the law is called legalism. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the spirit of legalism dominated many in the Catholic Church. We have only to remember how people measured their Christianity by their observances of certain rules and regulations. For some Catholics, the sole measures of being a good Christian or Catholic was going to Mass on Sunday, not eating meat on Friday, marrying in the Church and not practicing birth control. This created in many a false sense of security for they forgot that religion, pure and undefiled, is love of God and love of one's fellow man. The Holy Spirit called the Church to renew itself in the true spirit of Jesus Christ!

Nothing was further from the spirit of Jesus than this Pharisaic spirit. A meeting between Jesus and the Pharisees was bound to create tension, hostility and rejection. The mildest thing Jesus said of the Pharisees was a warning to His Disciples that their righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees or else they would never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Obviously, righteousness could not be based solely upon keeping laws, for no one did that better than the Pharisees. The Pharisees were called a *"brood of vipers"* by John the Baptist. When Jesus really let Himself go, He called them a

wicked and adulterous generation. He accused them of making religion harsh and intolerable. Their very rigorous adherence to the Law was but a subtle device to the real spirit of the Law. Jesus' favorite word for them was *"hypocrite,"* the original meaning of which was reference to an actor who recited dialogue on a stage. It came to be applied to people whose whole life was a stage and a series of "actings-out", with no sincerity behind what was said and done. When pleasing God becomes no more than keeping rules and regulations, with no regard to what the heart contains, a person becomes guilty of religious hypocrisy. When a man outwardly observes the demands of religion but inwardly, he is filled with hates, grudges, hard feelings, envies and pride – he is guilty of hypocrisy. Legalism leads to hypocrisy because it takes only man's external deeds into consideration while taking no account of his inward feelings and motivations.

The historical attitude of Jesus toward the Law, generally speaking, was that of the Sadducees. Jesus regarded the Law, as given by God, as binding, while rejecting the oral law as traditions of men, which in fact undermined the observance of the Law. Nevertheless, Jesus approached this binding Law of God with godly authority. He placed the spirit of the Law above the letter of the Law. He emphasized certain aspects of the Law as being of greater importance and more binding than other aspects.

> ***You pay tithes on mint and herbs and seeds while neglecting the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and good faith. It is these you should have practiced, without neglecting the others.***
>
> ***(Mat. 23:23)***

MORALITY OF JESUS

With this background, we can better understand the seriousness of the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees and what really was at the heart of the conflict:

> ***The Pharisees and some of the experts in the Law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Him. They had observed a few of***

His Disciples eating meals without having purified – that is to say, washed – their hands. The Pharisees, and in fact all Jews, cling to the custom of their ancestors and never eat without scrupulously washing their hands. Moreover, they never eat anything from the market without first sprinkling it. There are many other traditions they observe – for example, the washing of cups and jugs and kettles. So the Pharisees and the scribes questioned Him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of our ancestors, but instead take food without purifying their hands?" He said to them, "How accurately Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites when he wrote.

'This people pays me lip service but their heart is far from me. Empty is the reverence they do me because they teach as dogmas mere human precepts.'

"You disregard God's commandment and cling to what is human tradition."

He went on to say, "You have made a fine art of setting aside God's commandment in the interests of keeping your traditions! For example, Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and in another place, 'Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death.' Yet you declare, 'If a person says to his father or mother, Any support you might have had from me is korban' (that is, dedicated to God), you allow him to do nothing more for his father or mother. That is the way you nullify God's word in favor of the traditions you have handed on. And you have many other such practices besides." (Mk. 7: 1-13)

Many scholars believe that here lie echoes of the conflict existing between the early Church and the Jews. The battle on behalf of the freedom of Gentile Christians, so violently waged by Paul, to dispense with the restrictions of the Jewish Law, had been fought and won by the time this Gospel came to be written. No doubt the echoes of that great controversy resound between the lines of these narrations. Jesus told them, ***"You have made a fine art of setting aside God's commandment in the interest of keeping your traditions."***

The oral law – with its burdensome rules – contradicts the Divine intention. These elaborate regulations – these traditions of men – created self-satisfaction in those who observed them and smothered the very purpose for which God's law had been designed, namely the glad and humble worship of God by men. It substituted man's wisdom for God's law. Men did not listen to the spirit of God, but to their own clever legal interpretations. As if true religion could ever be the product of the human mind. A true religious spirit only develops as it humbly listens to the Voice of God and accepts His Will.

The Hebrew word *"korban"* means "dedicated" or "given to God." It was a formula used in a vow to God. If an angry Jewish son, in a fit of passion or out of guile, uttered the formula, "Korban!" and thereby dedicated to God or to Temple service the money set aside to support his parents, he would have the sanction of religious authorities. The whole thing was a legal loop-hole; the goods thus dedicated often did not go toward religious purposes. Some scribes emphasized so strongly the vow that they insisted it must be observed to the letter even if it violated a man's duty to his parents. It thereby annulled God's Law rather than upheld it.

At this point, Jesus:

> ***summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and try to understand. Nothing that enters a man from outside can make him impure; that which comes out of him, and only that, constitutes impurity. Let everyone heed what he hears!"***
>
> ***(Mk. 7:15-16)***

This statement appears so clear and self-evident that it is hard to believe the Disciples did not understand the meaning of it. It was one of the most revolutionary religious statements uttered by Jesus. We do not live in a

world where things are taboo and render man sinful in the sight of God. This was not so in the ancient world and it is not so in many places today. Jesus proclaims that <u>things</u> cannot be religiously clean or unclean: only persons. No Jew held that belief at the time of Jesus. The Orthodox Jew

does not believe it today. This principle destroys, with a prophetic blow, the terrible burden from which all ancient religions suffered; that certain objects are religiously unclean and rendered men unclean in the sight of God. To understand how shattering this doctrine was to the hearers, we have only to recall that Leviticus declared certain animals unclean and forbade the eating of them. We read of the heroic deaths of seven brothers who suffered terrible tortures under King Antiochus Epiphanes rather than eat the meat of pigs. The First Book of Maccabees relates that terrible affliction was upon Israel:

> ***But many in Israel were determined and resolved in their hearts not to eat anything unclean; they preferred to die rather than to be defiled with unclean food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die. (1Mac. 1:62-63)***

Even in our own time, the story is related that the wife of Mahatma Gandhi was seriously ill and was told she must take broth made from meat to recover, but she refused – saying that she preferred death to defiling her body. This was in keeping with her Hindu belief.

With one single statement, Jesus declared a principle abrogated for which many Jews had suffered and died. Mark writes, *"Thus did He render all foods clean." (Mk. 7:19)* Small wonder it was difficult for the Disciples to understand. It took great faith in Jesus to accept and put into practice. It did demand that man put the same faith in Jesus as in God! This principle is today endorsed by modern liberal Jews:

> ***Things cannot be religiously either clean or unclean, only persons. And persons cannot be defiled by things, they can only be defiled by themselves by acting irreligiously.***

Jesus revealed that religious defilement is essentially moral and spiritual. Man is a moral and a spiritual being living in and through a physical dimension called the human body. Food cannot essentially defile a person – it merely passes through the body but does not touch man's true being. Jesus taught, *"What emerges from within a man, that and nothing else is what*

makes him impure. Wicked designs come from the deep recesses of the heart." (Mk. 7:20-21) They come from the center of a man's personality flowing from his mind and will. *"Wicked designs"* are not merely evil thoughts, but evil plannings, schemes and dreams, giving birth to degrading acts and vices. Mark enumerates six evil actions: acts of fornication, theft, murder, adulterous conduct, greed and malicious deeds. He enumerates six evil vices: deceit, wantonness, envy, slander, pride (arrogance) and folly (it is the stupidity of the man who lacks moral judgment). This vocabulary seems to belong to Paul.

It is understandable that the Pharisees did not react well to this teaching of Jesus. The Disciples reported this reaction to Jesus, *"Do you realize the Pharisees were scandalized when they heard your pronouncement?" (Mat. 15:12)* Jesus told His Disciples, *"Every planting not put down by my Heavenly Father will be uprooted.... Let them go their way, they are leaders of the blind. If one blind man leads another, both will end in a pit." (Matt. 15:13-14)*

When Mark wrote, *"Thus did He render all food clean,"* we probably have a deduction by the early Church from this principle stated by Jesus. It is not likely that it was understood at the time that Jesus had directly set aside the food laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. There was too much controversy in the early Church over the issue for it to have been understood so clearly. We know that the Semitic had no way to express the comparative degree. They indicated the idea that one thing was better than the other by saying one thing mattered and the other did not – or one thing was loved and the other hated. As Our Lord expressed His principle, it would have conveyed the idea that pollution from within was more serious than pollution from without. The Disciples no doubt did question Jesus about the matter and received subsequent instructions. The principle stated by Jesus, though not fully understood at the time, would one day free Christianity from the bondage of Jewish legalism and observances, but not before the matter would be hotly debated and seriously reflected upon and the Risen Lord Himself enlighten and direct Peter.

JESUS AND THE GENTILES

In the first years of Christianity, many Gentiles must have felt as if they were second class citizens in the Kingdom of God. The full acceptance of the Gentiles into the Christian Community came slowly. Peter's action of receiving the Gentile Cornelius and his household into the Church had to be more than once justified. Many Jewish Christians demanded that Gentiles must become both Jews and Christians. They demanded that converts had to observe the entire Mosaic Law. Paul strenuously contested this and the Council of Jerusalem decided in Paul's favor around 50 A.D.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told the Disciples, *"Do not visit pagan territory and do not enter a Samaritan town. Go instead after the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Mat. 10:5-6)* Jesus said to the Gentile woman, *"My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt. 15:24)* Paul speaks of Jews being saved first and Gentiles second. The mission method of the early Apostles was to preach first to the Jews and, only when rejected by them, to turn to the Gentiles.

Apparently, it was Mark's intention to show that this practice of Christian missionaries had a foundation from the life of Jesus. Mark presents Jesus proclaiming a principle that ultimately would be interpreted as to free the Gentiles from the observance of Jewish traditions and customs. Jesus' unexpected move in this direction was seen as a means of escaping the Pharisees and likewise, the spies of Herod Antipas. It was a time of respite and peace – a needed environment to prepare the Disciples for the future. It marked the end of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. His rejection by the Pharisees and the Herodians had brought Jesus to the Gentiles.

In Mark's mind, this journey outside the Jewish area was highly significant for the Gentile Christian. Mark relates that Jesus *"retired to a certain house and wanted no one to recognize Him; however, He could not escape notice." (Mk. 7:24)* The fame of Jesus had spread beyond Palestine. A Greek woman, Syro-Phoenician by birth, heard of Jesus and came to Him seeking a cure for a possessed daughter. The woman symbolically represents the Gentile world coming to Jesus. Her daughter represents the spiritual

condition of the Gentiles. The woman was a pagan; Jews did not associate with pagans for they were considered unclean. The Jews were the children of God, and pagans, because the vices they practiced, were viewed by the Jews as not any better than dogs – the fierce *"pariah"* dogs that roamed the Oriental cities as scavengers devouring refuse. Rabbi Eliezer taught, *"He who eats with an idolater is like unto one who eats with a dog."* Objectively, the Gentiles were in a very bad religious condition. Paul taught that they communed with devils through their eating of meat sacrificed to idols. There was a real spiritual distinction between Jews and pagans and Jesus stressed this distinction. In His dialogue with the woman, Jesus expressed this religious reality: the woman approached Jesus and crouched at His feet and, began to beg Him to expel the demon from her daughter. He told her, *"Let the sons of the household satisfy themselves at table first. It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." "Please, Lord,"* she replied, *"even the dogs under the table eat the family's leavings." (Mk. 7:26-27)*

St. Matthew's version gives us the reaction of the Disciples to this woman:

It happened that a Canaanite woman living in that locality presented herself, crying out to Him, "Lord, Son of David, have pity on me! My daughter is terribly troubled by a demon." He gave her no word of response. His Disciples came up and began to entreat Him, "Get rid of her. She keeps shouting after us." (Mat. 15:22-23)

Apparently, that was their usual solution to a problem!

Jesus had been sent as the Messiah to the Jews. *"My mission is only the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* The ministry of Jesus had a particular scope willed by the Father. The Prophets had foreseen that in the Messianic days, God's grace and spirit would be extended to the Gentiles. The Greek woman understood her position before God. She agreed with Jesus' statement but she also perceived that the Gentiles were lost without this Jewish Messiah, for He is indeed the Savior of the World. *"Salvation comes from the Jews!"* If it is of any comfort to modern-day readers, the word *"dog"* addressed to the woman would have indicated a household pet rather than a street dog. It was customary for people to wipe their hands during a meal with bread and

throw the bread to the dogs under the table. The woman, in her reply, did not question the Divine order, nor preference – she pleaded to be allowed to participate, to some limited degree, in the *"bread of life."* Her response pleased the Lord and Jesus *"said to her, 'For such a reply, be off now! The demon has already left your daughter.' When she got home, she found the child lying in the bed and the demon gone." (Mk. 7:29-30)* In St. Matthew's account, Jesus replied, *"Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass."* She was a shrewd woman – she discovered Jesus' weakness – Faith! He couldn't say "no" to such faith.

We have only two such miracles in the Synoptic accounts of Jesus healing from a distance: The present miracle and the cure of the servant of the Centurion – himself a Gentile.

St. Augustine saw a connection between the two miracles. Two pagans came to Jesus and He healed their sick by a Word. It symbolized for Augustine the time when the personal presence of Jesus would be absent in the world, but Jesus would live among us in His Word!

Mark continues his theme of Jesus' attitude toward the Gentiles. Mark relates that Jesus took a rather amazing journey, *"He then left Tyrian territory and returned by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee."* It would be as if someone in Los Angeles went to Las Vegas by way of San Francisco. The Lord made quite a journey taking a considerable amount of time (perhaps as much as eight months). The quiet before the storm! Jesus needed time with His Disciples. We have seen how crowded their daily schedule had become due to Jesus' popularity with the people. It certainly militated against instruction and reflective meditation. Apparently, Jesus used this time to instruct His Disciples and prepare them to bear what was to come. Perhaps, in these quiet moments, Peter truly began to hear Jesus and to see Him in a Divine Light.

HEALING OF THE DEAF MAN

Mark introduces, at this point, the healing of a man – deaf and hardly able to speak:

> ***Some people brought Him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged Him to lay His hand on him. Jesus took him off by Himself away from the crowd. He put His fingers into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; then He looked up to Heaven and emitted a groan. He said to him, "Ephphatha!" (that is, "Be opened!") At once, the man's ears were opened; he was freed from the impediment, and began to speak plainly. Then He enjoined them strictly not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it. (Mk. 7:32-36)***

The miracle demonstrates the personalism and the sensitivity of Jesus in dealing with the sick. He took the man off by Himself and He used sign language in order to communicate with him. The man responded to Jesus and his ears were opened. For the first time, he could really hear and, regardless of Jesus' admonition to remain silent, because of his new found ability to speak, he and his friends gave praise to God. Their amazement went beyond all bounds, *"He has done everything well! He makes the deaf to hear and the mute speak."* Jesus indeed fulfilled the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah:

> ***The desert and the parched land will exult; the steppe will rejoice and bloom. They will bloom with abundant flowers, and rejoice with joyful song. The glory of Lebanon will be given to them, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God. Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God; He comes with vindication; with Divine recompense He comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the dumb will sing. (Is. 35:1-6)***

The symbolism of the miracle may be found in the ease by which this Gentile man was opened to hear Jesus and to praise God. Only a few verses before, Jesus had said to the Disciples, *"Are you, too, incapable of understanding?"* He pleaded with the Jews, *"Let him who has ears to hear Me, hear!"* They had ears but they were not opened, they listened carefully but did not understand. The description of the works Jesus did to open the ears symbolizes the hints of His sufferings and prayers in these words, *"He looked up to Heaven and emitted a groan. He said to him, "Ephphatha! (*Be opened!)" The miracle of this Gentile having his ears opened and his tongue loosed to praise the Lord emphasizes Jesus' personal attention and love for the Gentiles and their overwhelming acceptance of Him. In only a few more verses, Mark will give us the contrast when he writes, *"The Pharisees came forward and began to argue with Him. They were looking for some heavenly sign from Him as a test." (Mk. 8:11)* Truly, we have a symbolism here in Mark of the Gentiles' acceptance of the Gospel and Israel's refusal to believe.

FEEDING THE FOUR THOUSAND

At this point, Mark narrates a second miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes. The appearance of two such miracles in the Gospel have troubled many scholars. The similarity between the two miracles suggests that there existed several versions in Church tradition of the one miracle. This is certainly likely, but evidently, Mark had his own purposes for including a second version of the miracle. The first miracle symbolized Jesus as the New Moses feeding the people of Israel, in which the five loaves represented the five books of the Pentateuch, believed by the Jews to be the bread from Heaven – the twelve baskets represented the Twelve Tribes of Israel. There are enough changes within the second version to know that Mark intends this miracle to carry another message. It is a message to Gentiles. The setting was Gentile territory and Gentile people were being fed. The mention of seven loaves and seven baskets is significant. In the first version, the word used for basket expresses a basket used among Jews. In the second account, the word for basket describes a basket common among Gentiles. The mystical significance of seven is perfection – fullness. Jesus perfectly fulfills the needs of all men. He is the Bread of Life for the whole world. His Disciples must never fear that Jesus is not for all men. The number seven

may have recalled the seven deacons selected to free the Greeks or the seventy nations into which the Pagan world was divided. In the Scriptures, the fullness of God's Holy Spirit is described as seven spirits of God. The Holy Spirit is to be poured out in fullness upon the Gentiles. It is not a question of Gentiles being allowed to eat the crumbs that fall from the table; Disciples are to give them of the abundance of the table so that they too can be filled.

Since the miracle symbolizes the Eucharist and the Last Supper, it proclaims the truth that Jesus would die for all men – that He would become the Bread of Heaven for the poor of the earth who so moved His heart to pity in time and eternity. One author wrote:

> ***The five loaves of the Law were broken for the former, the seven loaves of the spirit for the latter. But the loaves were broken by the one and same Lord. The difference did not prevent the recognition of the fact that all alike, Jews and Gentiles, partook of the One Loaf!***

SEEKERS OF SIGNS

Jesus then returned to His own people on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. The following encounter reminds the reader of the continuing hostility directed toward the ministry of Jesus by the Jewish officials. In the face of all that Jesus had done, the Pharisees demanded some sign from Heaven so that they might believe in Him. The miracle of the loaves demonstrated that Jesus was truly the new Moses. Just as that generation tried God by demands for signs and wonders, so Jesus was tested by His own generation. The Lord complained to Moses:

> ***How long will this people spurn me? How long will they refuse to believe in me, despite all the signs I have performed among them? I will strike them with pestilence and wipe them out. (Num. 14:11)***
>
> ***Yet, by My life and the Lord's Glory that fills the whole earth, of all the men who have seen My Glory and the signs I worked in Egypt and in the desert, and who nevertheless have put Me to the test ten***

times already and have failed to heed My voice, not one shall see the land which I promised on oath to their fathers. None of these who have spurned me shall see it. (Num. 14:22-23)

In the 95th Psalm, we hear these words of God:

Your fathers tempted Me; they tested Me though they had seen My works. Forty years I loathed that generation, and I said, "They are a people of erring heart… and they shall not enter into My rest."
(Ps. 95:9-11)

Mark's account echoes the same spirit that caused Yahweh to say, ***"Forty years I loathed that generation!"***

The Pharisees came forward and began to argue with Him. They were looking for some heavenly sign from Him as a test. With a sigh from the depths of His spirit He said, "Why does this age seek a sign? I assure you, no such sign will be given it!" Then He left them, got into the boat again, and went off to the other shore. (Mk. 8:11-13)

No doubt, by a sign from Heaven, the Pharisees meant some overpowering and spectacular miracle that would "blow their minds" – It would overcome all opposition to acceptance and compel belief in Jesus. Demand for such signs arises from human distrust. Men who demand such have failed faith. Faith is a gift from God. The healing hand of Jesus touches our human weakness by giving us a gift by which we can see and understand. Faith enables us to know the Presence and Power of God in our lives without evidence that satisfies the human faculties of seeing, hearing, touching and understanding. When a man demands signs and wonders in order to accept the reality of God or Jesus Christ, he does not choose to live by faith but by the flesh! He repudiates faith and demands that God meet him where he is. He insists that God meet him on his own human level. In a sense, God must become someone such a person can see, touch, feel and examine under his personal microscope before God is acceptable. God must satisfy the human faculties of knowing and understanding. This is <u>not</u> faith. Faith is a spiritual faculty that enables man to perceive and to know God in a way that

is beyond the evidences of the senses. It is indeed more certain and firmer than any sensual evidence or empirical data. Faith is the Spirit of God's own witness to the spirit of man. Since God is Spirit, He can only truly be known through the Spirit. Faith is the supernatural faculty God gives man to know Him. How Jesus longs that we live by faith. God has given into man's hand the key to open unto himself Heaven and its power and glory. The key to Heaven is faith!

When man refuses to seek God in faith, and demands God meet him in the flesh, in other words, when God must work signs and wonders so dazzling as to completely satisfy the senses of man about the reality of God, God not only refuses to meet man in this fashion but He abandons man. The Scriptures tell us that God *"loathes"* such men. Our Lord taught this when the demands for signs and wonders caused Him to sigh from the very depths of His spirit. After this we are told, *"He left them!"*

Men who seek signs and wonders will find such signs and wonders. But they will not come from God!

> ***False messiahs and false prophets will appear performing signs and wonders to mislead, if it were possible, even the chosen. So be constantly on guard! I have told you about it beforehand.***
>
> ***(Mk. 13:22-23)***

"The just man lives by faith!"

CHAPTER 10

EYE OF THE SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION

In order to be a good counselor, it is said that one needs more than two ears. One must have a third ear to hear what is not being said. In order to be a good Christian, one must not only have a third ear, but also a third eye. A Christian needs the eye of the spirit. A man must be able to see what the eyes of the body do not behold in order to see the reality of God in this world. The bodily eyes rest on the physical and material dimensions of being, while the eye of the spirit penetrates the outer shell and beholds the inner dimension – the spiritual and the very foundation of being – the domain of Divine Being. We read in the Book of Wisdom, ***"for your imperishable spirit is in all things!" (Wis. 12:1)***

Paul writes in his Epistle to the Romans:

> ***For what can be known about God is perfectly plain since God Himself has made it plain. Ever since God created the world, His everlasting power and deity, however invisible, have been there for the mind to see in the things He has made.***

Paul held it to be inexcusable not to see and respond to the existence of God, ***"That is why such people are without excuse"*** **writes Paul.** ***They knew God and yet refused to honor Him as God or to thank Him, instead, they made nonsense out of logic and their empty minds were darkened. The more they called themselves philosophers, the more stupid they grew, until they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for a worthless imitation – for the image of mortal man. (Rom. 1:19-23)***

We read in the Book of Wisdom:

> ***All men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing Him***

> *who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan. (Wis. 13:1)*

Psalm 19:1-2 proclaims, *"The Heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims His handiwork. Day to day pours out the word to day, and night to night imparts knowledge."*

When the eyes of St. John of the Cross beheld the beauties of the created universe, an inner spiritual vision caught a glimpse of divine beauty. He wrote, *"Scattering a thousand graces, He passed through these groves in haste. And, looking upon them as He went, left them by His glance alone, clothed with beauty."* Another poet once wrote, *"God is not dumb that He should speak no more. If thou hears not His Voice, tis thy soul that's poor."*

The Scriptures do not excuse man for being unable to know God's reality and power. If man has not come to a knowledge of God, it is due to a blameworthy and perverse spirit. As Paul expressed, *"The wrath of God is being revealed from Heaven against the irreligious and perverse spirit of men who, in this perversity of theirs, hinder the truth." (Rm. 1:18)* Paul teaches the evil consequences of such disbelief:

> *They did not see fit to acknowledge God, so God delivered them up to their own depraved sense to do what is unseemly. They are filled with every kind of wickedness: maliciousness, greed, ill will, envy, murder, bickering, deceit, craftiness. They are gossips and slanderers, they hate God, are insolent, haughty, boastful, ingenious in their wrongdoing and rebellious toward their parents. One sees in them men without conscience, without loyalty, without affection, without pity. (Rm. 1:28-31)*

The Scriptures confirm spiritual blindness to be a serious malady with disastrous consequences.

BLINDNESS OF THE DISCIPLES

It is against such a background that Mark sees the disbelief of the Jews and the truly perilous situation of the Disciples in failing to come to fullness of faith in Jesus. It is not simply a matter of stupidity, but of sinfulness. If man is inexcusable for failing to recognize the Presence of God in the created beauties of this world, then how much more culpable and blameworthy is he

for failing to see God in His very Incarnation in the Flesh – Jesus of Nazareth – of whom John writes to be the Divine Word made Flesh? In the Book of Hebrews, we read:

> ***In times past, God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways to our fathers through the prophets; in this, the final age, He has spoken to us through His Son, whom He had made heir of all things and through whom He first created the universe. This Son is the reflection of the Father's glory, the exact representation of the Father's Being, and He sustains all things by His powerful word. (Heb. 1:1-3)***

The Scriptures did not excuse men when God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways through the prophets. Jeremiah says,

> ***Pay attention to this, foolish and senseless people who have eyes and see not, who have ears and hear not... this people's heart is stubborn and rebellious; they turn and go away. (Jer. 5:21-23)***

The Lord spoke to the prophet Ezekiel, *"Son of man, you live in the midst of a rebellious house; they have eyes to see but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious house." (Ezek. 12:2)* How much more rebellious were the spirits of men when they failed to heed the voice of God through His own Divine Son?

The failure of men to believe in Jesus and obey Him did not flow solely from human frailty and weakness. It had, at its source, a certain perversity and rebelliousness of the human spirit. The Book of Wisdom admits that certain men:

> ***search busily among His works, but are distracted by what they see, because the things seen are fair. But again, not even these are pardonable. For if they so far succeeded in knowledge that they could speculate about the world, how did they not more quickly find its Lord? (Wis. 13:7-8)***

The Scriptures suggest that to one who has the eye to see God is so present in our world that He is always visible in all created things. God in a most unique, personal way is present in Jesus of Nazareth. Man fails to see and hear God in Jesus because he sees and hears Him only with the eyes and ears

of the flesh. This is to look and not see – to listen and not hear.

The fundamental being of man is spiritual and this spiritual dimension possesses powers that enable man to see and hear God who is Spirit. The inability of man to believe and obey God demonstrates the sinful condition of man. Man does not live by the spirit, but by the flesh. Spiritual blindness and deafness is the general spiritual condition of man. When man encounters Jesus of Nazareth he does not see and hear God. Man is in need of deliverance.

Mark's Gospel reveals that the failure to believe in Jesus of Nazareth proceeds from this perversity and rebelliousness in man. In Chapter Three, we are told that Jesus *"was deeply grieved that they (the Pharisees) had closed their minds against Him." (Mk. 3:5)* In Chapter Six, we heard of the rejection of the people of Nazareth, *"They found Him too much for them.... He could work no miracle there, apart from curing a few who were sick by laying hands on them, so much did their lack of faith distress Him." (Mk. 6:3-5)* Mark has already demonstrated the Apostles' lack of insight when he wrote, *"They were taken aback by these happenings, for they had not understood about the loaves. On the contrary, their minds were completely closed to the meaning of the events." (Mk. 6:51-52)* It almost appears as if the powers of evil had been allowed to blind all men to the truth about Jesus. Mark continues now to demonstrate the serious spiritual condition of the Disciples and Jesus' continuing struggle to bring them to faith:

> ***They had forgotten to bring any bread along; except for one loaf they had none with them in the boat. So when He instructed them, "Keep your eyes open! Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod," they concluded among themselves that it was because they had no bread. (Mk. 8:14-16)***

Yeast or leaven for the Jews symbolized evil. It was thought of as a source of corruption and unholiness. St. Paul thought this when he wrote to the Galatians:

> ***You were progressing so very well; who diverted you from the path of truth? Such enticement does not come from Him who calls you. "A little yeast can affect the entire dough." I trust that, in the Lord, you will not adopt a different view. May condemnation fall on whoever it is that is unsettling you. (Gal. 5:7-10)***

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

> ***This boasting of yours is an ugly thing. Do you not know that a little yeast has its effect all through the dough? Get rid of the old yeast to make of yourselves fresh dough, unleavened loaves, as it were; Let us celebrate the feast not with the old yeast, that of corruption and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1Cor. 5:6-8)***

Paul warned the Corinthians, as a source of contamination, of association with immoral Christians. For the rabbis, yeast was a symbol of the evil tendencies and inclinations in man's nature – another word for the effects of original sin. Rabbi Alexander wrote,

> ***It is revealed before thee that our will is to do Thy Will. And what hinders? The leaven that is in the dough and slavery to the kingdom of the world. May it be Thy Will to deliver us from their hands.***

Jesus saw the religious teachings and the pietistic attitudes of the Pharisees as a corruptive influence on His Disciples, alienating them from Himself. In St. Luke's account, Jesus warned His Disciples, *"Be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." (Lk. 12:1)* St. Matthew related that the Disciples, *"<u>finally</u> realized He was not issuing a warning against yeast (used for bread), but against the Pharisees' and Sadducees' teachings." (Mat. 16:12)* The reference to Herod no doubt referred to the spirit of the world that serves the kingdom of this world rather than the Kingdom of God. It is a spirit that uses the political and material powers of this world to achieve its ends.

No man is immune to his environment. Jesus sought to protect His Disciples against their evil environment. If a person lives in an environment hostile to Jesus, there is danger that environment will weaken, water down and erode

that person's commitment to the Lord. Herein, Christians have a prudent warning against seeking religious instructions from unsound and dubious sources. St. Paul constantly warns about the danger of listening to erroneous teachers. As Catholics, we have inherited nearly two thousand years of spiritual teachings and principles. We have an obligation to preserve this

faith as it has been handed down to us. For many years, we were forbidden to participate in the religious worship of non-Catholic Communities. This was so in order to preserve our Catholic heritage. As Catholics, we hold many beliefs in common with other Christian Communities, but we also hold beliefs contrary to theirs – beliefs we believe to be essential to Christian revelation; beliefs we are obliged in conscience to profess and maintain. For example, we differ from many Christian Communities on our doctrine of Grace, the Seven Sacraments, the Communion of the Saints, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the powers of the Priesthood. It is not a matter of judging other Communities, but of being true to the Christian Faith as we understand it. As the Holy Spirit has enlightened us, we must follow the Way, the Truth and the Life of Jesus. We have our moral insights and must be true to them. For example, the Catholic Community knows deliberate abortion to be murder – as true Catholics, we can never hold or teach otherwise, even if the whole world approves abortion!

Today there is a spirit of ecumenicism in the Church that seeks to recognize and strengthen the beliefs and principles which the Christian Communities hold in common. But the true spirit of ecumenicism does not mean to deny our differences or to hold these differences to be of no importance, as if Christianity was a garden in which we enter to pick and choose the bouquet of truths pleasing to us, or generally acceptable to the majority. Ecumenicism does not reduce Christianity to its least common denominator. Prudence demands we preserve our Catholic Faith. Many Catholics who have gone to non-Catholic centers for religious instruction (Bible studies) are today anti-Catholic or indifferent to Catholic teachings and beliefs. Unfortunately, certain Christian centers do teach anti-Catholicism, while others wean Catholics from their beliefs by leading them to believe that many Catholic beliefs and practices are not important matters for salvation and spiritual growth.

We are morally obliged to avoid any person, place or thing that is a needless occasion of sin. Infidelity and apostasy are most serious sins. We ought to be very careful from what wells we drink religious truths. We do well to keep in mind the words of Paul to the elders of Ephesus:

> ***Keep watch over yourselves, and over the whole flock the Holy Spirit has given you to guard. Shepherd the Church of God, which He has acquired at the price of His own blood.... From your own number, men will present themselves distorting the truth and***

leading astray any who follow them. Be on guard, therefore.
(Acts. 20: 28-31)

Not every preacher or teacher who proclaims "Jesus Is Lord" accepts the Lordship of Jesus. Remember – to destroy the power of truth, it is only necessary to distort the truth. To over-emphasize a Christian Truth can destroy the delicate balance of Christian Truths and cause much disturbance in the community.

Our Lord's warning to the Disciples was lost upon them for the most part – they completely failed to grasp the meaning of His words. Jesus and the Disciples were on two different levels. The Disciples' gross interpretation served to illustrate how incapable they were of understanding Jesus. Their own little world engrossed them and even when God encountered them there, they could only interpret Divine revelation in the light of their worldly concerns and values.

A good example of listening but not hearing! They were looking but could not see the Divine in Jesus. We see them trapped in a hopeless condition of spiritual blindness and deafness. With a slight tone of exasperation, Jesus said to them,

> ***"Why do you suppose that it is because you have no bread? Do you still not see or comprehend? Are your minds completely blinded? Have you eyes but no sight? Ears but no hearing? Do you remember when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets of fragments you gathered up?".... They answered, "Seven." He said to them again, "Do you still not understand?" (Mk. 8:17-21)***

When Jesus asked them the question, *"Are your minds completely blinded?"* – He sought to make them grasp the seriousness of their situation. He sought to force them to see how close their spiritual condition resembled that of the Pharisees who *"have closed their minds against Him."* Their condition was

sinful. They had no confidence that Jesus could supply their needs. Jesus sought to force reflection and meditation that would awaken some in-depth understanding of what they were experiencing with Him. Jesus labored for a spiritual break-through – a spiritual awakening within the Disciples.

HEALING OF THE BLIND MAN

At this point, Mark introduces a miracle very similar to the healing of a deaf-mute. We read:

> ***When they arrived at Bethsaida, some people brought Him a blind man and begged Him to touch him. Jesus took the blind man's hand and led him outside the village. Putting spittle on his eyes, He laid His hands on him and asked, "Can you see anything?" The man opened his eyes and said, "I can see people but they look like walking trees." Then, a second time, Jesus laid hands on his eyes, and he saw perfectly; his sight was restored and he could see everything clearly. Jesus sent him home with the admonition, "Do not even go into the village." (Mk. 8:22-26)***

The healing of a deaf-mute and the blind man of Bethsaida are two perfect illustrations Mark uses to indicate the Divine Power involved to bring men to the fullness of spiritual insight. Only the miraculous power of Jesus opens the ear and the eye of the spirit. How well both narratives illustrate the willingness and docility needed on the part of the recipient. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him. The blind cannot lead the blind. Only Jesus is the Light of the World. Men must put trust in Jesus and follow Him. Just as it took a miracle to open the ears and the eyes of these men, man in his sinful condition cannot come to faith in Jesus without a miracle of God's Grace. In the Gospel of Mark, it is a slow process by which the Disciples came to the fullness of faith in Jesus – the whole process was a supernatural achievement. Jesus brought His faithful and humble Disciples, step by step, to the fullness of Divine revelation. In the beginning, nothing was seen, then the shadows of Divine realities; and in time, the realities were seen in ever-growing brightness. There is no end to the unfolding of the Divine Beauty. For a Christian, life is a pilgrimage into Divine truth enduring a lifetime and one enters eternity wide-eyed in order to know as he is known.

When a man makes a decision for Jesus, he becomes a baby in the spirit. It is a long road to Christian maturity. The danger of so much of today's "TV Christianity" is that it gives the impression the whole heart and essence of Christianity is repentance and salvation. Once a man joins the Christian Church, he has arrived! In truth, he has arrived at the beginning, and unless the Christian Community is aware of the need and the methods of

spiritual growth and development, that Community retards God's children. Some Christian Communities remind one of birds that hatch eggs and leave the babies to shift for themselves. Some Communities do not possess the spiritual resources to enrich new members. They are like the mountain woman who said to a complaining daughter, "Zula Mae, I gave you life and that looks about as if that's all I'll ever be able to give you. You better stop complaining about what I ain't giving you and do something about what I gave you!" The Apostles certainly had repentance and had entered into fellowship with the Lord, but they had an awful long way to travel before becoming as Christ!

No Christian Community has more spiritual resources to nourish spiritual growth and development than our Catholic Community. Often, this is the real loss when members leave the Catholic Community. On the other hand, how many Catholics have a Divine banquet spread before them and they spiritually starve to death or survive only as anemic spirits?

The miracle was not only a symbolism of the slow process to faith, but a prophetic sign of what now began to take place in the Apostles. Jesus then led His Disciples about twenty-five miles north of Bethsaida to the district of Caesarea Philippi, lying outside Galilee and within the jurisdiction of Philip, half-brother of Herod. In ancient days, the city was called Paneas after the Greek god Pan, the god of nature. A grotto on the hillside was celebrated as the birthplace of Pan. The place is described as a sanctuary of water – from a deep gorge in the hillside a veritable river bursts forth forming the source of the Jordan River. Herod the Great had built a temple in honor of Augustus near the grotto of Pan. In the earlier days, it was a place dedicated to Baal. In this area, steeped in the idolatry of nature, demons and man – Jesus put this question to His Disciples, *"Who do people say that I am?"* He was speaking of the "crowd" – those outside with a superficial attraction to Jesus to whom He spoke in parables. They replied, *"Some, John the Baptizer, others, Elijah, still others – one of the prophets."* None of the people saw Jesus as the great Jewish Messiah.

THE MESSIAH

What was the popular concept of the Messiah at the time of Jesus? Under Kings David and Solomon, Israel reached its greatest glory. The Jews anticipated the coming of another David who would re-establish their Kingdom and extend the greatness of Israel. As their history had unfolded,

the Jews knew neither greatness nor power. Ten tribes of Israel were swallowed up by the Assyrians. The Jews were conquered by the Persians, the Greeks and finally by Rome. For centuries, they had not experienced even freedom, much less power. Israel realized that only through Divine intervention would its dreams of greatness come to be. In a series of popular religious writings called Apocalypses – a Greek word meaning "unveilings" – the Israelites expressed their national hopes. In these works, the future was unveiled with a foretelling of events to come. Here, Jewish political hopes and desires found expression. Before the coming of the Messiah, there would be a time of great tribulation in which the whole world would suffer physical and moral chaos. It would be the birth pangs of the Messianic Age.

According to the Apocalypses, Elijah would return and restore order preparatory to the coming of the Messiah. The word "Messiah" meant the Anointed One. The word "Christ" is the Greek equivalent for Messiah. When Jesus is called "Christ," it infers that He is the Messiah – the Anointed One of Yahweh. Some thought of the Messiah as the Son of David, but generally He was conceived of as a superhuman being suddenly appearing in history to vindicate the Jews and bring them to worldly glory. Philo spoke of the Messiah *"as making war and destroying great nations."* The Messiah would be the most destructive warrior in history, destroying the enemies of God and of the Jews. The destruction of the Gentiles was foretold and rejoiced in. After a time of vast destruction, a new Jerusalem would arise or descend from the heavens to which the dispersed Jews, from the four corners of the world, would come. Palestine would be the center of the world and all nations would be subjected to its dominion. A new age of eternal peace and goodness would come to be. According to the popular concept, the Messiah would be the Lion of Judah and would crush and destroy all God's enemies. He would establish peace only through slaughter and conquest. Against such a background, Jesus is extremely cautious in making any public proclamation of being the Messiah; it would have had an undesirable reaction among the people. Their concept was not according to the Divine Plan.

CHRISTIAN FAITH

Jesus then turned to the Twelve and emphatically demanded of them, *"And you... who do you say that I am?" (Mk. 8:29)* It was a moment of crisis – their relationship with Jesus had reached a climactic moment. The time of His public ministry was approaching an end. They must decide where Jesus

stood with them. Jesus is the Messiah – the Son of God. He did not tell them who He was. If they were to have true faith in Him, that faith must be rooted in the grace of their spirit. True faith must flow from a spiritual consciousness of Divine reality. This consciousness is born from experiencing the Divine, and from the inner light of grace that reveals to the spirit the reality of the Divine Presence. How necessary, to mature faith, is inner reflection and quiet meditation upon religious experience! The Apostles must have reflected upon their relationship with Jesus in the light of the Divine grace given to them by the Father. Without this grace, they could not draw near the truth of Jesus' true personality. A true faith relationship with God has its real foundation in the spirit of man when man, in the very depths of his being, really "sees," "hears" and "experiences" God as a real Person.

The human experience of God is the handmaid of faith, but the Divine gift of grace in the spirit is the mother of faith. But – the spirit must be docile and open to grace to reflect upon a religious experience in the light of grace. True religious faith is both a Divine and human act.

Jesus was very cautious not to force His own conscious reality of His Self upon His Disciples, as this could have led to a profession of belief not rooted in grace and spirit but rather in the flesh. Belief in Jesus could have arisen because of the dominance of His personality over the weaker personalities of His Disciples – this would have been manipulation on the part of Jesus. Belief could have arisen from a need to please Jesus and be pleasing to Him – a very human need and motivation. Weak people have a tendency to gravitate toward strong personalities (or organizations) in order to find ego strength in a self-identification with the strong person or organization. This militates against mature growth of personality. A person filled with irrational fears of the future, the unknown or death can be induced to accept certain beliefs which alleviate or consciously suppress the emotional fears that beset him. All this builds castles upon sand. No matter how great the spiritual edifice rising upon the foundation, if it does not have a firm foundation, it will not endure the storms of the spirit. True Christian faith must be built upon the grace of the spirit – this s the rock foundation which endures because grace is the Divine Presence. A religious edifice built upon such a rock endures the storms of nature and Hell.

Here lies the heart of our problem in religious education. Enduring faith cannot come solely from teaching religious truths. We cannot educate people

into faith; we cannot manipulate nor frighten them into faith. We do know we can brainwash a person into believing whatever we desire if we can control their environment, make them dependent on us, and constantly stimulate dread and fear within them. Such beliefs have their foundation in the flesh and they can be brainwashed out as well as in. We cannot have true Christian beliefs without a foundation in Christian Faith.

Love does not manipulate nor force. Love respects the freedom of others.

Jesus takes the blind by the hand and seeks to lead them to faith. Between a religious experience and the subjection of this experience to the light of the spirit, stands the human will. A man can will to value and see the religious experience only with the eyes of the flesh. The light of religious truths may so threaten human desires and ambitions that a person hardens his heart or closes his mind to the grace of the spirit. The religious experience is evaluated only by the dark light of human intelligence which judges religious truth to be foolishness or worse still, diabolical!

Jesus awaited an answer from the Apostles. He asked, *"Who do you say I am?"* What was the true foundation of their relationship with Him? There was a reflective silence. They looked into their inner selves; they listened to what they heard. From the spirit of one Apostle, a conscious awareness of the spirit broke as a flooding light upon his mind. The lips of Simon gave utterance for the first time to what his spirit then knew. Peter replied emphatically, *"You are the Messiah!" (Mk. 8:29)* The crisis had passed. The Church had arrived at a true faith in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Christ. The Church will forever express this faith by calling Him Jesus Christ! Here in Caesarea Philippi, a location that embodied the worship of nature and the incarnation of political power, the Church – in Peter – expressed Jesus' claim upon the faith of mankind!

St. Matthew's Gospel account records Jesus' reaction to and the effects of Peter's confession of faith. Jesus recognized that Peter's faith was born out of grace – he had heard and accepted the Divine Witness of the Father. The question had been directed to the Twelve, but Jesus then directed Himself to Simon, *"Blest are you, Simon, son of Johan! No mere man has revealed this to you, but my Heavenly Father."* Jesus recognized the Divine choice of Peter by the Father to take Jesus' position of leadership in the Christian Community.

I for my part declare to you, you are 'Rock,' [in Aramaic, the word

is "Kepha" and in the Greek "Petros" – it implies a foundation stone. Jesus called Simon – "Peter," symbolizing that Peter is the firm foundation on which Jesus would build His Church] and on this rock I will build my Church, and the jaws of death shall not prevail against it. I will entrust to you the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in Heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in Heaven. (Mat. 16:17)

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Peter's position in the Church was so firmly founded on Divine Authority that it was never questioned by the early Christian Community.

Mark makes no mention of this because, for Mark, the main point of the narration is not Peter's profession of faith, but the revelation to follow, in which Jesus revealed the true role of the Messiah and Christian discipleship. We now reach the middle of this Gospel and the very heart and essence of the Gospel message.

Mark follows Peter's confession of faith with a sharp rebuke by Jesus. *"He gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about Him." (Mk. 8:30)* **From this point on, the Gospel account takes on an entirely different tone. The true concept of the Messiah is revealed. Peter and the others are silenced because, even though they have received a Divine Revelation, they do not yet understand what has been revealed. They would have spoken about what they did not truly understand. It is one thing to hear a Divine truth and another thing to understand its meaning. The Source of Truth must also be the Source of enlightened instruction. Men have a habit of understanding Divine truth in the light of human insights. Jesus instructed them as to the meaning of this revelation. For the first time, the shadow of the Cross falls heavily over a page of the Gospel. From this point on, the shadow will darken every page. Jesus revealed the sufferings of the Messiah:**

He began to teach them that the Son of Man had to suffer much, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be put to death, and rise three days later. He said these things quite openly. (Mk. 8:31)

The concept of a suffering Messiah was unthinkable to the Jewish mind –

such a thought was intolerable. What about all their hopes and dreams? All those glorious prophecies and teachings? At this point, Peter took Jesus aside and began to argue with Him. Peter's attitude expressed a spirit of pity and condescension toward Jesus. ***"At this, He turned around and, eyeing the Disciples, reprimanded Peter, 'Get out of my sight, you satan! You are not judging by God's standards but by man's!'" (Mk. 8:33-33)*** **We certainly see from this instance that even though Peter may have received Divine authority, he is still a man capable of sin. Peter is not impeccable!**

We have here an excellent distinction between a revelation from God – a moment of grace – and the interpretation of the revelation that is ungodly. One moment, man is under grace and the next, he is under nature, the flesh! Peter immediately interpreted his mystical insight by the light of his own mind – under the force of his own needs. Jesus told him that his interpretation was diabolic. The way of man and the way of the devil are opposed to the way of God! What a warning and caution we have here. Even if an inspiration comes from God, its interpretation may not. Test <u>every</u> **Spirit! The spirit that inspires and the spirit that interprets. For this reason, all private revelations ought to be humbly submitted to the discernment of the Christian Community and every religious inspiration ought to be humbly submitted to a spiritual director. Remember, sincerity is not enough. You can be sincerely wrong! Many have believed themselves acting under grace when, in reality, they truly opposed the Grace and Will of God. We may consciously believe we are serving Christ when, in reality, we serve Satan. Jesus may have to say to us as He did to Peter,** ***"Get out of my sight, you satan! You are trying to make Me trip and fall." (Matt. 16:23)*** **He cautioned His Disciples to be meek and humble of spirit. If we are humble we will never stray too far from the truth.**

A human being's true self is spiritual. At the very heart of his being, man is a spiritual creation. The concept of self, as a unique person, arises from conscious awareness. What is the content of conscious awareness? As human beings, we are aware that we have physical needs; unfilled – they express themselves as hungers (pain and suffering); satisfied – they are expressed by self-satisfaction (contentment and peace). Our most basic human needs, as nourishment and reproduction, have been recognized to arise from a greater need, self-preservation – a hint that true self may be more than physical needs. Likewise, for growth, man needs external stimulation; a poverty of external stimuli results in a retardation of sensitive life and eventually results in a retardation of character and personality.

Experience teaches that man is more than a physical being, for his needs extend beyond the physical world. Man has needs that cannot be made, weighed, bought, sold or found. A human being needs to be appreciated and valued – in a word "loved." Being loved may be expressed in countless physical ways but it always implies more than a physical act. Being loved makes a person feel and experience his value and worth. A human being needs to be productive and creative at the level of his talents and abilities. All these needs and more, with all their accompanying desires, wishes, feelings, emotions, thoughts, dreams, actions, fill to the brim our conscious awareness and the sum of all these needs we equate as self. It may well reflect a false concept of self. We may feel ourselves to be a being of no more than physical and psychic dimensions. We can see self-fulfillment and perfection within these two dimensions. The truth is that man is more than a summation of all these things. It lies beyond all this and largely outside man's conscious awareness. Man is a spiritual being, expressing himself through physical and psychic dimensions and, more importantly – he may develop or destroy his spiritual self as he does so. At death, man will shed these two dimensions as a snake its skin and a butterfly its cocoon. Then man beholds his naked self, the true self, a spiritual being now changeless and immutable – in a sense forever a devil or angel, albeit, always a human devil or a human angel!

Jesus expounded the doctrine of the Cross. This was not a message only for the Apostles, but for every man and woman who desires to be His Disciple – to follow Him. Mark indicates this is so when he tells us that Jesus *"summoned the crowd with His Disciples."* Here, men are told the very principles that guided and directed the entire life of Jesus. Jesus revealed the secret of His life. What is His Way. What it means to follow in His footsteps. It is not a teaching easily acceptable by men. The nature of man rebels against such a teaching. The reaction of Peter (mirroring the spirit of man) that the doctrine of the Cross is frightening and unacceptable. Indeed, one must be called to be a Christian. Jesus enumerated the principles by

which He lives. He gave four teachings of the way that must guide all Disciples:

> ***(1) If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross and follow in my steps.***

(2) Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will preserve it.

(3) What profit does a man show who gains the whole world and destroys himself in the process? What can a man offer in exchange for his life?

(4) If anyone in this faithless and corrupt age is ashamed of me and my doctrine, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes with the holy angels in his Father's glory.

(Mk. 8:34-38)

In those last words, we hear most clearly Mark's message to the Church in Rome. The Christian who tries to "save" his life by evading martyrdom shall "lose" it in the life to come, but he who endures martyrdom for the sake of Christ, or for the Gospel's sake, shall gain it unto eternal life. The Christian who shrinks from martyrdom does so because he values the things of this world too much. How foolish of him!! It is the end of the ages and Judgment is near. What will it profit to gain the whole world if it separates one from Christ and thereby eternal life?

Jesus asks men not only to accept His Message, but to identify their lives with His life. Three conditions are laid down which must be fulfilled by a loyal follower of Jesus. The first two are decisive and willful decisions on the part of the Disciple. They must deny or forget self and they must carry their cross. The third condition is a continuous one – a never-ending condition. The Disciple must follow Jesus.
The first condition is a self-denial to the point that the Disciple utterly denies and disowns self. He loses sight of self and no longer makes himself the object of his life and actions. To deny self, according to Mark, is to affirm, *"I do not know the man."* It manifests a freedom from oneself – one no longer wills to recognize his own self!

The second condition is to take up the Cross. We find no Jewish parallel for this thought! The Cross is an instrument of death – a mark of death. To carry a Cross meant one was condemned to death – marked for death, and was on the way to death. One sees the end of Christian Discipleship as death of self – one freely accepts this end and resolutely sets his face toward it. Paul refers to it as a crucifying of the flesh for the life of the Spirit: *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and*

desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's lead." (Gal. 5:24) **Carrying the Cross is expressed by the denial of our will in favor of the will of God. Our wills daily lead us in one direction – God's Will crosses our will going another way. Accepting the "cross-out" of our wills in deference to the Will of God is the acceptance of our Cross!**

The third requirement, ***"follow in my steps,"*** **demands a sustained loyalty in discipleship. It demands that no love can ever be greater than the love of Jesus – the love of God. All the Evangelists agree that the emphasis of true discipleship lies upon human willingness. Only the man who consciously places the will of God before his own will and all others has the heart of a true Christian Disciple. In other words, he loves God above all things and with his entire will. Only such men and women have been born from above!** *(Jn. 3:5)* **These words sum up Christian Discipleship: self-denial – the Cross and Jesus!**

When we see what is the very bone of discipleship, we see how much Christianity today is false, a sham, a charade – a lie. The lives of too many pseudo-Christians profess that they are enemies of the Doctrine of the Cross. As Paul wrote to the Philippians:

> ***Unfortunately, many go about in a way which shows them to be enemies of the Cross of Christ. I have often said this to you before; this time I say it with tears. Such as these will end in disaster! Their god is their belly and their glory is in their shame. I am talking about those who are set upon the things of this world.***
>
> ***(Phil. 3:18-19)***

In another place, Paul wrote that this doctrine was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. It was so then and it is so now!

But this "foolish" way of Jesus is the only way to find true life. The secret of life is to give the life of self. It is the life of love – the life of Jesus – the life of the Heavenly Father. It is the Holy Spirit! He who seeks to cling to his own self loses all chance for genuine happiness. Life, as the Creator willed it, can only be found in self-sacrificing love. When Jesus asks us to die to self, it is to die to that illusion of self in order that our true self can come to life. Love that ever grows, grows into God – into eternal life.

An early Cenacle Member read from Father Judge:

There is another lesson that this Cross will teach, but only the favored few will learn it. Some will gaze upon this Cross as they gazed upon it of old, "All they that saw me have laughed me to scorn; they have spoken with the lips and wagged the head." (Ps. 22:8) Others will gaze upon it with love and holy desire. These will enter deeply into its holy mysteries and that which to Jew and Gentile may be but a stumbling block and rock of scandal, to these it will be, "That mystery which has been hidden from ages and generations but now is manifested to His saints." (Col. 1:26[1]) My dear children, may it be our grace to be numbered among that chosen few.

Our problem is not whether there is life after death. That is an academic question, the answer to which in no way alters the eternal facts. Our problem here is how to obtain the grace to live our lives in such a way that when death occurs, we will not have lost the opportunity for eternal happiness. This doctrine of Jesus – His Doctrine of the Cross – is the answer for life now and in eternity!

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[1] - Probably from Old Duvay Version of Bible.

CHAPTER 11

SON OF MAN

INTRODUCTION

Among all the titles applied to Jesus, *"Son of Man"* originated with Jesus Himself. From the Hebrew, the word *"bar nasha"* meaning "The Man" was translated into the Greek as "Son of Man" and thus passed into the English text. In the Aramaic, it carries the meaning of a human being. Jesus called Himself "bar nasha," implying to His hearers that He was no more than a man. Within a small elite circle, it was known as a Messianic title. Certain apocalyptic writers understood "Son of Man" in the sense of supernatural man, pre-existent in Heaven from all eternity with God. He was identified as the *"Anointed"* the *"Elect,"* the *"Righteous One"* of Jewish expectation, who was destined to come with clouds and to exercise judgment as the Agent and Representative of God. The title appears in the Book of Daniel where we read:

> ***One like a son of man coming, on the clouds of Heaven; When He reached the Ancient One and was presented before him, He received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13-14)***

At the time of Jesus, this text was interpreted as a symbolic representation of Israel who, after a long period of trials and sufferings, had finally been vindicated and exalted by God. Israel is referred to as the Son of Man in contrast to the nations of the world who were symbolized as beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard and a fourth beast beyond description. In this version of Daniel, the Son of Man came <u>to</u> God and not <u>from</u> God. For the majority of the people, the use of "Son of Man" did not awaken any Messianic ideas and was a safe title for Jesus to use. Although in reality, it was a title capable of conveying the divine origin of Jesus as expressed in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel: The Word made Flesh. No doubt the early Church

interpreted the expression in this manner.

It is highly possible that Jesus referred to Himself as the Son of Man to identify His life and mission with Son of Man as described in Ezekiel. Here, the word is used some eighty-seven times and very aptly expresses Jesus' divine commission to serve in lowliness and in suffering. The description of "Son of Man" in Ezekiel parallels closely the life of Jesus. He appeared as a man filled with the spirit of the Lord who must dwell among a rebellious people: ***"Son of Man, you live in the midst of a rebellious house; they have eyes to see but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear." (Ez. 12:2)*** **He possessed a certain popularity among the crowd, but they did not obey his words:**

> ***As for you, Son of Man, Your countrymen are talking about You along the walls and in the doorways of the houses. They say to one another, "Come and hear the latest word that comes from the Lord." My people come to You as people always do; they sit down before You and hear Your words, but they will not obey them.***
>
> ***(Ez. 33:30-32)***

The people believed the day of judgment to be far off: ***"Son of Man, listen to the house of Israel saying, 'The vision He sees is a long way off; He prophesies of the distant future!'" (Ez. 12:27)*** **The Son of Man was a watchman of Israel observing her sins and proclaiming disaster and judgment because of impenitence. He announced the coming of the good Shepherd, the cleansing with the Holy Spirit in the last days, the Resurrection from the dead when the very spirit of the Lord will impart life to the dead. He foretold the future glory of Israel.**

It was difficult for the early Church to separate the concept of Jesus before the Resurrection and the concept of Jesus after the Resurrection. Its Easter faith and vision constantly flowed into its presentation of the earthly life of Jesus. As a result, we have a somewhat paradoxical presentation of Jesus, in which He appears as the heavenly man of the apocalyptic writings – where the Son of Man was the Representative of God on earth, the ultimate Judge of the world and Lord of the Sabbath and then, on the other hand, Jesus as the Son of Man of Ezekiel and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. In the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, we read:

Through His suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt He shall bear.... Because He surrendered Himself to death and was counted among the wicked; and He shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses. Therefore, I will give Him His portion among the great. (Is. 53:12)

How well Mark expresses this when he writes, "The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve – to give His life in ransom for the many." (Mk. 10:45) The Son of Man passed to His glory by way of the Cross, giving His life for the ransom of mankind.

The Scriptures foretold the sufferings of the Messiah, but the disciples, as the people, had not understood. Their hearts had been hardened. They were filled with a spirit of personal ambition and of self-seeking. For personal reasons, the disciples did not want Jesus to suffer. They had no desire to follow a man of sorrows. They desired a man made glorious by His victories over the enemies of Israel. Natural pride rebels against following a defeated man. According to their values, the sufferings of the Messiah would serve no purpose. Worse still, if it be God's will that the Messiah suffer, it may likewise be His will that the disciples share in His sufferings. They wanted no part of this. Their rejection of Jesus as a suffering Messiah revealed how much their own spirits were governed by the standards of the world. They were men of the flesh. In Luke's account, the Resurrected Jesus addressed these words to the disciples,

"What little sense you have! How slow you are to believe all that the prophets have announced! Did not the Messiah have to undergo all this so as to enter into His glory?" Beginning, then, with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted for them every passage of Scripture which referred to Him. (Lk. 24:25-27)

When Jesus called Himself 'the Man,' He identified completely with mankind. But it is difficult for us today, trained in the teaching that Jesus is the Son of God, to appreciate in any great degree how utterly Jesus identified with us. When John describes the Incarnation in the Fourth Gospel, he speaks of the Word made Flesh – the *'sarx'* – and it implies much more than a human body. It implies that Jesus assumed this humanity, touched by sin, with all its built-in alienation and rebelliousness to God. The very fact of the God's Son assuming humanity hurled Him into a life of pain and suffering. The Book of Hebrews plainly expresses this truth when it says

that Jesus *"was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned." (Heb. 4:15)* The life of Jesus was sinless, but apparently, His life was not free from the effects of sin. Otherwise, He could have not known temptation – He could not have experienced death. His earthly life would have been but a divine charade. Paul writes that Jesus *"was in the form of God.... He emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of Men." (Phil. 2:6-7)* For this reason the Book of Hebrews writes, *"we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness." (Heb. 4:15a)*

Jesus identified with humanity and therefore, all men can identify themselves with Him. He felt the cold and the heat; He knew thirst and hunger. He longed to be appreciated and understood; He sought to be loved. He suffered when men rejected Him, spoke evil about Him, turned people against Him. Because of the sensitivity of His spirit to the holiness of God, the evilness of sin and the sinfulness of men, He experienced inexpressible suffering in mind and spirit. As His life drew to a close, He spoke of dying of sorrow. The truly extraordinary thing of His life was the circumstances of His life – circumstances small and great – no different from any human existence.

It is not in accomplishing miracles that a disciple truly imitates Jesus – but in his obedience. Paul describes the human life of Jesus precisely by the virtue of obedience; *"he humbled himself, obediently accepting even death, death on a Cross!" (Phil. 2:8)* This obedient death was the cause of the world's salvation, as was the sin of disobedience the cause of man's fall from grace. Jesus' calling Himself *"bar nasha"* identified Himself with Adam, called in Genesis, until Chapter Four verse twenty-five, *"the man."* Paul saw the significance and called Jesus the New Adam. Paul writes,

> ***Scripture has it that Adam, the first man, became a living soul; the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit. (1Cor. 15:45)***
>
> ***If death began its reign through one man because of his offense, much more shall those who receive the overflowing grace and gift of justice live and reign through the one man, Jesus Christ.***
>
> ***To sum up then: Just as a single offense brought condemnation to all men, a single righteous act brought all men acquittal and life. Just as through one man's disobedience all became sinners, so through one man's obedience all shall become just. (Rm. 5:17-19)***

For Mark, Jesus is the Messiah, not in spite of His sufferings, but precisely because of His sufferings.

The whole life of Jesus is summed in the word 'obedience.' His extraordinary obedience flowed from this spirit identified as meek and humble. Humility is the foundation of obedience, as pride is the mother of rebellion. By God's grace, the imitation of Jesus Christ is not beyond any of our lives. In our exercise of humility and obedience, our lives assume a Christian Character. The author of 'One Solitary Life' expressed well how ordinary and imitatable the life of Jesus of Nazareth is:

> ***He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village, where He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years, He was in itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a home. He didn't go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place he was born. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies and went through a mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While He was dying – His executioners gambled for His garments, the only property He had on earth. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He is the central figure of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that… ONE SOLITARY LIFE!***

As an introduction to the extraordinary event to follow, Jesus declared, *"I assure you, among those standing here there are some who will not taste death until they see the reign of God established in power." (Mk. 9:1)* This prophecy was fulfilled during the Transfiguration of Jesus. We owe this record to the eyewitness account of Peter. The occurrence is related by all three Synoptic Writers. Mark ties the Transfiguration with what took place in Caesarea Philippi by stating it occurred six days later. It was there the disciples

received the prophecy that *"the Son of Man had to suffer much, be rejected by the elders, the chief priest, and the scribes, be put to death, and rise three days later." (Mk. 8:31)* What follows encourages men to accept the Divine Plan.

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Jesus took Peter, James and John and climbed to the top of a high mountain in order to be alone. When an event demanded the utmost secrecy, Jesus only involved the needed number of witnesses. Christian tradition, from earliest days, identified the place as Mount Tabor, ten miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee – a mountain no more than 1000 feet high. Some scholars prefer the 9200ft. high Mt. Hermon twelve miles northeast of Caesarea Philippi as the site of the Transfiguration. On the Mount of Transfiguration, as Jesus prayed and the disciples slept, a marvelous spiritual experience occurred. From the testimonies of those closely associated with great spiritual men and women, we are told that at times of prayer when the Spirit of God so touches the spirit of the saint, an ecstatic state occurs at which point the entire Person – body and soul – is effused by the Divine Presence and the physical features of the saint assume an unearthly beauty, as when the sun shines through a beautiful stained glass window. The saint is truly transfigured by the Glory of the Lord. From the religious writings of the Jews, we know they expected the righteous to be transfigured with celestial glory and resplendent beauty in the end of time. *(1Cor. 15:51 and Syriac Baruch 51:3)* The redeemed were pictured as clothed in new and white clothing symbolizing their eternal life. We read in Revelations, *"The victor shall go clothed in white," (Rev. 3:5)* and *"They stood before the throne and the Lamb, dressed in long white robes and holding palm branches in their hands." (Rev. 7:9)* Today, we hear most about the aura around people that some claim to see. The origin of the halo around the head of saints arose because people testified to seeing a light around the saint. It is said that during a documentary film about Mother Teresa of India, most film taken outdoors was overexposed, but film shot indoors was perfect and revealed an aura of light around her body. From her own mystical experience, St. Teresa of Avila understood that God, at times, grants extraordinary spiritual experiences to His saints to prepare them for the trials that lie ahead, or to show them what one day will permanently be theirs due to the hardships they suffer for His name's sake. This is to encourage them to continue in His will.

'Ineffable' is a word used to describe a mystical experience. It means the experience cannot be expressed verbally for there is nothing in human experience to which it can be compared. In the Scriptural report of the Transfiguration, we have a human attempt to describe the ineffable. Luke relates,

> *While He was praying, His face changed in appearance and His clothes became dazzlingly white.... Peter and those with Him had fallen into a deep sleep; but awakening, they saw His glory and likewise, saw the two men who were standing with Him.*
>
> *(Lk. 9:29-32)*

Matthew writes, *"He was transfigured before their eyes. His face became as dazzling as the sun, His clothes as radiant as light." (Matt. 17:2)* And Mark adds, *"whiter than the work any bleacher could make them." (Mk. 9:3)* The event recalls the scene in Exodus, in which the face of Moses was glorified while he talked with God. We read:

> *As Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the commandments in his hands, he did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant while he conversed with the Lord.*
>
> *(Ex. 34:29)*

The New Testament account implies more than a reflective Divine Glory on the face of Jesus. The word 'transfigured' translates the Greek word 'metamorphothe,' which implies the changing of form – it implies an extrinsic and intrinsic change in the very body of Jesus. It indicates that Jesus temporarily exchanged the normal human form that He bore during his earthly life, for that glorious form to be possessed after His exaltation to Heaven. The three disciples were granted a glimpse of Jesus in the final state of lordship and glory to be His after His death and Resurrection.

All three Evangelists identify the two men talking with Jesus as Moses and Elijah. Luke says, *"They appeared in glory and spoke of His passage, which He was about to fulfill in Jerusalem." (Lk. 9:31)* In the Book of Revelation, both Moses and Elijah are identified by their supernatural activities as the two witnesses of the Messiah. From the time of the writing of Deuteronomy, it was believed that God would one day send another *"prophet like me... from among your own kinsmen; to whom you shall listen." (Dt. 18:15)* They believe

that a voice from the cloud would call this prophecy to mind and confirm Jesus as the New Moses. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Their presence is a symbolic manifestation that the Old Testament testifies that Jesus is the Messiah and in Jesus, the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled. The Divine Voice bid the disciples to harken not only to the Law and the Prophets, but to Jesus. The disappearance of Moses and Elijah symbolize that the Law and the Prophets have been replaced by the Beloved Son of God.

Mark relates, "A cloud came, overshadowing them, and out of the cloud – a voice, *"'This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to Him.'" (Mk. 9:7)* From Old Testament history, we know that the cloud was the *'Shechenah'* manifesting the Divine Presence and symbolizing the Divine Glory. We read in Exodus,

> ***"When Aaron announced this to the whole Israelite community, they turned toward the desert, and lo, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud!" (Ez. 16:10)***
>
> ***The Lord also told him [Moses], "I am coming to you in a dense cloud, so that when the people hear me speaking with you, they may always have faith in you also." (Ez. 19:9)***
>
> ***After Moses had gone up, a cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled upon Mount Sinai. The cloud covered it for six days, and on the seventh day, He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. To the Israelites, the glory of the Lord was seen as a consuming fire on the mountaintop. But Moses passed into the midst of the cloud as he went up on the mountain; and there he stayed for forty days and forty nights. (Ez. 24:15)***

We read at the dedication of the Temple of Solomon:

> ***When the priests left the holy place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord so that the priests could no longer minister because of the cloud, since the Lord's glory had filled the temple of the Lord. (1Kings 8:10)***

The Second Book of Maccabees relates the return of God's glory in the final age. Jeremiah prophesied,

The place [of the Ark of the Covenant] is to remain unknown until God gathers His people together again and shows them mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord will be seen in the cloud, just as it appeared in the time of Moses and when Solomon prayed that the Place might be gloriously sanctified! (2Mac. 2:7-8)

When Mark relates that the disciples were covered by the cloud, he indicates that, through their relationship with Jesus, they are being brought into the Divine Presence. Due to the death He endured, they shared in the Divine Life. It is a foretaste of the heavenly glory theirs as faithful disciples of Jesus. Our Lord had initiated His disciples into the mystery of His Passion and made it clear that despite these sufferings and death, He is the Beloved Son of God. He has shown them that the Passion is the prelude to the Divine Glory. They must go down the mountain to fulfill that Will of God.

The disciples utterly failed to understand the vision. Peter's words – their impulsive character – are in keeping with his character and with an occasion of such a 'mind-blowing' experience. Peter says, *"Rabbi, how good it is for us to be here! Let us erect three booths on this site, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." (Mk. 9:5)* Luke adds, *"He did not really know what he was saying."* Perhaps, as a revolt against the suffering to come, Peter wished to prolong the experience. It was God's will for Christ and the disciples to return to the world and enter upon the path of suffering. It was, therefore, not good for Peter to remain on Tabor. It was <u>nice</u> and <u>easy</u> to remain on Tabor. It was <u>good</u> and <u>loving</u> to go down! God's Will is always good and loving, but not always nice and easy!

The appearance of Moses and Elijah fulfilled two expectations among the Jews that before the end of the ages, a prophet like Moses would come and Elijah would appear heralding the beginning of a New Age. The vision of Mt. Tabor declared the fulfillment of the history of Israel and the dawning of the history of Israel and the dawning of the New Age with the coming of Jesus.

The vision ends with the command, *"This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him."* When the voice fell silent, Jesus was alone. From then on, only in the voice of Jesus was the voice of God to be heard – only in the Person of Jesus would the Divine Presence be with the Church. The heavenly vision

passed – the message remained. The vision had once again emphasized the message: *"Listen to Him!"* A message so difficult for man to hear and accept!

With these words, Mark recalls the Church from a fanatical longing for the end to come. He calls the Christian Community back to listening to the Word – to the Good News – the very Word that presents the Sufferings of the Son of Man. He dispels dreams that the days of glory had already come upon this earth. When Mark writes, *"Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them – only Jesus." (Mk. 9:8)* He teaches that on this earth, Jesus and His Spirit are all that is given to the Church – and Him Crucified!

As they came down the mountain, Jesus strictly enjoined them not to tell anyone what they had seen, before the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Mark uses this time to move from the theology of glory back to the theology of the Cross. They then questioned Jesus concerning Elijah. We may hear in this the Church's answer, at that time, to the Scribes' assertions that Jesus was not the Messiah, nor could the end of the ages be at hand since Elijah the Prophet had not yet returned – as foretold by the Scriptures. The point of the narrative is clear but the present order is difficult to follow. It has been suggested that the presentation should read:

> ***And they kept this word of His to themselves, though they continued to discuss what 'to rise from the dead' meant and why the Scriptures say of the Son of Man that He must suffer much and be despised. And they asked Him, saying, "How is it that the scribes say that Elijah must first come?" He told them, "Elijah will indeed come first and restore everything. Let me assure you, Elijah has already come. They did entirely as they pleased with Him, as the Scriptures say of Him."***

Jesus teaches that John the Baptist came in the spirit of Elijah and thereby fulfilled the prophecy. If he did not restore all things it is because men did their evil will upon him. Herodias, the new Jezebel, was more successful than the first. Mark sees the destiny of John the Baptist – the new Elijah who had been so ill-treated – as a prophecy of the suffering of the Messiah. The fact that John's death was already an accomplished fact serves to underline the near approach of Jesus' own final destiny – a destiny the disciples were completely unable to grasp and accept.

THE POSSESSED BOY

As they came down the mountain, the disciples encountered the very thing Peter would have preferred to have avoided by staying on Mount Tabor. They encountered a problem that revealed their own deficiencies. Mark relates this narrative to emphasize what is involved in the Resurrection from the dead – the victory of Jesus over the power of evil. Beneath the surface of the narrative, one can almost see the sacramental life of the Church. Mark desires to stress that the very power of the Risen Lord and His victory over evil was to be found in the Sacraments of the Church. And, if the Church left the hopes of people disappointed, it was not the deficiency of Christ's power and love, but the failure of the Church in its faith in Jesus. If the Church failed to do good in His Name, it was attributable to a failure to rely upon His Presence and Power. Jesus still remains and when the body fails us, we must push past it to the Lord's personal Presence!!

The realistic scene now pictured may truly symbolize the Christian Community after the departure of Jesus. ***(Mk. 9:14-29)*** **A man in need came to Jesus in the Christian Community because the disciples were unable to aid the man. The man's faith in the Christian Community and therefore in Jesus was badly shaken. The enemies of the Church certainly judged Jesus by the defects of the Church. In the narrative, Jesus arrived unexpectedly on the scene and a man in the crowd told Jesus,** ***"Teacher... I have brought my son to you because he is possessed.... Just now, I asked your disciples to expel him, but they were unable to do so."*** **Jesus replied by saying to those present,** ***"What an unbelieving lot you are! How long must I remain with you? How long can I endure you?"*** **Jesus was not dealing with an individual case, but the universal problem of lack of faith. The lack of faith was the primary cause of Jesus' sufferings and the Church's limitations. The disciples lacked the authority to dispel the demon due to their disbelief. That which distinguished the disciples from the Scribes and the crowd was to whom they turned in time of need.**

Jesus' situation with the disciples appeared nearly hopeless. The way to avoid pessimism and despair at such times is to take what immediate action one can. No matter how hopeless a situation appears, there is always something that can be done. Anyone who listens to the news or reads a newspaper could despair over the world conditions and give into hopelessness and despair. This is precisely the plan and the desire of the Enemy! Our

Lord encourages us to do the good we can in our corner of the Church. We can never submit to evil and admit defeat if we are to be Christian. Paul tells us, *"Do not be overcome by evil. Overcome evil with good!"* When we despair and quit, evil has overcome us.

Jesus told the father to bring the possessed boy to Him. When the boy was brought to Jesus, the evil spirit demonstrated its power and control over the boy, challenging the power of Jesus as it had done with His disciples. They were unable to free the boy from the evil spirit. We read,

> ***The spirit caught sight of Jesus and immediately threw the boy into convulsions. As he fell to the ground, he began to roll around and foam at the mouth. Then Jesus questioned the father, 'How long has this been happening to him?' (Mk. 9:20-21)***

The father related that this destructive and evil force had been operative since childhood. Mark certainly intends this to symbolize the hold of the Evil One over human nature itself. Only Jesus has the power to deliver mankind from such evil. The father said to Him, *"If out of the kindness of your heart you can do anything to help us, please do!"* The father identified with the sufferings of his son. It was commonly held in the early Church that children of a believing household were, in some sense, included in the faith of their parents and could hope to enjoy the benefits of their faith. The father's words expressed his doubt in the power of Jesus even as he appealed for help. Jesus emphasized the problem to be a lack of faith by the father when He responded, *"If you can? Everything is possible to a man who trusts."* The father's lack of trust set limits on what God could or would do through Jesus. The father cried out, *"I believe; help my unbelief!"* It was a cry for aid to faith in the pains of birth. It was not the unbelief of the Pharisees but a half-faith filled with doubts and fears which needed divine power to bring to life. It well illustrates the truth that fullness of faith comes from God and not from self. It is impossible to be confident unless one is relying upon God's action. Faith in God can set no limits to the power of God.
Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the boy,

> ***"Mute and deaf spirit, I command you: Get out of him and never enter him again!" Shouting, and throwing the boy into convulsions, it came out of him; the boy became like a corpse, which caused many to say, "He is dead!" (Mk. 9:26)***

The healing of the boy is described as a challenge to the power of Jesus – a conflict with the enemy in which Jesus stressed his personal authority with a very emphatic, *"I command you!"* On the surface, it appears to be no more than the healing of a sick boy, but underneath, one sees the demonstration of a power that will one day raise the dead – *"Jesus took him by the hand and raised him up."* The last enemy of mankind is death and the power of Jesus is greater than death itself. Here we have the answer to the disciples' question, *"What does rise from the dead mean?"*

"When Jesus arrived at the house, his disciples began to ask him privately, 'Why is it that we could not expel it?' He told them, 'This kind you can drive out only by prayer.'" (Mk. 9:28) **If the disciples were seeking some special secret or trick for exorcism, they missed the point. The point is that all power is found in God and not in the inner being of the believer. In dealing with the power of evil – man's Ancient Enemy – there is no room for human achievement. It is not a matter of saying prayers and fasting (as some have added), but of man depending on God and not on self. Effective and dynamic discipleship does not result from human piety, but from divine action within and through the disciple. The disciple who has learned to pray is the one who realizes his own inadequacy and becomes entirely dependent upon God.**

When Jesus said, *"This kind can only be cast out through prayer,"* it recalls to mind the words of Pope Paul VI, recently quoted,

> ***It is not a question of one devil but man, all creatures of God, but fallen, because of their rebellion damnations; a whole mysterious world, upset by an unhappy drama, of which we know very little. We know many things, however, about this diabolical world, which concerns our life and the whole history of man. From the fall of Adam, the Devil acquired a certain dominion over them (mankind), from which only Christ's Redemption can save us. It is a story that is still going on.***

St. Paul writes,

> ***Our battle is not against human forces, but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above. (Eph. 6:12)***

He defines human existence as a war of the Spirits. We are not truly at war with the flesh – it is not a War of the Worlds – it is 'Star Wars,' the War of the Spirits. The Scriptures picture Satan as a Falling Star sweeping down a third of the Stars of Heaven as he falls. These fallen stars now compose the Kingdom of Darkness.

The problem we see with the disciples is not attributed to ignorance and stubbornness, but to diabolic control – a degree of possession. Jesus is at war with unseen powers for the wills of His apostles. Evil power has a grasp upon them. Jesus told James and John, *"You do not know what spirit you are of!"* The warfare is between two spirits in which our very lives are at stake – it is warfare waged within ourselves by the Holy Spirit against the spirit of evil.

> ***Evil Spirit aims at attacking and destroying the humanness of each human being. This humanness is neither a physical nor a psychophysical condition. It is a spiritual capacity possessed by each man and woman and child. (Dr. Malachi Martin)***

There was an ancient Jewish belief that God brought man into the world to confront the Prince of this World, Lucifer, fallen before man began, and to drive him out of the world. Since the evil spirits are created beings, they cannot separate themselves from created nature.

Men are unaware of themselves as spiritual beings – the conscious awareness of self is riveted to the physical and psychophysical world. We see our sins flowing from the world around us – from the flesh with all its desires. Sin does not proceed simply from our human consciousness whatever it may be – it is born in a consciousness far more spiritual than our own. When men achieve detachment from this world – when they have crucified their flesh with all its evil passion, they gain St. Paul's spiritual insight – they discover that they have only just begun to deal with sin. They discover the spiritual dimension of their being. From this spirit rises a force of evil that previously used the world and the flesh to entrap them. Our sin is always spiritual in its final substance, both within ourselves and the principle from which it proceeds. It is a personal power that is characterized by deceit – lying is its nature; pretense is its character and shield. Many poor men and women never come to discover the real sources of their problems. [An exorcist in Rome once said that when mankind really comes to understand the sources of its psychic problems, it will put old Siggy on the shelf of Ancient History.]

The faculties of our body's psychic dimension are but instruments upon which the evil spirits play their tunes. Because of their superior nature, they have no problem stirring the feelings, the emotions – filling the imagination with images and the mind with thoughts. These evil spiritual intelligences make use of visual impressions and abstract ideas to enslave our intelligence and mind, in order to keep it away from a knowledge of the Divine Spirit. What better deception and deceit than to hide the world of the spirit – to tell the lie that such a world does not exist – and call all this talk of evil or good spirits so much superstitious foolishness.

Any human being who has made true spiritual advancement comes to an experimental awareness of the power of evil and its personal control over his will. The powers of darkness only permit themselves to be seen or discovered when all those secondary things, those which they have used to enslave us from childhood, have been removed. A person must move from struggling in the superficial levels of his being – with the world's illusions and the flesh's promises – into the dark abyss of his own will, which is truly a will enslaved by evil spiritual forces. Without faith, a person faces despair as he enters the dark night of the spirit. A person beholds his captivity to evil – his need for deliverance. Faith must reveal the strength and Presence of God in the spirit. He sees himself as nothing but weakness, but Jesus is his strength. In his weakness, he finds hope and strength in the power of God. A person moves from the terrible experience of the power of evil over himself to a life-giving experience of the Holy Spirit, whose presence within the darkness of the soul is experienced as fighting with him against *"the power of darkness."* As the person more and more allies his will with the Holy Spirit – he seeks to walk in the Spirit – the Holy Spirit can more and more fill his spirit, his mind, his body until he becomes the Paradise the Creator intended – but which sin hindered and destroyed. He knows now in the depths of his being that *"It is no longer I who live; it is Christ Who lives in me!"* The Kingdom of God truly comes in him as in Heaven!

As one spiritual writer has expressed,

> ***Before Baptism, the spirit of evil lies in wait in the depths of the soul and from all sides, as it were, the Spirit of God calls to it in vain. After Baptism and the gift of faith, the Spirit of God drives out the spirit of evil and takes his place. Then it is the turn of the spirit of evil to attack us from without (Now he works in the world around us, the people around us. He can work in our bodies and***

in our psychic world.) and to plunge his tentacles into us, reaching up toward that summit (our spirit), now inaccessible to him so long as we hold to the faith, where the Spirit of God now dwells. And the whole purpose of the spiritual combat is to have the Spirit take more and more complete possession of us; from the intimate depths of the heart to our whole soul, with our sensibility and even our body given up to His influence, so that finally, He comes to shine out through us victoriously upon the world. (Diadocus of Photike)

We do well to bear in mind the story of the unclean spirit going out of a man and then returning with other evil spirits. It tells us that we are always in a process of either being possessed by God or by evil spirits.

We do know that in this evil Kingdom there are hierarchies of evil spirits. Some are much more powerful than others. We also know there are degrees of possession. The power and time needed to free a possessed person will depend upon the person and the experience of the exorcists.

Dr. Malachi Martin, who studied in depth many cases of possession and their exorcisms, has this to share with us about the process of possession:

It is fair to say that usually before either the target of possession or those near him are aware of it, the actual process of possession has begun – often the earliest lines of 'invitation' can be followed back into childhood.

The general outlines of the process of possession run as follows:

First, the actual entry point, the point at which an Evil Spirit enters an individual and a decision, however tenuous, is made by the victim to allow that entry. It appears always to be made by means of the spirit's knowledge of a trait of character or some special interest or vocation of the victim. In every case, knowledge of these special traits and interests – none either good or bad in and of itself – and by clever appeal in special relation to these traits and interests, entry was made. The victim vaguely knows that the source of the offered help was neither a human being nor any religious source. The source was always vague, always reassuring. It always alienated them from their surroundings and from those nearest to them. The general feeling was that "great things could happen" to them or that "special success" would be theirs if they were to "listen" or to "think along these lines"

or "wait for more." At this stage, there never appeared to be an overt suggestion against religion, or religious faith, or against Jesus. At some point during this earliest stage, there arrives a delicate moment when each person chooses to consider the particular offer made to him or her. They made such a choice, and they had a sense of violating their consciences when they made it, though at the time, in some cases, it seemed a fairly minor violation.

Then the second stage: A stage of erroneous judgments – by the possessed – in vital matters, as a direct result of the allowed presence of the possessing spirit and apparently, in preparation for the next stage. These erroneous judgments begin generally in the area where the individual places the greatest value and enjoys the greatest sense of personal accomplishment and freedom. During this stage, the original strength, beauty and idealism of the individual are slowly, piece by piece, turned upside down. If the victim, by now partially possessed, does not withdraw consent and succeed in freeing himself, with help or by dint of his own strength of will and resistance, he will arrive at one sure, critical moment.

The third stage: He will be presented with an increasing and finally unremitting pressure to allow an "inner control" by an alien force – a presence he clearly feels is alien to himself, as a result of which the possessed loses control of his will, and so loses control of his decisions and his actions. This control will affect his thoughts, emotions, acts of will, intentions, likes and dislikes. Once a person has yielded, he starts to receive 'instructions' – ready-made judgments and attitudes arise in him, even words on his lips and actions in his limbs. Once control is yielded, virtually all personal freedom ceases from that point on. This is the most profound personal choice that can be made. The choice can only be made by the person; it can never be made for him. At every new step, and during every moment of possession, the consent of the victim is necessary, or possession cannot be successful. The consent may be verbal, but always involves choice of action. Once initial consent has been given, its withdrawal becomes more and more difficult as time goes on.

Once the third stage is secure, extended control proceeds and may potentially reach the point of completion – perfect possession. (Many exorcists believe from this point there is no return!) If the fundamental option is made to relinquish freedom of will, possession has then been accomplished in its most essential and conclusive step. The simultaneous decision is to reject God and Jesus. Divine life is no longer his. All luminosity for the soul is progressively

snuffed out. Into that vacuum, the Evil Spirit pours its own light and knowledge.

Often, the possessed are forewarned of physical threats of any ordinary kind. They are enlightened about opportunities to pursue their individual satisfaction or prosperity, are given additional weight, fresh information, mental energy, and added power with people. When possession is achieved, expansion of diabolic control is dramatic and rapid. It puts the possessed on their guard against circumstances, people, places, and objects closely associated with God and with Jesus. It will lead the possessed to avoid situations which constitute a threat to the possessing power of Evil Spirit. Possessed people who have been successfully exorcised often recount how, at some point, they began to make an effort to control their thoughts, their wills, their memories. It is that strange and terrible struggle between the rebelling victim and the evil spirit protesting the rebellion that, in a strange way, begins to produce the repulsive, disquieting, and frightening events so often associated with the possessed and which lead their families or friends to seek help on their behalf.

To assume the role of the exorcist for a seriously possessed person is heroic charity. The exorcism is done in the Name of Jesus, through the Power of Jesus Christ and by the authority of the Church. Nevertheless, the exorcist takes the place of Jesus – without having the immunity of Jesus from the attack of the Evil Spirit upon the person of the exorcist. The exorcist confronts the naked power of evil and wickedness. Their lives are often dramatically curtailed because of their involvement in the exorcism. They literally must be willing to lay down their lives to save the soul of the possessed. As the Good Shepherd, they must be willing the lay down their lives for the lost sheep. We see a hint of the danger involved in exorcism in Acts 19:13-17. Some itinerant Jewish exorcists once tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were possessed by evil spirits, saying, *"I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches."* Another time, when the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, were doing this, the evil spirit answered, *"Jesus I recognize, Paul I know; but who are you?"* Then the man with the vile spirit sprang at them and overpowered them all. He dealt with them so violently that they fled from his house naked and bruised.

When we understand all that is entailed in exorcism, it is easy to understand Jesus' reply to John.

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we tried to stop him because he is not of our company." Jesus said in reply, "Do not try to stop him. No man who performs a miracle using my name can at the same time speak ill of me. Anyone who is not against us is with us." (Mk. 9:38-40)

Jesus then left the safety of the North and began his journey south with His face set for Jerusalem. He moved with caution through Galilee, avoiding public attention. He prudently guarded against anything arising that would impede the Divine Plan. He had no will but that of the Father. He completely denied His own self and chose, for His path, the Divine Will – the way of the Cross. In the time that remained, He sought to prepare the disciples for His departure and their continuation of His mission after His death and Resurrection. To them, He revealed further circumstances about His coming Passion. He knew he would be personally betrayed and handed over to the evil wills of men, *"The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men who will put Him to death; three days after His death He will rise." (Mk. 9:31)*

AS LITTLE CHILDREN

Mark clearly demonstrates how foreign was the spirit of the disciples from that of the Lord. *"Though they failed to understand His words, they were afraid to question Him." (Mk. 9:32)* They did not understand His way nor did they desire to do so. They had no desire for self-denial. Their spirit was of self-exaltation and self-seeking, which often leads to despising of others. They were motivated to increase their self-importance and esteem in their own eyes and that of others. This spirit expressed itself in a secret argument among themselves about their relative importance and greatness. When Jesus asked them to share their conversation and thoughts with Him, they refused. Within our own lights, how important and impressive so many things appear and yet, when subjected to the Presence of God and viewed in the light of eternity, how small, mean and dirty so many human thoughts, desires, ambitions and deeds appear. The disciples fulfilled, in truth, the words of Jesus:

Everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may plainly be seen that what he does is done in God. (Jn. 3:20-21)

If we Christians always sought to subject all we think, say and do to the Presence of God, how much more realistic and blessed our Christian lives would be.

Jesus forced the disciples to see their ambitions in the light of Divine Truth – their spirits very opposite of His. They desired to stay away from people – to exalt themselves above others – they were lacking in both humility and love. How unchristian and ungodly they were. God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son into the world. Not to condemn or judge the world, but to save. Jesus so loved mankind that He was willing to lay down His life that others may live. At this point, Jesus called the Twelve around Him and took a small child in His arms. He symbolized by doing so, His love for the small and weak ones of this world. He revealed their true dignity in the eyes of God when He identified His very self with the little ones of the earth – the little sparrows that only the loving eye of the Father beholds. Jesus told His disciples,

> ***If anyone wishes to rank first, he must remain the last one of all and the servant of all…. Whoever welcomes a child such as this for my sake – welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me – welcomes not me, but Him who sent me.***

He stressed the loving concern that must be extended to the little ones:

> ***Any one who gives you a drink of water because you belong to Christ will not, I assure you, go without his reward. But it would be better if anyone who leads astray one of these simple believers were to be plunged in the sea with a great millstone fastened around his neck. (Mk. 9:35-37, 41-42)***

Being a servant is of the essence of discipleship – if we serve in love. But, a stumbling block to some, a scandal to others, is the very denial and negation of all that Jesus stands for. Jesus makes it very clear that a man has two alternatives in this world: He must choose between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Darkness. He must willfully choose life and enter upon the path that leads to life or accept the alternative – Hell. Jesus uses contemporary images and expressions to describe the hell that is in store for the man who excludes himself from God. He refers to it as *"Gehenna"* – a place *"where the worm dies not and the fire is never extinguished. Everyone*

will be salted with fire." (Mk. 9:48-49) **Jesus forcefully teaches that a man can cut himself off from life and from the Kingdom of God through abuse of his fellow man. In the face of these alternatives, there is only one reasonable course for anyone to adopt: abandoning whatever proves an obstacle either to self or to any others entering eternal life. Only love saves us from evil and Hell, but the love of God cannot save us from evil nor Hell, except by enabling us to love as God loves. Our Lord tells us, *"Keep salt in your hearts and you will be at peace with one another." (Mk. 9:50)* The *"salt"* in our heart is humility – which preserves our unity through loving services of one another. The whole life of the Son of Mary says to us, *"Learn of me for I am meek and humble of Heart and you will find peace for your souls."***

CHAPTER 12

STANDARD OF DISCIPLESHIP

INTRODUCTION

We read in Chapter Ten that Jesus then moved south toward Jerusalem and the fulfillment of His Divine Destiny. The life of Jesus sets the pattern of discipleship and the teachings of Jesus illuminate His Way. The Way of Jesus is always opposed to the way of man. His teachings create tensions in human hearts and minds. His Way is the Way of God – a Way lying beyond the comprehension of man. It establishes criteria and values that not only leave reason in the dark, but confound its lights and contradict it findings. It is the Way of the Spirit and it always leaves the flesh in darkness and in pain. As St. Paul writes, *"If anyone is in Christ, He is a new Creation: The old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (2Cor. 5:17)* The Way of Jesus is the New Way and yet ancient, for it is the Eternal Way of God. The Way of Jesus imposes serious moral responsibilities, for it incorporates one into the very life of Jesus to such a degree that disciples become the Body of Christ. For this reason, Christians are called *"salt of the earth"* and *"light of the world."* Because of this, the redemptive work of Jesus continues even now in the world. The Christian spirit is re-created by Grace with the potential to live a new life – a life lived in union with God, enabling the Christian to be something unique in society and in his relationship with other persons. A Christian knows it is the destiny of his body, mind and spirit to be a veritable image of the Author of Light. The saints are spoken of as shining stars in a world made night by sin. As a person seeks to grow in God's grace, becoming more a light in this world and personally freed from the darkness of sin, he must experience the sinfulness of his own life, as the light of divine revelation shines upon his mind and heart through the teachings of Jesus. As the absolute will of God reveals itself, it cannot but reveal how partial and tenuous is man's commitment to the Divine Will – how ungodly, sinful, and devilish the human will may be. Such light does not intend to produce despair and hopelessness – for that is pride (dependence upon self), but it endeavors to produce humility, and where there is knowledge of Jesus and faith, to produce hope! Where there is infidelity and pride, the

teachings of Jesus are rejected by men in favor of human reason, in a word, what a godless society values – what everyone says is right (which usually means what everyone else is doing or would do if they had the opportunity). It is the blind leading the blind in a land where darkness is light. Naturally speaking, in the degree we are unredeemed, we will be repelled by Jesus' teachings. There will be a struggle to accept them. There will be a need to take them to prayer and subject the heart and mind to Divine Light and insight.

The Church is composed not only of saints, men and women who fulfill the Will of God as revealed in Jesus to a heroic degree, but also sinners – the partially redeemed. The closer a person is to God, the more compassionate he is toward sinners, for God is compassionate and infinitely merciful. The more pharisaic a Christian, the more intolerant of the weaknesses and sins of others. They desire to call down fire from heaven to consume sinners. There must always be room in the Christian Community and within the hearts of Christians, not only for the spiritually immature, but for the spiritually maimed and ill – those only touched by redemption! The spiritually, morally strong need to bear in mind the words of the Lord to Ezekiel:

> ***Therefore thus says the Lord God, Now will I judge between the fat and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and butt all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them out, I will save my sheep so that they may no longer be despoiled, and I will judge between one sheep and another. (Ez. 34:20-22)***

During the life of Jesus, the chosen disciples were far from being ideal. Jesus was often displeased with them, but He always loved them and never rejected them.

As Jesus moved toward Jerusalem, He began, once again, to teach publicly. Mark relates, *"Once more, crowds gathered around Him, and as usual, He began to teach them." (Mk. 10:1)* Mark uses this opportunity to present certain essential Christian teachings: Jesus' attitude toward marriage, children and possessions.

THE DIVORCE QUESTION

As an ideal, marriage was highly exalted among the Jews. It was said that

the *"very altar sheds tears when a man divorces the wife of his youth."* A Jew must die rather than commit idolatry, murder or adultery. The strict religious sect at Qumran held that if a man married two women during his lifetime, he would be guilty of *"whoredom."* They contended that marriage had its basis in creations, *"a male and a female He created them,"* and that those who entered into the ark, entered two by two. In actual practice, divorce was so widespread at the time of Jesus that women hesitated to marry because of the insecurity involved in the relationship. Jewish law permitted divorce. We read in Deuteronomy 24:1:

> ***When a man, after marrying a woman and having relations with her, is later displeased with her because he finds in her something indecent, and therefore he writes out a bill of divorce and hands it to her, thus dismissing her from his house; if on leaving his house she goes and becomes the wife of another man, and the second husband too, comes to dislike her and dismisses her from his house by handing her a written bill of divorce… then her former husband, who dismissed her, may not again take her as his wife….***

In the beginning, a bill of divorce simply stated, *"Let this be from me your bill of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that you may marry whatever man you will."* Later, the form became more complicated and needed a scribe to draw it up, be approved by a court of three rabbis, and recorded with the Sanhedrin.

According to Jewish Law and custom, a woman could not divorce her husband. The man alone could divorce his wife and only with his consent could she remarry. This was the reason for the 'bill of divorce' – a proof that he had given consent. A woman could be divorced with or without her consent, but a man only by his will. The historian Josephus writes, *"For it is only the man who is permitted by us to do this, and not even a divorced woman may marry again on her own initiative unless her former husband consents."* The woman could only request a divorce. The only grounds upon which a woman could claim a divorce were if her husband became a leper, if he engaged in a trade rendering him ritually impure, if he raped a virgin or if he falsely accused his wife of prenuptial sin. The woman could claim a divorce, but if her husband refused, the claim could not be enforced. In the end, divorce among the Jews was always a man's prerogative.

In the Old Testament, the sin of adultery only defined intercourse between a

married woman and a man other than her husband. A woman could commit adultery against her husband, but a man could not commit adultery against his wife; he could only commit adultery against another man. Having relationships with a widow or a single woman was not considered adultery according to the Mosaic Law. It was otherwise in the Greco-Roman world. Both the man and woman had a legal right to divorce each other. Neither in Jewish nor Roman Law were the parties divorced by any extraneous authority: In the Jewish Law, the man divorced his wife and in the Roman Law, either party in the marriage could divorce the other. (According to the Roman Law, Herodias, the wife of Herod Antipas, had a right to divorce and remarry. Only according to Jewish Law could Herodias be considered an adulteress. Jewish Law, likewise, condemned her for marrying the brother of her former husband.)

At the time of Jesus, divorce among the Jews was an accepted fact and a widespread practice. The only point open to discussion was the interpretation of the phrase, *"finds in her something indecent."* There were two Jewish schools of thought. The school of Shammai held for a very strict interpretation. It taught that *"something indecent"* was adultery and adultery alone. This was not generally accepted since Deuteronomy itself declared that adultery was punishable by death. This implied that in the case of adultery, the union had 'ipso facto' been dissolved. If the adulteress was punished by death, divorce was not necessary. Only when it became impossible to carry out the death penalty would adultery be considered a cause for divorce. According to the Jewish mind, adultery dissolved the bond of marriage. Once adultery had been committed, the unity of the marriage had been destroyed and divorce only attested to that fact. Soon after the time of Jesus, a Jewish husband was compelled to divorce his wife in case of adultery.

The more popular interpretation of *"something indecent"* came from the school of Hillel. It was interpreted as widely as possible: If a woman was a bad cook, if she appeared in public with her head uncovered, spun around in the street, spoke to a strange man, or even if she was too loud (could be heard in the next house). Rabbi Akiba held that it meant if a man found a woman who was better looking, in his eyes, than his wife. The issue was a hotly debated one at the time of Jesus. We are told the question was put before Jesus as a test. His enemies perhaps hoped His answer would alienate Herod Antipas or attack the Mosaic Law and give them needed evidence to accuse Him. As the episode appears in the Gospel of Mark, it has more of a

Christian Jewish setting. The entire passage is representative of the kind of controversy in which the Church frequently was engaged in its quarrel with Judaism. This episode appears to be in response to a problem existing in the Roman Christian Community. A Jew, not to mention a Pharisee, would hardly have posed such a question since Deuteronomy made it clear that divorce is lawful in certain circumstances; the only question being what circumstances. It is highly possible that Jesus' opinion on this was sought. We read in Mark:

> ***Then some Pharisees came up and, as a test, began to ask Him whether it was permissible for a husband to divorce his wife. In reply, He said, "What command did Moses give you?" They answered, "Moses permitted divorce and the writing of a decree of divorce." But Jesus told them, "He wrote that commandment for you because of your stubbornness. At the beginning of creation, God made them male and female; for this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and the two shall become as one. They are no longer two – but one flesh. Therefore, let no man separate what God has joined." Back in the house again, the disciples began to question Him about this. He told them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and the woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery." (Mk. 10:2-11)***

No doubt, a teaching on this subject existed in Church tradition. Matthew records this isolated teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

> ***It was also said, whenever a man divorces his wife, he must give her a decree of divorce. What I say to you is: everyone who divorces his wife – lewd conduct is a separate case – forces her to commit adultery. The man who marries a divorced woman likewise commits adultery. (Matt. 5:31-32)***

With the added phrase *"lewd conduct is a separate case,"* the Jewish background of Matthew is evident. Matthew's presentation of the same scene is again more in keeping with a Jewish background:

> ***Some Pharisees came up to him and said, to test him, "May a man divorce his wife for any reason whatever?" He replied, "Have you not read that at the beginning, the Creator made them male and***

female and declared, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall become as one?' Thus they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, let no man separate what God has joined." They said to him, "Then why did Moses command divorce and the promulgation of a divorce decree?" "Because of your stubbornness, Moses let you divorce your wives," He replied, "but at the beginning, it was not that way. I now say to you, whoever divorces his wife (lewd conduct is a separate case) and marries another, commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (Matt. 19:3-9)

The reply of the disciples to this reveals how much they were products of their own culture, *"If that is the case between man and wife, it is better not to marry." (Matt. 19:10)*

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus absolutely prohibits divorce and remarriage. He teaches it is sinful to divorce one's wife. If, in addition to divorcing her, a man marries another woman, then he adds adultery to the sin of divorce. In Matthew, Jesus is shown forbidding remarriage, but as permitting divorce on one ground – adultery.

It is clear that Jesus regarded marriage as an indissoluble union and that He placed husband and wife in a relationship of equality. In this respect, His teaching went beyond Jewish and pagan conceptions, giving to marriage a position of the highest dignity. Jesus held there has never been any other way – from the beginning, one woman was created for one man. It is a truth established in nature by God.

The term *"flesh"* – quoted in the passage from Genesis, means virtually a blood relationship. It implies that marriage constitutes a relationship as real and as indissoluble as that which binds a man to his relatives by blood; while the obligations of a man toward his wife take precedence even over his obligations to his parents. The forsaking of the house of one's father was far more meaningful at the time, since a man would be forsaking the security and protection of his own clan.

Jesus taught that the law of divorce – set forth in Deuteronomy – was a departure from the true and original ideal of marriage and an accommodation to human weakness. It was a dispensation from the Law because of the 'hardness of heart' – because of the unteachableness, the

stubborn refusal to obey God's will as revealed in Genesis. It was a continual witness to the sinfulness of men.

In His response, Jesus referred twice to the *"commandment,"* while the questioners referred twice to the matter of *"permission"* – what is "allowed." This shows how Jesus was concerned about the Will of God and others were concerned about their own rights and privileges. When a person begins to ask this kind of question, his eyes are upon self rather than on God – he seeks the greatest possible advantage for himself within the limits of what is permissible. It is not the way of discipleship. By looking to the Will of God, Jesus rises above legalism. A Christian disciple must seek the spirit of the commandment, which involves more than the avoidance of what is forbidden.

Many scholars believe that the exceptional clause in Matthew, *"lewd conduct is a separate case,"* represents the standpoint of a Jewish Christianity which could not bring itself to believe that Jesus had really been stricter than even the strictest rabbinical school, or had taken up a position that invalidated a law of Deuteronomy. It is contended by some scholars that the exceptive clause, admittedly an addition by Matthew, nevertheless correctly interprets our Lord's meaning. It being supposed that the case of adultery was excluded from consideration on the ground that it was already dealt with in Deuteronomy 22:22.

When these passages are used to interpret the doctrine of the sacrament of marriage, scholars point out that there is no direct evidence as to the original form of the statement. It cannot be assumed that the question is settled by simply quoting Jesus' words; for the record is limited to His reply to a hostile question and to a detached saying. The trend of Jesus' teachings was away from legalism. What Jesus proclaimed, by such commandments that set forth the pure Will of God in its absolute form, is a new existence before God. To this new existence, a disciple of Jesus is called. It is left to the Church under the Spirit of God to authentically interpret this teaching of Jesus. As we view how the Church deals with the problems of marriage and divorce, we should bear in mind that the statement, *"let no man separate what God has joined," "man"* is understood as in opposition to God – it is understood as human authority. When Moses dispensed the Jews from Divine Law, he did so as God's representative – with divine authority.

The earliest New Testament record concerning the Lord's teaching on

marriage appears in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul simply states the mind of Jesus without quoting His words:

> ***For those married I have something to say, and this is not from me but from the Lord; a wife must not leave her husband or, if she does leave him, she must either remain unmarried or else make it up with her husband – nor must a husband send his wife away.***
>
> ***(1Cor. 7:10-11)***

Paul does not recognize the right of divorced Christians to remarry because it was not in keeping with the teachings of the Lord.

When Paul turns to the question of mixed marriages, he writes:

> ***If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever but is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever but is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. The unbelieving husband is consecrated by his believing wife; the unbelieving wife is consecrated by her believing husband. If it were otherwise, your children should be unclean; but as it is, they are holy. If the unbeliever wishes to separate, however, let him do so. The believing husband or wife is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace.***
>
> ***(1Cor. 7:12-15)***

Even though Paul stands with the teaching of Christ against divorce, he does accept the fact of divorce and even remarriage in the case quoted above. The Church refers to this as the *"Pauline Privilege."* Paul upholds the absolute norm for Christians – being no divorce or remarriage – because of the peculiar human situation involved.

The Church continues to maintain that a true Christian marriage is in God and cannot be dissolved. Such a marriage exists between two baptized Christians and fulfills the necessary requirements for the reception of the Sacrament of Marriage. Each sacrament involves an interaction between the Lord and the believer within the Community. Church law, governing the

Sacraments, attempts to ensure the authenticity and integrity of that encounter. Marriage as a Sacrament is a unique interpersonal relationship

between consenting parties who accept certain rights and responsibilities. Hence, marriage law tries to safeguard the integrity of that relationship, not only for the benefit of the parties themselves, but also for the well-being of society as a whole.

There has been a change in Church attitude and practice toward the Sacrament of Marriage since the Second Vatican Council. This has been due to a deeper understanding of the Sacrament of Marriage. A more in-depth study of the Sacred Scriptures has broadened the theological dimensions of the Sacrament of Marriage. Psychological advancements have broadened our awareness of the personality factors and powers essential for a true Christian marriage. In practice, what does all this mean? It means our vision of the requirements for a valid Christian marriage has broadened. The past requirements for such a marriage are no longer acceptable. The requirements today go beyond those of the past. This implies that many marriages in the past were in reality invalid and could have actually been annulled and today can be – if subjected to the marriage tribunal of the Church.

Emphasis in the past was upon these external and extrinsic characteristics for a valid marriage: both parties must be baptized; if one was non-baptized, a dispensation had to be granted; married before a duly appointed representative of the Church; take place before two witnesses; and the marriage was sexually consummated. The essential internal and intrinsic qualities were limited; both parties were free to marry, they freely consented to the marriage; they intended to enter a permanent union until death; they did not intend to exclude all children from the marriage. For a marriage to be declared annulled, in the past, on psychological grounds, it would have been necessary to prove one party was insane at the time of the marriage.

These requirements are now realized to be insufficient. Christian marriage is a commitment to a total life relationship in faith – a relationship reflecting God's love. It is much more than a contractual consent to sexual intercourse and the begetting of children. Marriage presupposes the necessary physical, psychological and emotional maturity to assume and fulfill the responsibilities of a lifelong heterosexual union. It is one thing to know about marriage intellectually and to desire such a commitment. It is entirely another thing to possess the psychological equipment to sustain conjugal and parental responsibilities. There is a growing awareness in the church that certain individuals are incapable of Christian marriage. The Church today

sees three general categories for marital incapacity. The first two deal with the ability to give true consent to marriage:

1. **Mental disturbances that impede the use of reason.**

2. **A serious lack of discretion regarding marital rights and obligations.**

3. **An inability of a person to assume the essential obligations of marriage because of a serious psychosexual problem. It concerns an incapacity itself to live the marriage.**

The sacrament is being reviewed today as the actions of a believing community in a covenant relationship, expressing God's love for his people – consummation of the marriage symbolizes Christ's union with the Church. This is no longer being viewed as an isolated physical act, but a genuine human act reflecting marital commitment and embodying, with the passing of time, an ever growing love.

The validity of Christian marriages is being seriously questioned where little faith existed at the time of marriage and the on-going marital relationship reveals no evidence of Christian love, nor the assuming of marital or parental responsibility. Marriage is no longer being seen as an 'instant sacrament.' Apparently, only time reveals whether the essential ingredients for a Christian marriage were present or absent at the time or the marriage ceremony.

It has been estimated that probably five million Catholics in the United States are divorced. Of these, three million of them could initiate procedure for an annulment, with about one-third obtaining a decree of nullity according to the present judicial practices. An annulment means that, contrary to appearance, the marriage does not fulfill the legal requirements for community recognition and the marriage contract is invalid.

Certain valid marriages, due to lack of some quality, may be dissolved. In these particular cases, the marriage bond is binding and legal. They may not be dissolved by the partners involved – only by Church authority. The so-called *"Pauline Privilege"* is a case where the actual bond of marriage is dissolved. During the 16th century, the Church responded creatively to new pastoral needs rising out of the missionary activities of the Church. There

were a number of cases where the strict requirements for a "Pauline Privilege" could not be met – accordingly, the Church extended this privilege to those cases because the same spiritual grounds were present.

In the past, the Church recognized grounds for dissolution of the bond of a sacramental marriage (two baptized persons), when the marriage had failed to be consummated. Free consent suffices for a valid marriage, but only consummation makes the marriage indissoluble. The 20th century has witnessed a further expansion of the dissolution of the bond of marriage involving at least one non-baptized person. These marriages can be dissolved *"in favor of the faith"* by the Holy See and are referred to as the *"Petrine Privilege"* – a reference to the divine authority given to the Church *"to bind and loose."* Paul exercised this same power in granting the "Pauline Privilege."

BRINGING INFANTS TO JESUS

One of the primary reasons for the permanence of marriage and the establishment of a loving community is to form a proper environment for the growth and development of children. Good marriages are the foundation stones of a good society. In line with natural development, Mark here introduces Jesus' attitude toward children. Mark narrates one of the most beloved memories from the life of Jesus. As with many such scenes, it contains more than what at first appears.

> *People were bringing little children to Him, for Him to touch them. The disciples turned them away, but when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. I tell you solemnly, anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Then He put His arms around them, laid His hands on them and gave them His blessing. (Mk. 10:13-16)*

It was customary for pious Jewish mothers to bring their children to a holy rabbi for a blessing – particularly on their first birthday. The attitude of the disciples demonstrated their protectiveness of Jesus. They sought to preserve Him from unnecessary and meaningless encounters. Jesus reacted very strongly to this and His reaction suggests that a real evil had taken place. It

is the only time *"indignation"* is ascribed to Him. His rebuke told them that it was wrong to impede little children from coming to Him. For *"such"* as little children belong to the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught that certain qualities of children are essential for reception and entrance into the Kingdom of God. Certain child-like qualities are often absent in adults. To emphasize His teaching, Jesus took the children into His arms, blessed them and laid His hands upon them. Romani Gaurdini expresses the thought that adults become too mature – over matured. They become hard, calculating, mistrustful, too analytical. Self gets in the way. They become unfit receptors to the Kingdom of God. They are the opposite of the child who possesses a certain lack of self-consciousness, who does not take himself too seriously. The child has a natural openness and receptiveness to truth – a natural humility that willingly accepts things as they are. The child permits things to be – without questioning their existence. The child is content to be dependent upon the care and generosity of others. The Kingdom of God must be received in a childlike fashion. It is a gift from God that must simply be accepted and can never be personally achieved nor deserved. The children were brought by their mothers to Jesus. They did nothing on their own and could not point to any personal achievement. In their littleness and emptiness, they could only receive. As these little children came to be blessed, so must men come to Jesus. The Kingdom is promised to men without their even desiring or deserving it.

Many see, in this episode, a defense for the practice of infant baptism vigorously defended in the early Church. The early Church saw in the words, *"Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,"* an expressing of the Lord's Will in this regard. The action of Jesus corresponded closely to that of the minister at the baptism of an infant. The question, *"What hinders?"* was asked liturgically before the candidate was baptized. The blessing and laying on of hands was an essential part of the primitive baptismal rite. Infant baptism is an appropriate symbol of the true spiritual condition needed for the reception and entering the Kingdom of God. *"Unless you become as little children you will not enter into the Kingdom of God!"*

THE STUMBLING BLOCK OF RICHES

The next episode presents one of the fundamental obstacles to discipleship. Mark mentions that Jesus was *"setting out on His journey,"* when a rich young man ran up to Him with the request, *"Good Teacher, what must I do*

to inherit eternal life?" (Mk. 10:17.) When a man comes to Jesus, he comes to the Light. Humility is the first lesson to learn. Truly, the young man saw goodness in Jesus and in himself, but to whom did he attribute the source of this goodness? Undoubtedly to man – to self. Jesus immediately responded, *"Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." (Mk. 10:18.)* Jesus did not deny His own goodness as man, but He humbly acknowledged that God is the source of all human goodness. The glory belongs to God!

The way of Christian discipleship is always rooted in Jesus and His life. St. Paul writes of Jesus, *"Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2Cor. 8:9.)* Jesus requires of His disciples the spirit of *"anawim."* Anawim is the name which the Scriptures give to God's needy and poor – to the little ones of the world. It is a spirit rising out of a conscious awareness of the Presence of God in the needs of daily life – wherever and however it may be lived; expressed in an abiding faith in His love, and a living hope in the fulfillment of His promises. Anawim is the spirit of true spiritual poverty that humbly looks to God as the source of all goodness – material and spiritual. External poverty is never the cause of, but the occasion for expressing the spirit of anawim. Material prosperity itself is not essentially opposed to the spirit. Reaching its zenith in the reign of Solomon, a spirit of materialism penetrated Israel leading to the oppression of people, the disdaining of the poor and the alliance and dependency upon the mighty nations of the earth. Material prosperity and the desire for it can destroy the spirit of anawim and man's proper relationship with Yahweh. It can become a vice – impeding men from being true disciples of Jesus. Mark demonstrates this truth in this narrative.

The seriousness of the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man may be measured by the gravity of the question, *"What must I do to come to eternal life?"* Jesus' answer was in a standard rabbinical fashion, *"Keep the commandments of God."* Jesus mentioned all the negative ones, with the exception of honoring your father and mother. The young man confessed that all his life he had avoided evil. Jesus loved him, but knew that avoiding evil was not enough. Jesus issued His radical invitation to him, *"There is one thing more you must do. Go and sell what you have and give to the poor; you will then have treasure in heaven. After that, come and follow me." (Mk. 10:21.)* The young man lacked one thing – he lacked Jesus. He lacked being a disciple of Jesus. As the words implied, his wealth and lands were an obstacle for him in following Jesus. He was generous in avoiding evil, but he

was not prepared to answer the call of love – the call to go and do something positive. Mark tells us his face fell and he departed in sorrow – perhaps a sorrow to companion him forever. He would never taste the joy of a Francis of Assisi, for such joy flows from the spirit of anawim.

It is the only example in the New Testament, of an outright refusal to follow Jesus. It was the attachment to possessions that closed the man's heart to Jesus. Jesus twice declared how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. When he said it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God, Jesus truly declared it is impossible. A popular interpretation of this has been that there existed a narrow gate through which a camel could enter by kneeling down and this led to flights of fanciful interpretation. The fact is the "needle gate" never existed, and was but a pious invention to water down the force of Jesus' teachings. Our Lord's statement, so opposed to accepted belief, shocked the disciples.

> ***Who then can be saved? Jesus fixed his gaze on them and said, "For man it is impossible, but not for God. With God, all things are possible." (Mk. 10:27.)***

Here, the disciples came face to face with the truth that discipleship is so demanding and so radical, that it can never be attributed to man's achievement, but only to God's grace.

What, in the eyes of men, appears a foolish way, truly becomes the wise way. It is the life that finds itself after being willing to lose itself. It is the life that willingly gives up all and receives in return a hundred-fold. A disciple receives in the measure he gives.

> ***Peter was moved to say to Him, "We have put aside everything to follow you!" Jesus answered, "I give you my word, there is no one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother or father, children or property, for me and for the gospel, who will not receive – in this present age – a hundred times as many homes, brothers and sisters, mothers, children and property – and persecutions besides – and in the age to come, everlasting life." (Mk. 10:28-30.)***

It is a remarkable promise. It appears to encompass every aspect of life. (It is interesting to note that "wife" is omitted from the list in verse 29.)

Discipleship to Jesus does not lead to poverty and deprivation, but to wholeness – to the experience of real life wherever there is genuine, joyous abandonment. Life is experienced in real fullness in the here and now – and part of that experience is *"persecutions as well."* True Christian disciples of Jesus are rewarded a hundred times in a richer social and religious life – a token of the greater riches and joys of the eternal life to come!

CHAPTER 13

THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

NO CROSS – NO CROWN

Jesus proceeded toward Jerusalem with his disciples; yet, Jesus was very much alone. Mark notes that there was a physical and psychological separation from Jesus. Jesus walked in the lead; the Twelve with Him were filled with fear. Jesus alone realized what awaited Him in the holy city of the Jews. He sought to prepare His disciples for the reality ahead. Mark relates three revelations concerning the Passion; each one in progressively more detail. We read in Chapter Eight:

> ***He began to teach them that the Son of Man had to suffer much, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be put to death, and rise three days later. He said these things quite openly. (Mk. 8:31-32)***

In Chapter Nine, Jesus said to the Disciples,

> ***The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men who will put Him to death; three days after His death He will rise.***
>
> ***(Mk. 9:31)***

The last of these three prophecies He gave on the road to Jerusalem:

> ***Taking the Twelve aside once more, he began to tell them what was going to happen to Him. We are on our way up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn Him to death and hand Him over to the Gentiles, who will mock Him and spit at Him, flog him, and finally kill Him. But three days later, He will rise. (Mk. 10:32-34)***

After each prophecy, Mark demonstrates the Disciples' lack of understanding by narrating some incongruous episode immediately following

the revelations. Following this third prophecy, Mark relates that James and John approached Jesus, seeking to obtain a promise from Him that they would be given the two leading positions in the Kingdom of God. Whatever they expected to happen to Jesus, it did not dampen their hopes in His ultimate triumph. Luke does relate that as the Disciples grew near to Jerusalem, *"they supposed that the Kingdom of God was to appear immediately." (Lk. 19:11)* This may explain the desire of James and John to get the jump on the other Disciples, apparently an attempt to move Peter out of his recognized position of leadership and replace him with the Sons of Thunder.

Jesus was quite patient with the two brothers and used the opportunity to teach an important lesson – if one expects to reign with Christ, one must be willing to share in His sufferings. To the ambitious Disciples, Jesus said, *"You do not know what you are asking. [Someone once said, "Thank God for unanswered prayers!"] Can you drink the cup I shall drink or be baptized in the same bath of pain as I?" (Mk. 10:38)* There are a number of Old Testament passages suggesting that cup and baptism symbolize suffering knowingly embraced. *"Cup"* became symbolic for the life and the experience that God allotted to men. Isaiah pictured the coming disaster of Israel as the cup of God's wrath pouring forth from the hand of God. *(Is. 51:17) "Baptism"* expressed the concept of being overwhelmed with disaster. The Greek verb "baptizein" means to dip. The past participle of the verb implies being "submerged" – it was commonly used to mean being submerged in an experience or an emotion, as for instance being submerged in fear and sorrow. It is regularly used in literature to describe a sinking ship – submerged under the waves of the sea. The concept "baptism" would be kin to that expressed in Psalm 42:8, *"All your breakers, and your billows pass over me."*

The word of Jesus to James and John clearly indicate that sharing in the glory of the Kingdom related to sharing the sufferings of Jesus. Jesus asked them if they were willing to share in His fate. They acknowledged that they were willing and Jesus confirmed that they would be martyred, but it did not follow that their selfish request would be granted. What James later wrote, he knew from experience, *"You ask and you do not receive because you ask wrongly...." (James 4:3)* Their request was out of order. Places in the Kingdom of God have been ordained by the Father. It may be deduced from what followed that services rendered to God determine the place to be received. The highest places in the Kingdom of God have gone to those

persons whose lives have rendered the greatest service to God.

No doubt this episode would recall to the mind of the Roman Community the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. Mark implies that those who have accepted Christian Baptism – *"have been baptized in Christ,"* and who now drink from the Eucharistic Cup must prepare themselves to share in the suffering of Jesus – perhaps to bear martyrdom for His name's sake. This concept carries an important message to would-be Disciples; the victory of Jesus over sin and death does not free a Disciple of Jesus from suffering and from the other consequences of sin in this world. For a Disciple, as for the Master, the path of glory is through suffering. A "Pollyanna" Christianity, implying that the full effects of redemption can be had here and now, has no roots in the teachings of Jesus, nor in the experience of the early Church. There will always be false *"Christian"* prophets, as Paul wrote, whose doctrines will oppose the Cross of Christ and who will speak and appeal to men and women of the flesh. St. Paul contrasts himself and the real apostles of Jesus with such Christians,

> ***As I see it, God has put us Apostles at the end of the line, like men doomed to die in the arena. We have become a spectacle to the universe, to angels and men alike. We are fools on Christ's account. Ah, but in Christ you are wise! We are the weak one, you the strong! They honor you, while they sneer at us! Up to this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, poorly clad, roughly treated, wandering about homeless. We work hard at manual labor. When we are insulted we respond with a blessing. Persecution comes our way; we bear it patiently. We are slandered, and we try conciliation. We have become the world's refuse, the scum of all; this is the present state of affairs. (1Cor. 4:9-13)***

CHRISTIAN AUTHORITY

The overt ambition of James and John angered the other ten Apostles. No doubt their little political move anticipated the ambitions of the others. It gave rise to expression of the heretofore-suppressed jealousy existing among the Twelve. Jesus used this opportunity to teach the Disciples what must be their proper attitude toward authority, power and greatness.

> ***Jesus called them together and said to them, "You know how among the Gentiles those who seem to exercise authority lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like***

that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the least; whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve – to give life in ransom for the many." (Mk. 1:42-45)

Jesus acknowledged Himself to be a man of authority. He told His Disciples, *"You address Me as 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and fittingly enough, for that is what I am." (Jn. 13:13) "Full authority has been given to me both in Heaven and on earth...." (Matt. 28:18)* If members of the Christian Community share in the authority of Jesus, they have the obligation to express that authority as Jesus did. *"As the Father has sent Me, so I send you." (Jn. 20:21)* All human authority must look to Jesus for a model and guidance. The Father sent Jesus out of love – it was the mission of His life to establish a kingdom of love and grace that glorified the Father's Divine Love for mankind. Jesus revealed His Kingdom to be one of love. The authority and lordship of Jesus cannot be separated nor exercised apart from His love. The rule and the commandments of Jesus must be an extension and expression of God's love. In every exercise of legitimate Christian authority, the love of God must be present and out to be visible. It is certainly the duty of Christian instruction and teaching to make the presence of this love visible in Church rules and regulations, so that Christian obedience can always be a response to Divine Love.

The Lord never seeks to force His own will on men as some authoritarian character. Jesus wishes to receive men into His Father's love and thereby make them His friends. To achieve this end, it is important that Disciples have the same moral standard as Jesus. By his moral standard, a man judges what is good and evil. True Christian morality or behavior does not flow merely from a knowledge of God's laws and regulations. Nor can we equate Christian morality with Christian customs and rules. It is a deplorable stage when Christian morality is limited to what is commanded or forbidden. The inner value of the thing commanded ought to shine forth. A Christian needs to ask, *"What does God wish to say and give to us through this command?"* Only when law and authority visibly express God's love to us does the beauty of the burden of the New Covenant become visible.

A person needs to see value and good in a commandment – to see this and awaken the conscience to morally respond. Only good can be the basis of a moral obligation. We ought to realize that no code of Christian conduct, however extensive, can ever be an exhaustive expression of the good that

God's presence and grace may demand of a person. A Christian must be trained to hear, within his or her soul, the voice of God that may demand an obedient response unique and special to the individual. Christian obedience is a conscious and willing response to God's love, as it reveals itself in His laws and commandments, but also by His Spirit in a grace-filled conscience.

Conscience is always the guiding star to be followed. When the infallibility of the Pope was defined and Cardinal Newman was asked, *"What about the teaching of your own conscience?"* Newman answered, *"I have always affirmed that obedience to conscience, even to an erring conscience, is the best way to the Light." (Apol. Ch.5)* A Christian does not follow his conscience as a man does a wheel barrel. Conscience needs authority to safeguard her in truth. It is the duty of the Church to place before the minds of Christians, God's law and the requirements of His love and grace. The more certain our moral knowledge, the clearer we see the good and the beautiful, the more our conscience urges us to accomplish the good. When a person is confused about moral good and does not know what God wills, that person should not act, but should seek enlightenment through prayer, study and counsel. Through His Spirit of Truth, Jesus enlightens His Disciples from within, and through His Scriptures and the teaching voice of the Church, He instructs His Disciples from without.

For the formation of a mature conscience, a Christian needs to be able to distinguish between the unchangeable manifestations of God's Will in this world and an historically conditioned expression of pastoral love exercised by the Church. Some Church laws express things that are eternally good and true and others that are right for a time or under certain circumstances: the Commandments against abortion flows from God's Commandment not to murder; the Commandments to attend Church on Sunday, for priests not to marry or the previous Commandment not to eat meat on Friday flow from a conditional expressing of pastoral love in time.

Again, a Christian must realize the Church offers knowledge that is infallible, giving the conscience an infallible foundation and security for moral behavior; but it also offers knowledge authoritatively that is directive and enlightening, but not infallible. A mature conscience needs to know the limits within which the Church teaches us with infallible certainty.

When a person, after serious reflection and being certain that she or he is free from selfish motivation, comes to the conclusion that his or her con-

science demands other than that demanded by legitimate authority, that person must follow conscience no matter how painful the results. A person cannot carry out a command of one in authority if that command opposes his or her conscience.

In order to live an obedient Christian life, it is not enough to be aware of love's demands and desire the achievement of good. A Christian must also possess moral liberty. Moral liberty is the inner power of the will to put itself at the service of the acknowledged good. In other words, a Christian possesses the power to be obedient – to do the deed demanded by love – to make the necessary sacrifice. A Christian becomes free in the measure that he becomes like Jesus. Such moral liberty demands that one hold oneself free from the slavery of sin and Satan. Sin makes a person spiritually impotent. A Christian has the liberty of a child of God when he or she can daily and hourly respond to the Will of God – manifested by the stirrings of grace in the call of constantly changing circumstances. Such liberty is a gift from God. It is only received, preserved and perfected by an unconditional docility to the Will of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is obvious from the life and teachings of Jesus, that true authority and obedience to that authority expresses itself concretely by loving service to God and mankind. *"The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve – to give His life in ransom for the many."* Divine authority and obedience truly blend themselves in self-sacrificing love. It is for this reason that the Holy Father in Rome refers to himself as the Servant of the Servants of God.

THE GRACE TO SEE

As a preparation for understanding what occurred next in Jerusalem, Mark presents a miracle in which a blind man received his sight. Jesus and His Disciples arrived at Jericho, geographically located in the area where the River Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, 1,309 feet below sea level--the lowest spot on the face of the earth. Jericho lies about twenty-three miles from Jerusalem by way of a winding mountain road which descends from 2,250 feet above sea level to 900 feet below sea level. It lies south of an abundant spring, called the Fountain of Elisha, whose waters make the oasis of Jericho one of the richest agricultural areas in the Near East. Jericho is believed to be the oldest city on earth, dating back at least to 6800 B.C.

As Jesus passed through Jericho with a sizable crowd, the disturbance caught

the attention of Bartimeus, a blind beggar sitting by the roadside. On hearing it was Jesus of Nazareth passing by, Bartimeus began to call out, *"Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!"* He attributed a Messianic title to Jesus and expressed the belief that Jesus is Messiah. His plea, *"Have pity on me"* appears to imply more – a plea one would direct to the Divine. Some angrily attempted to silence Bartimeus. In the past, Jesus had silenced any attempt to publicize Himself as the Messiah. Bartimeus only shouted louder. Jesus did not correct nor silence him, but called him. The critics of Bartimeus told him that Jesus called him and he had nothing to fear from Him. Bartimeus' response to Jesus was immediate and spontaneous. It was a moment of grace not to be lost. Even though he could not see Jesus, he jumped up and ran in His direction. He wanted nothing to impede his way and threw aside his cloak. By whatever grace he possessed, he came to Jesus even though he was incapable of following Jesus, for he could not see. Jesus asked him, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* Bartimeus responded by calling Jesus his *"dear Teacher."* He had arrived at faith in Jesus and he said, *"I want to see."* Jesus said in reply, *"Be on your way! Your faith has healed you."*

Immediately, Bartimeus received his sight and started to follow Him up the road leading to Calvary. Jesus told him, *"Be on your way!"* He saw that Jesus was His way and he started to follow Jesus *"up the road."* No man can follow Jesus up that road unless he truly believes. At the Last Supper, Jesus told the Disciples,

> ***"I am going where you cannot follow me now; later on you shall come after me. "Lord," Peter said to Him, "why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!" "You will lay down your life for me, will you?" Jesus answered. (Jn. 13:36-37)***

No man can see the way of the Messiah and follow that way unless the miracle of faith has opened his eyes. Men must pray to Jesus, *"Rabboni... I want to see!" (Mk. 10:46-51)*

Going up to Jerusalem was always, for the Jews, a great event. Many Psalms echo the joy of pilgrims making their way over the steep hills of Judea:

> ***His foundation upon the holy mountains the Lord loves, the gates of Zion, more than any dwelling of Jacob. Glorious things are said of you, O City of God. (Ps. 87:1-3)***

How lovely is your dwelling place, 0 Lord of Hosts! My soul yearns and pines for the courts of the Lord. (Ps. 84:1)

Jerusalem represented, in the Old Testament, the national unity of God's people. The political glory of Jerusalem had long faded. With the fall of the city to Pompeii in 63 B.C., it had been reduced to a small provincial city in the Roman Empire. Chosen by God as a dwelling place for His Holy Name, it was the spiritual center of Israel. It was a city with a holy destiny. Jewish history tells over and over of her failures, despite the efforts made by the prophets to remind her of her divine vocation. The prophets denounced her sins and called her vainly to repentance. Instead, she persecuted the prophets. Of Jeremiah she said, *"This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city." (Jer. 25:11)* In the actual court of the house of the Lord, King Joash had the Prophet Zechariash stoned to death. *(2Cor. 24:20f)* There, King Jekoiakim slew the Prophet Uriah. *(Jer. 26:20f)* Josephus reported that King Manasseh made the streets of Jerusalem run red with the blood of the Prophets. *(Antiq. X, III, 1)* It was for such crimes as these that Jesus lamented, *"O Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!" (Lk. 13:34)*

St. Luke places the third temptation of Jesus by Satan in Jerusalem. Jesus was tempted by Satan to make a public display of His Divine Sonship before all Jerusalem. Satan invited Jesus to throw Himself down the parapet of the temple and let God miraculously preserve His life before all the peoples. A miracle as this would conquer the hearts of the people and give Jerusalem a Messiah after its own desires. It was an alternate plan to humble and hard way of a Cross winding through the street of the city and leading up to Calvary. Jesus rejected Satan's method and stood by God's Will. Because of what would transpire within her walls – what hardly moved her at all, what appeared to be no more than a ripple on the sea of time – Jerusalem would witness a triumph never expected. Jerusalem became the spiritual center of the world.

Jesus proceeded toward Jerusalem for He knew that a prophet should perish in Jerusalem. (Lk. 13:33) Jesus knew Satan awaited Him there. When the brief moment of joy had faded, Jesus faced a fierce and lonely struggle against the powers of darkness.

When the angel informed Joseph that he was to call the child *"Jesus,"* the

Son of Man received a name expressing His mission and destiny. Jesus means *"Yahweh is salvation."* He was called "Jesus" because, as the angel revealed, He saves His people from their sins. "Jesus" is a name that describes the Son of Man's essential relationship to mankind. As the Samaritans expressed to the women at the well, *"We know that this is really the Savior of the world." (Jn. 4:42)* Jesus is God's answer to the problem of human salvation. Of necessity, the life and death of Jesus goes beyond human understanding and expectation. Once more, human reason stands confounded. Once again, as we bring the human mind to meditate and contemplate the mystery of Jesus' life as it unfolded in its concrete and historical setting, we are confused by the insight that faith reveals and the circumstances of Jesus' life and death presented by history. The more we look at His last days – the circumstances surrounding them – there is nothing there the eye can see to account for such a stupendous, cosmic happening as world salvation. Absolutely nothing on the surface of things. His life and death appear to be no more effective than a leaf blowing in the wind of time. There is no human explanation for Jesus of Nazareth. That an Alexander or a Caesar be remembered, a Plato or an Aristotle survive oblivion, the world can understand – but not that of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet today, no library could hold the accounts of lives shaped by Him, the deeds and events inspired by Him. Over the places He touched and walked, emperors built basilicas. Wars among nations were waged over these shrines. No man has affected mankind as Jesus of Nazareth. It is a ruse to place His name beside that of Moses, Buddha, Mohammed – He remains incomparable. Jesus is a name above every name – a name before which the Buddha's and Mohammeds and Moses will one day bow.

Only in another realm does the life of Jesus find an adequate explanation. Only when the deeds of His life are viewed in the light of grace, can any light of understanding dawn upon the human mind. Without grace, it is all darkness – incomprehensible, a phenomenon without equal – accountable only as a freak event.

John the Evangelist, under the grace of the Holy Spirit, explains that God so loved the World that He sent His only begotten Son – He was made flesh and dwelt among us. The life of Jesus appears so strange to us for it was a life lived totally under the Will of God. A life expressing God's Will in a world alienated and hostile to the Will of God. By the standards of the world, the life of Jesus was one of no importance – at most, an annoyance, a diversion – at best, a rainbow in the sky.

Only in the light of the Resurrection did the Disciples arrive at a point of being able to properly evaluate the life of Jesus. When the life of Jesus unfolded around them, its true significance was lost upon them as they viewed His life through their own expectations and illusions. Our Lord's efforts to bring some realism into the situation was lost upon them. Only when they actually encountered the horrors of Good Friday, were they shocked into some kind of awareness of the reality of the situation.

How and when Jesus arrived at a conscious awareness that salvation of the world would flow from His death on the Cross, we do not know. Was it in His study of the Scriptures this truth came to him? As He mentioned later to the Disciples on the road to Emmaus, the sufferings of the Messiah had all been foretold by the Scriptures. Or was it in those prayerful nights of communion with God that the Holy Spirit brought all this to His conscious mind? The New Testament makes it clear that long before He arrived at Jerusalem, Jesus knew what awaited Him.

Jesus has one ambition – to perfectly fulfill the Will of God in His regard. His Spirit felt a certain restlessness until it should all be accomplished. God's Will would be recognized, accepted and accomplished in the seemingly loose threads of chance and within the arbitrary deeds of men.

THE INVISIBLE THREAD

The human attitude is to believe the one does God's Will by accomplishing extraordinary deeds. It sees evidences of the Divine only in the *"mind blowing"* signs and wonders. The eye of man fails to see the face of God in the common occurrences of everyday existence. It fails to note the hand of Divine Providence in the accidental and chance happenings of daily living. Always looking for God in the extraordinary and unusual, men fail to recognize His ever-present Presence in the mundane stuff of daily existence. Man fails to love God in a myriad of daily opportunities; he remains unresponsive to a God clothed in humdrum. How many Christians wait for the big moment to heroically accomplish God's Will – to express total love for Him - only to discover, too late, that all moments to do so, quietly passed beneath their noses. Everyday life is truly a divine milieu. St. Theresa spoke of finding straws of Divine Will scattered through the day – straws that continually feed the fire of Divine Love.

There are no ready-made and set formulas for Christian holiness. Holiness is always personal and unique. Holiness is simply the willful accomplishment of God's Will. It may be to our liking or disliking – it does not matter. To the person attuned to the Divine Will in daily life, it never fails to manifest itself in the interior of the human spirit. When the human spirit acknowledges and accomplishes this will in Mary-like fashion – *"Behold the servant of God – be it done to me according to your word,"* a loving union is established between creature and Creator. A union that progressively purifies the creature bringing the spirit into total and enduring union with God.

Underneath all the myriad of events crowding Jesus' days and particularly the last six before His death, Jesus beheld the Will of God and humbly responded to that Will. In the midst of all the pandemonium, the evil and turmoil, the Will of God ran like a constant thread. In actuality, the Divine Will did spell itself out in terrible sufferings and a horrible death for Jesus. It was the means permitted by the Father through which His Beloved Son would actually save the world, as His name from birth had implied. The story was beautifully expressed in these words, *"The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve – to give His life in ransom for the many." (Mk. 10:45)* This is the reason the Son of Man is called Jesus and that the Name of Jesus is above every name!

THE ARRIVAL IN JERUSALEM

Jesus arrived with His Disciples on the Mount of Olives facing the city of Jerusalem. It was Sunday, the first day of the week, the countdown had begun – Jesus had but six more days to live. It was the hour to proclaim Jesus the Messiah of Israel, but not the Messiah of Jewish expectations. Jesus performed a symbolic act manifesting His true messianic role. The prophet Zechariah foretold,

> ***Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is He, meek, and riding on an ass. He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem; The warrior' bow shall be banished, and He shall proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you, for the blood of your covenant with me, I will bring forth your prisoners from the dungeon. (Zech. 9:9-11)***

A king, bent upon war, approached a city riding on a war-chariot or upon a war-horse. A king coming in peace rode upon a donkey. Mark relates that as they neared Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, close to Jerusalem, He sent off two of His disciples with the instruction:

> ***Go to the village straight ahead of you, and as soon as you enter it you will find tethered there a colt on which no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it back. If anyone says to you, 'why are you doing that?' say, 'The Master needs it but He will send it back here at once.' (Mk. 11:24)***

So they went off, and finding a colt tethered on the street near a gate, they untied it. Some of the bystanders said to them, *"What do you mean by untying that colt?"* They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the men let them take it. [Mark intended, by this account, to manifest Jesus' superior knowledge of all the events that lie ahead.] They brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on the road, while others spread reeds which they had cut in the fields. Those preceding Him, as well as those who followed, crying out, *"Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the reign of our Father David to come! Hosanna in the Highest!" (Mk. 11:1-10)*

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is presented on Palm Sunday as the Messianic King who came to claim His capitol and temple. Of all the evangelists, Mark presents a curtailed account – undramatic and simple. He avoids any mention of a triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. Mark appears to present Jesus more as the unrecognized Savior of His people, rather than its Messianic King. The cry *"Hosanna"* – the acclamation of praise reported by Mark – means in Hebrew, "Save us." Mark may have intended to recall to mind the words of Psalm 118 recited by the Jews during the Feast of Passover and the Feast of Booths:

> ***Open to me the gates of justice; I will enter them and give thanks to the Lord. This gate is the Lord's; the just shall enter it. I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me and have been my savior. The stone, which the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone. By the Lord has this been done; it is wonderful in our eyes. This is the day the Lord has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it. O Lord, grant salvation! O Lord, grant prosperity! Blessed is he who comes***

in the name of the Lord; we bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Join in profession with leafy boughs up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I give thanks to you; O my God, I extol you. Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His kindness endures forever. (Ps. 118:19-29)

These words may well express the sentiments Mark wished to convey by his presentation of Jesus on Palm Sunday, sentiments not recognized on Palm Sunday, but sentiments realized after Jesus was glorified.

The Synoptic Gospels tells us that the Palm Sunday procession ended in the Temple. No doubt they saw in this the fulfillment of prophecy by Malachi:

And suddenly there will come to the temple the Lord whom you seek, and the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, He is coming, says the Lord of Hosts. But who will endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? (Mal. 3:1-2)

As a fulfillment of this prophecy, Mark simply states,

He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple precincts. He inspected everything there, but since it was already late in the afternoon, He went out to Bethany, accompanied by the Twelve. (Mk. 11:11)

Mark pictures Jesus in the temple as an Inspector General – "He inspected everything there." Jesus appeared in the temple as its Lord whose coming Malachi foretold.

REJECTION OF ISRAEL

According to Mark, there was not recognition in Jerusalem of Jesus' claim to be its Savior and Lord. Jesus met but disbelief, a disbelief that rejected Jesus' authority. The external rejection of Jesus' authority by the Jews revealed their internal rejection of God's authority. Their rejection of God, undoubtedly unconscious, was nevertheless a reality. Their external observance of religion no doubt hid from the Jews their internal spiritual poverty – it was an alienation of their spirit from God – an apostasy of their hearts. The Jews subtly revealed this in the next few days, by their rejection

of Jesus and their projected hatred toward Him. Jesus recognized all this as a disguised rejection and hatred of God. It was to have dire consequences for the Jews resulting in God's rejections. Jesus was truly their last chance for salvation as recorded in Luke, *"If only you had known the path to peace this day; but you have completely lost it from view."* Because of their rejection of Jesus, the words of the prophets Michah, Jeremiah and Malachi would be fulfilled. The prophet Michah warned,

> ***Hear this, you leaders of the house of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel! You who abhor what is just, and pervert all that is right; who build up Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with wickedness! Her leaders render judgment for a bribe, her priests give decision for a salary, her prophets divine for money. While they rely on the Lord saying, "Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No evil can come upon us!" Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem reduced to rubble, and the mount of the temple to forest ridge. (Michah 3:11-12)***

The prophet Jeremiah had warned,

> ***Hear the word of the Lord, all of you of Judah who enter these gates to worship the Lord! Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Reform your ways and your deeds, so that I may remain with you in this place. Put not your trust in the deceitful words, "This is the Temple of the Lord! The Temple of the Lord! The Temple of the Lord!" Only if you thoroughly reform your ways and your deeds… will I remain with you in this place. (Jer. 7:1-7)***

> ***If you disobey me, not living according to the law I place before you and not listening to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I send you constantly – though you do not obey them, I will treat this house like Shiloh, and make this city which all nations of the earth shall refer to when cursing another. (Jer. 26:4-6)***

We read in the Book of Malachi:

> ***Oh, that one among you would shut the temple gates to keep you from kindling fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of Hosts; neither will I accept any sacrifice from your***

hands, for from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, my name is great among the nations; and everywhere they bring sacrifice to my name, and a pure offering; for great is my name among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts. (Mal. 1:10-11)

Mark now relates two prophetic actions by Jesus that declared the words of the prophets will come to be – the Jewish worship and religion will come to an end.

The next day, when they were leaving Bethany, He felt hungry. Observing a fig tree some distance off, covered with foliage, He went over to see if He could find anything on it. When He reached it, He found nothing but leaves; it was not the time for figs. Then, addressing it, He said, "Never again shall anyone eat of your fruit!" His Disciples heard all this. When they reached Jerusalem, He entered the temple precincts and began to drive out those who were engaged in buying and selling. He overturned the money-changers' tables and the stalls of the men selling doves; moreover, He would not permit anyone to carry things through the temple area. Then He began to teach them, "Does not Scripture have it, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples' but you have turned it into a den of thieves." The chief priests and the scribes heard of this and began to look for a way to destroy Him. They were at the same time afraid of Him because the whole crowd was under the spell of His teaching. When evening drew on, Jesus and His disciples went out of the city. Early the next morning, as they were walking along, they saw the fig tree withered to its roots. Peter remembered and said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered up." (Mk. 11:12-21)

Mark has reinforced the symbolic meaning of the cleansing of the Temple by placing the event between Jesus cursing a barren fig tree and the drying up of the fig tree the day following the cleansing of the Temple. The fig tree symbolized the unbelief and the rejection of Israel. The act of cursing the fig tree may be seen as a symbolic act of judgment against unfaithful Israel, so often described by the image of a fig tree in the Old Testament. *(Jer. 8:13; Joel 11:7; Ezel. 17:24)* **Jesus Himself has spoken a parable about the fig tree that bore no fruit** *(Lk. 13:6-9),* **but which was given another chance due to the entreaties of the gardener. Here, the condemnation was of foliage without fruit, which, when applied to Israel, meant appearance without any**

substance. The time for clemency was over and judgment must be passed.

The cleansing of the Temple was not a symbolic act of reform, but a sign indicating the end of the temple worship and the Temple, even the appearance of worship, was to be destroyed. As foretold by the prophets, it would be replaced by a new Temple not made by hands, and a new worship open to all the nations. The distinction between Jew and Gentile would be destroyed. This would be realized in a new spiritual temple, the Body of Christ, where there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free. Men would no longer limit other men's access to God. The construction of this New Temple would be achieved through the death of Jesus. Mark indicates this when he tells us that the chief priests and scribes sought the death of Jesus after hearing about the cleansing of the Temple.

As reported by the synoptic writers, they later came to Jesus and questioned Him about the origin of His authority. They asked Him, *"On what authority are you doing these things? Who has given you the power to do them?"* To have answered their questions would have been useless. They were not open to the truth, or to the acknowledgment of God's authority in their lives. Jesus demonstrated this by the following encounters,

> ***Jesus said to them, "I will ask you a question. If you give me an answer, I will tell you on what authority I do the things I do. Tell me, was John's baptism of Divine origin or merely from men?" They thought to themselves, "If we say 'Divine,' He will ask, 'Then why did you not put faith in it?' [They were not ready to admit the truth of that question.] But can we say, 'merely human?'" (They had reason to fear the people, who all regarded John as a true prophet.) So their answer to Jesus was, "We do not know." In turn, Jesus said to them, "Then neither will I tell you on what authority I do the things I do." (Mk. 11:29-33)***

These religious leaders who acted in God's name, refused to accept God's authority over their own lives. They would actually war against God's authority when it was detrimental to their own selfish ambitions and fulfillments. The full extent to which they would go, Jesus related in the parable of the wicked tenants.

The cursing of the fig tree was originally interpreted as a prophetic sign of judgment of God upon stubborn and unfruitful Israel. When this was no

longer a concern to the Church, it served to demonstrate a lesson on prayer. Jesus' reply to Peter's statement, *"Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered up"* convey this later interpretations. Jesus replied,

> ***Put your trust in God. I solemnly assure you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and has no inner doubts but believes that what he says will happen, shall have it done for him. I give you my word, if you are ready to believe that you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer, it shall be done for you. When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance so that your heavenly Father may in turn forgive you your faults. (Mk. 11:21-25)***

These verses may appear to be out of context, but they will appear more appropriate if seen as a description of the quality of prayer to resound in the New Temple. For Mark, the cleansing of the Temple foretold the end of the old Temple worship and the promise that there would be a new House of Prayer for all mankind. This House of Prayer had actually been established through the death of Christ, with the Christian Community itself being the New Temple.

Scholars believe that the original saying of Jesus has been preserved in St. Matthew where we read, *"I assure you, if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would be able to say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move." (Matt. 17:20)* In this form, a promise is granted to a faith which is as a mustard seed. It is not a question of a large quantity or special quality of faith. It refers to the existence of a faith to which everything has been promised just because its expects everything from God and nothing from itself. In Mark's version, *"faith"* is defined as *"not doubting."* Doubt describes man in his indecision and in his wavering between God and every other source of help.

These Scriptures present three rules for Prayer: to pray with trust, expectation and lovingly. Prayer said with trust to God can move mountains. There are rabbinical teachings which speak of uprooting a tree by the power of prayer. Mountains are symbolic of great problems and difficulties. The great rabbis who were able to solve the perplexing problems of their students were spoken of as *"plucking up mountains."* Jesus simply wished to say, in the strongest manner possible, that by faith, men can do what seems absurd or impossible. Prayer can have the power to remove

great difficulties and solve tremendous problems. Prayer that trusts in God!

To trust God implies bringing the problem to Him and accepting His solution. Trusting God doesn't mean trusting God to do whatever we ask. That's really asking God to trust us – that we really know what is good for us. Well, even if we don't know that we are not trustworthy, God certainly knows we are not!

To trust God is to leave the solution to the problem to God. To have a preconceived answer to our prayer may prevent us from recognizing God's answer to our prayer. When we pray we need to keep all doors and windows open. You never know from whence or whom the answer may come.

A Christian ought to pray with expectation. Avoid making prayer a formality – a ritual without hope. St. Theresa used to say that if we don't listen to our own prayers, we certainly cannot expect God to listen to them. It can hardly be supposed that Jesus meant literally that our prayers are answered simply because we believe that we have received our request, or that we can expect to receive literally "whatever" we ask – however selfish or contrary to God's Will. His whole life was total submission to God's Will. No true disciple of Jesus would ever seek or want the Lord to grant anything contrary to God's Will. Had not the Master Himself prayed, *"My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Still, let it be as you would have it, not as I?" (Matt. 26:39)*

When we realize the *"House of Prayer"* is more than the Christian Community, but is, by some mystical and supernatural manner, the body of Christ, it is not fitting that prayer be offered opposing the Will of Jesus. It is the goal of discipleship to put on the Mind and Heart of Christ. All Christian prayer should always be offered with the implied condition that they are in keeping with the Will of God. God has certainly willed that much good can come into every Christian life through the power of prayer. Prayer, as someone said, does not change God, but it can certainly change our lives.

Many half-truths are preached about that for which we should pray and how to go about it. Men preach about the victory of Jesus over evil and encourage Christians to claim nigh everything in the name of that victory. Jesus, in His Person, has overcome the Evil One, but the Evil One has not yet

been overcome in His Mystical Body – the Church. The victory may be certain, but there yet remains many a mop-up campaign to be fought by the Christian Body. The full effects of Christ's victory will only come in the final Resurrection from the dead.

The redemption of man has been actually accomplished in Jesus, but the application of that redemption in the individual lives of Christians, occurs in time and on an on-going basis. In actuality, redemption is progressive in each individual Christian. It implies a daily willful cooperation of the Christian with the grace of the redemption won by Jesus. This grace begins its work in the spirit, and, as a yeast, seeks to permeate the entire person – spirit, soul and body. This work reaches completion in the Resurrection – only then does the body come to share fully in Christ's victory in the fullness of the redemption.

We need to bear in mind that to pray in Jesus' name implies more than faith in Jesus or the vocal pronouncing of that Name. It really means to pray in Jesus – to pray in His Person. This implies being one with Jesus to the degree that it is Jesus Himself who prays. It is inconceivable to pray in His Name for anything not in keeping with His Holy Will. That is incompatible with the way we have been taught by the example and words of Jesus!

The true prayer of Christian Faith is not the prayer that accomplishes signs and wonders, but the prayer offered in a spirit of love. If our spirit is filled with bitterness and animosity toward others, we are out of the spirit with God. To modernly express it, "We are not on the same wave-length." We are not communicating, and so, in reality, we are not truly praying. Without a spirit of love in our hearts, we lack the proper dimension for Divine communion.

Mark's teaching is not only reminiscent of St. Paul's teaching, but, no doubt, truly echoes its sentiments, *"If I have the gift of prophecy and, with full knowledge, comprehend all mysteries, if I have faith great enough to move mountains but have not love, I am nothing." (1Cor. 13:2)*

The prayer of faith is always a prayer of love – and hope for *"love never fails!"*

CHAPTER 14

RAYS OF THE SETTING SUN

THE GREAT SANHEDRIN

The most influential man in Jerusalem was the Jewish High Priest. The most powerful Jewish body was the Great Sanhedrin – the supreme national religious body. The Sanhedrin came into existence about the second century B.C. when the Seleucid kings ruled Palestine. It was a limited form of local government conceded to the Jews by foreign kings. It gave the Council of the Elders (the city fathers) the right to make civil and religious laws. Since Jerusalem was the religious capitol of the Jews and there was no distinction between the nation and the religion, the Sanhedrin had directive force for all Jews throughout the world.

Rome granted many privileges to the Jews. Out of respect for the Jewish law of Sabbath rest, Jews were exempted from military service and could not be called into Roman courts on the Sabbath. Roman soldiers were forbidden to enter Jerusalem with ensigns bearing the image of the emperor. The money coined in Judea, bronze coins, did not bear the emperor's image, but simply his name and symbols not offensive to the Jews. Gold and silver coins bearing the emperor's image were found in Judea, but were issued elsewhere. The worship of the emperor was not imposed on the Jews. The imperial family in Rome more than once sent offerings for the Temple in Jerusalem. Augustus asked that an ox and two lambs be sacrificed daily *"for Caesar and for the Roman people."*

The Great Sanhedrin acquired a great deal of power under Roman rule. Any religious or civil case connected with Jewish law could be judged by the Sanhedrin. Its decision carried executive weight and Roman soldiers could be used to enforce these rulings. Rome limited the Sanhedrin's executive power only in the matter of the death sentence, as it could pronounce a sentence of death, but could not execute the sentence without the approval of the Roman Procurator. Generally speaking, it was a solemn legal principle of the Sanhedrin to avoid capitol punishment as much as possible. A

Sanhedrin that passed a death sentence once in seven years was considered severe.

The Sanhedrin consisted of seventy-one members presided over by a president, the high priest. The members came from three distinct groups. The first such group was the chief priests – composed of men who had held the office of high priest and the leading members of the families from which the high priests were selected. The second group was the elders – prominent members of the lay aristocracy who, by reason of wealth and position, could make an effective contribution to the administration of civil affairs. These two groups belonged to the party of the Sadducees. The third group was composed of scribes or doctors of the Law. These were laymen and most belonged to the party of the Pharisees. The scribes were the most popular and dynamic members of the Sanhedrin. In essence, the Sanhedrin represented the cream of Jewish society; it did not represent those masses for whom Jesus had the greatest appeal – the people of the land. It was Jesus' continual association with these people that constantly annoyed the Pharisees for in their opinion, *"this multitude that knows nothing about the Law are lost anyway." (Jn. 7:49)*

At one point, Jesus recognized the authority of these men. He said to the people,

> ***The scribes and the Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers; therefore, do everything and observe everything they tell you. But do not follow their example. Their words are bold but their deeds are few. (Matt. 23:2-4)***

We have read in Chapter Eleven that at one point, Jesus refused to obey their authority. While He was walking in the temple precincts, *"the chief priests, the scribes and the elders approached Him."* They were a delegation of the Sanhedrin and they demand to know by what authority Jesus performed His deeds. As the legitimate religious authority, they were channels of God's authority in Israel and deserved obedience. In the eyes of Jesus, they had ceased to be channels of authority. When they failed to acknowledge that John the Baptist came from God, they had refused to accept God's authority. They rejected the authority of God and thereby ceased to be channels of God's authority in Israel. They had forfeited the right to religious obedience. This, Jesus implied, when He refused to obey them,

"Then neither will I tell you on what authority I do the things I do." (Mk. 11:33)

To have admitted that John was a prophet sent by God would have obliged them to accept the authority of Jesus, as John had testified that Jesus was the Messiah. The scriptures had foretold that the authority of Moses would endure until the coming of the Messiah. With Jesus revealing Himself as the Messiah, their authority would cease. These men served neither God nor religion with purity of intention, but with vested self-interest. They refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah. What in actual fact took place, Jesus related in a parable addressed to the delegation from the Sanhedrin. As this parable appears in Mark, it is more an allegorical story than a parable. Israel is pictured as a vineyard planted by God and entrusted by Him into the hands of men. God has generously equipped this vineyard with everything necessary to make it fruitful and its labor light. God is patient and generous with Israel, but He receives no return. From time to time, God sent prophets to remind Israel of its Covenant with Him. These prophets were destroyed. Lastly, God sent His Beloved Son whom they should respect and listen to. At this point, Jesus stated His own unique position in the history of salvation. He is not like those who have gone before – He is the Beloved Son of the Father – He is the Image of the Father. To Him belongs authority and obedience. But those in authority refused obedience and will kill Him in order to safeguard their own positions. As the story relates, ***"They seized and killed Him and dragged Him outside the vineyard."*** **This implied that the Messiah would die excommunicated from Israel. For this crime, God will destroy all they sought to gain and maintain by their evil deeds. Others will be given what they have lost. Jesus quoted the words of Psalm 118,**

> ***The stone rejected by the builders has become the Keystone of the structure. It was the Lord who did it and we find it marvelous to behold! (Ps. 118:22-23)***

The story was not lost upon its hearers:

> ***They wanted to arrest Him at this, yet they had reason to fear the crowd. They knew well enough that He meant the parable for them. Finally, they left Him and went off. (Mk. 12:12)***

They went off to plot and design some method to turn the people against Jesus.

Within the temple precincts were located two famous porches. On the East side was the Porch of Solomon, a magnificent arcade composed of Corinthian columns thirty-five feet high. On the South side was the even more beautiful Royal Porch – formed by one hundred and sixty-two white marble columns, thirty feet high and six feet in diameter. These porches offered shelter from the wind, rain and heat of the sun. Here, the great teachers would stroll up and down teaching their students. During His last days, Jesus could be found here daily teaching the people and it is here He engaged disputes with His enemies. Mark relates several of these instances (called pronouncement stories because, within them, Jesus proclaims certain doctrinal truths). Having Jesus utter these truths only a few days before His death emphasizes their importance.

To understand the following episode, we need a brief review of the political climate which served as its background. Herod the Great was proclaimed King of the Jews in 40 B.C. by grace of Mark Anthony and Octavian, who later became Caesar Augustus. Herod was neither of royal descent nor Roman blood. He ruled Palestine for thirty-five years. His kingdom was exempt from tribute to the empire (taxation) and was not obliged to quarter Roman garrisons. Herod enjoyed full rights of administration in judicial and financial matters. He had his own army, but could not wage war without consent of Rome; nor could he appoint a successor to his throne without the express approval of the emperor. In his Will, Herod divided his kingdom among three sons, naming Archelaus heir to the throne with dominion over Judea, Samaria, and Idumaea; Antipas was named tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; Philip was named tetrarch of the northern regions of Trochonitis, Gaulinities, Batanea and Auranitis.

The three brothers went to Rome to obtain Augustus' approval of their appointments. Many prominent Jews were against the sanctioning of this will. A delegation of fifty was sent to Rome representing the leading Jews and asking that the Herodian monarchy be suppressed and its territories be incorporated into the Roman province of Syria. Augustus rejected their request and approved the will except for the provision making Archelaus king. Instead, Archelaus was placed on probation. He stood the test only a short time. In 6 A.D., a new delegation, composed of Jews and Samaritans both, went to Rome to lay before the emperor their charges against

Archelaus. Augustus exiled Archelaus to Gaul and annexed his territories to the empire, as requested by the Jews. As a consequence of this, the Jews were then subjected to Roman taxation, the presence of Roman troops in their land and rule by a Roman Procurator. The actual taxes imposed were these:

1. **A poll tax – a yearly tribute each adult in the empire had to render to Caesar, levied on all men from the age of fourteen to sixty-five and all women from twenty to sixty-five. The tax payable was one denarius – a silver Roman coin.**

2. **A ground tax consisting of ten percent of all the grain produced and twenty percent of the wine and fruit produced.**

3. **An income tax amounting to one percent of a man's income.**

For the purpose of collecting the poll tax, Sulpicious Quirinius in 6 A.D. began the census of Judea. It became evident to many Jews at this time that Israel was now subjected to foreign rule. The majority of the Pharisees complied, but a fringe group rebelled under Judas of Gamala, called the Galilean, who thundered that *"taxation was no better than an introduction to slavery."* Along with a prominent Pharisee, named Sadduc, Judas induced his countrymen to revolt, saying that they were cowards if they would, after God, endure mortal men as their lords. He said God would only favor them if they resorted to all the violence possible. This movement gave birth to a group called Zealots or Sicarii, because they frequently attack their enemies with a small dagger called a *'sica.'* (One of Jesus' own apostles was said to have been a Zealot.) This rebellion was put down by the Romans, but it only succeeded in scattering the Zealots. They hid and kept alive a smoldering spirit of implacable hatred and opposition for all foreign rule, which was to burst forth in the final rebellion of the Jews in 66 A.D., resulting in the destruction of the Temple of the Jews and the Jewish nation. The Zealots often murdered Jews for collaborating with the Romans.

The poll tax was extremely unpopular because it constantly reminded the Jews of their subjected state and because the silver coin in which it had to be paid bore the name and image of Caesar. Many Jews were bitterly opposed to the tax. The Pharisees, who owed their popularity to their intense nationalism and hatred of the foreign rule, nevertheless accepted the tax as inevitable. But on the other hand, there were those who owed their positions

to the Roman government and therefore actively supported the government – the Herodians were such a group of men.

CAESAR vs. GOD

With this in the background, we can better understand how deadly was the question then put to Jesus – devised by artful and cunning enemies, calculated to do Jesus great harm. The question bristled with danger:

> ***They next sent some Pharisees and Herodians after Him to catch Him in His speech. The two groups [as someone once put it: War makes strange bedfellows!] came and said to Him, "Teacher, we know You are a truthful man, unconcerned about anyone's opinion. It is evident You do not act out of human respect but teach God's way of life sincerely." (Mk. 12:13)***

As we would say today, they were setting Jesus up for the kill. Only a man who does not stand in fear of man, even a Roman emperor, who pays no attention to outward conditions of rank and wealth, would dare, they imply, give a true answer to their question.

> ***"Is it lawful," they asked, "to pay the tax to the emperor or not? Are we to pay or not to pay?" (Mk. 12:14)***

Jesus knew the pretense and evil design behind their words and said,

> ***"Why are you trying to trip me up? Bring me a coin and let me see it." When they brought one, he said to them. "Whose head is this and whose inscription is it?" (Mk. 12:15-16)***

According to ancient ideas, coins were ultimately the private property of the ruler who issued them and whose image they bore. The emperor was Tiberius (14-37 A.D.) and the inscription read, *"Tiberius Caesar Son of the Divine Augustus,"* and on the reverse side, *"Pontifex Maximus"* – a high priest. When they brought the coin to Jesus, He had what He needed for His argument. Their very possession of the coin proved not only their subjection to Rome, but their obligation to it. They had sought the jurisdiction of Rome; they enjoyed the protection it offered and they had an obligation to pay for it. Jesus said, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's!"*

The word translated – 'give' or 'render' – implies payment of a debt. In other words, Jesus told them, 'Since the money you have in your possession is Caesar's, you implicitly acknowledge his authority and therefore you have an obligation to pay taxes to him. But more important, you have a debt to God. Man bears the image of God and therefore belongs to God. Everything else is insignificant in the light of man's relationship with God. This relationship you are neglecting.' Man receives from the state certain benefits and citizenship. But what does society give man in comparison to the blessings and benefits that come from God? What is the debt each man owes God? If God sent man a bill for services rendered, what would man owe God? God does demand a return in kind!

The teachings of Jesus convey an important message to the Roman Community: Man's rightful duty to the state does not contradict his duty of God. Men should perform the first, but concentrate above all, on their relationship to the Lord.

Jesus may well have been implying that since He is the Beloved Son of the Father, the Image of the Invisible God, and they had rejected Him, they had failed to acknowledge the kinship of God and render tribute to Him. On the other hand, they had truly acknowledged Caesar and paid their debt to him. Mark concludes this episode with *"Their amazement at him knew no bounds." (Mk. 12:13-17)*

THE FACT OF THE RESURRECTION

The Sadducees, probably Jesus' most deadly enemies, directed the next attack at Jesus. The word 'Sadducee' denotes the Zadokites, whose name was derived from the proper name, Zadok – a priest who distinguished himself by his fidelity in the time of David. The sons of Zadok were the aristocracy of the priesthood and Ezekiel gave them the exclusive right to its functions.

The party of the Sadducees differed widely from that of the Pharisees. The Sadducees accepted only the first five books of the Bible as inspired Sacred Scripture. They rejected the oral laws, traditions, rules and regulations esteemed so highly by the Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, nor in spirits or angels. They held that no evidence existed in the Pentateuch for these beliefs.

Some of the later Scriptures do confirm the resurrection from the dead. We read in Daniel:

> ***Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some shall live forever, others shall be in everlasting horror and disgrace. But the wise shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, and those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever. (Dan. 12:2)***

Isaiah writes,

> ***On this mountain he will destroy the veil and veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations; He will destroy death forever. (Is. 25:7-8)***
>
> ***Salvation we have not achieved for the earth, the inhabitants of the world cannot bring it forth. But your dead shall live – their corpses shall rise; awake and sing, you who lie in the dust. For your dew is a dew of light, and the land of shades gives birth. (Is. 26:18-19)***

One of the later Psalms says,

> ***Yet with you I shall always be; you have hold of my right hand; with your counsel you guide me, and in the end you will receive me in glory. (Ps. 73:23-24) (Also see Job 19:25-26)***

For the most part, belief in the resurrection or immortality is entirely missing from the Old Testament, which knows only of a shadowy existence that can hardly be called life, shared by departed souls in a gloomy and desolate region called Sheol. Apparently, the Jews believed man's relationship with God ended when entering Sheol, for we read:

> ***For it is not the nether world that gives you thanks, nor death that praises you; Neither do those who go down into the pit await your kindness. (Is. 38:18)***

As one of the early Psalms expresses:

> ***Return, O Lord, save my life; rescue me because of your kindness, for among the dead no one remembers you; in the nether world who gives you thanks? (Ps. 6:5-6)***

The Sadducees, being disbelievers in the resurrection of the dead, presented to Jesus one of their standard arguments reducing the concept to the ridiculous. They began by quoting the Levitical law of Moses that stated, *"If anyone's brother dies leaving a wife but no child, his brother must take the wife and produce offspring for his brother." (Mk. 12:19)* The institution of the levitate marriage went back to the most primitive times, when to die without issue was regarded as a terrible calamity, since anyone doing so would have no one to perform the filial duty of making offering to propitiate his ghost. Later, the custom was followed in order to keep property within the family, as the oldest son was heir.

After quoting the Levitate law, the Sadducees then related the case of one woman who, due to this law, finally had to marry seven brothers. They asked Jesus, *"Whose wife would she be in the life to come?"* Pharisees themselves held a very materialistic conception of resurrection, believing that men would come forth from the graves as they had entered them. This was ridiculous in the eyes of the Sadducees. Jesus responded to the Sadducees,

> ***You are badly misled, because you fail to understand the Scriptures or the power of God. When people rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but live like angels in Heaven. As to the raising of the dead, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God told him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob?" He is the God of the living, not of the dead. You are very much mistaken. (Mk. 12:26-27)***

The answer of Jesus deals with the fact and manner of Resurrection. He first taught that the life to come cannot be measured or thought of in terms of this present earthly life. The life of the resurrected will be a spiritualized existence akin to that of angelic beings. The fact of the Resurrection flows from the power of God and Scripture testifies to this fact when it calls God the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for He is a God of the living and not the dead.

Jesus teaches that God loves mankind and when men serve God righteously – by rendering to God His due – such men enter into friendship with God. They enter into friendship with Divine Love. It is of the essence of love to share life with the Beloved. God shares eternal life with His friends. It is impossible for them to die who die in God's love! If God is love, then immortality and resurrection are assured!

Jesus told the Sadducees that their errors flowed from ignorance of the Scriptures that testify to God's love of mankind and from their not knowing the power of God. In other words, in their not experiencing in their own lives the love of God that endures eternally. They drew their erroneous deductions from the experience of their own loveless lives. The testimony of ungodly lives cannot but leave the spirit in darkness and error about a God of love and of His loving way toward men. As long as men do not know the Scriptures or experience the power of God in their lives, they will be very much mistaken in opinions, ideas and actions.

THE RIGHT QUESTION

As the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders reached a climax, Mark recounts an instance demonstrating the essential faithfulness of Jesus to the spirit of religion and the Law. In regards to the Law, there were two general viewpoints among the rabbis. There was a tendency to attempt to gather the Law into one general statement, which would be a compendium of the whole message, and there was the other tendency to expand the Law almost limitlessly. Among the rabbis, some believed that there were lighter and weightier matters of the Law and others believed that the smallest principle was equally binding. In their eyes, it was highly dangerous to distinguish between the relative importance of laws. Out of this web was woven a most involved legalism – an unbearable burden.

A scribe, apparently in good faith, then asked Jesus a question that reflected an area of lively debate among the rabbis. Mark relates,

> ***One of the scribes came up, and when he heard them arguing he realized how skillfully Jesus answered them. He decided to ask him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "This is the first: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord Our God is Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord your God with all your***

heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the second: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mk. 12:28-31)

Jesus clearly stated that love is the service man must give to God – the debt man must render to God. This love must proceed and express the entire person. It is a total expression of the person. This love of God includes in itself all other affections and loves – including the ever-present love of self. St. Bernard used to teach that if we cannot love ourselves, we cannot love our neighbor or God. All too often, love of self monopolizes man and truly destroys him. Total absorption in self is total insanity! Jesus demands that self-love be subordinate to love of God and that it be coordinated with love of man. Jesus carries us into the very heart and essence of religion. He combines two widely separate texts of the Old Testament.

Each morning and evening every Israelite had to recite:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)

If, then, you truly heed my commandments which I enjoin on you today, loving and serving the Lord, your God, with all your heart and all your soul, I will give the seasonal rain to your land, the early rain and the late rain, that you may have your grain, wine and oil to gather in; and I will bring forth grass in your fields for your animals. Thus you may eat your fill. But be careful lest your heart be so lured away that you serve other gods and worship them. For the wrath of the Lord will flare up against you and He will close up the Heavens, so that no rain will fall, and the soil will not yield its crops, and you will soon perish from the good land He is giving you.

Therefore, take these words of mind into your heart and soul. Bind

them at your wrist as a sign, and let them be a pendant on your forehead. Teach them to your children, speaking of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. And write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates, so that, as long as the heavens are above the earth, you and your children may live on in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers He would give them.

For if you are careful to observe all these commandments I enjoin on you, loving the Lord, your God, and following His ways exactly, and holding fast to Him, the Lord will drive all these nations out of your way, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves. Every place where you set foot shall be yours – from the desert and from Lebanon, from the Euphrates River to the Western Sea, shall be your territory. (Deut. 11:13-24)

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and tell them that they and their descendants must put tassels on the corners of their garments, fastening each corner tassel with a violet cord. When you see these tassels, let the sight of them remind you to keep all the commandments of the Lord, without going wantonly astray after the desires of your hearts and eyes. Thus you will remember to keep all my commandments and be holy to your God. I, the Lord, am your God, who, as God, brought you out of Egypt that I, the Lord, may be your God." (Num. 15:37-41)

This prayer is called *"Shema"* – taken from the first word of the prayer meaning 'Hear.' It was an Israelite's confession of Faith. To the first part of the Shema, Jesus added Leviticus 19:18, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* This ancient commandment takes on new meaning when the *"second"* commandment is placed alongside it. Matthew indicates, in so many words, that these commandments are of equal importance:

This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it... On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well. (Matt. 22:38-40)

Luke comments on the two commandments without any break between them, making it one commandment. *(Lk. 10:27)* This means that it is impossible to keep the first commandment unless one lives according to the second. When mark introduces it as a *"second"* commandment, he does so in

order to emphasize the proper sequence of love.

This message was understood by the early Christian Church. The First Epistle of St. John clearly states,

> ***If anyone says, "My love is fixed on God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. (1Jn. 5:20)***

Yet love of neighbor demands of man recognition that this love becomes possible only through love of God. Again, John expresses, *"No one has ever seen God. Yet if we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is brought to perfection in us." (1Jn. 4:12)*

With these two commandments, Jesus destroyed the power of legalism. He excluded legalism, which seeks all sorts of legal observances, while losing sight of the truth that true love of God can never be expressed by a *"holy"* indifference to the needs of other human beings. Love of God which does not express itself in concrete expressions for sinners is an illusion. Jesus called tax collectors and sinners into friendship with God. It is not possible for men to be saved by merely observing legal prescriptions. You do not measure whole-hearted love by counting the number of laws observed.

The scribe who asked the question responded,

> ***Excellent, Teacher! You are right in saying, 'He is the One, there is no other than He.' Yes, 'to love Him with all our heart, with all our thoughts and with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves' is worth more than any burnt offering or sacrifice.***
>
> ***(Mk. 12:32-33)***

This is the only instance in the Gospel where a teacher of the law is found agreeing with Jesus. If you feel you are often right and yet people do not agree with you, take comfort from the thought that you are in good company! Jesus said to the scribe, *"You are not far from the reign of God."* Apparently, it pays to agree with Jesus. The reign of God has come in Jesus and only He can determine who is close to Him. Remember Jesus warned that many who are first now will be last when it is all said and done. No doubt Jesus was inviting this good scribe to take the step into the reign of God.

Although the question from this scribe was friendly, other questions had been calculated to destroy the authority of Jesus with the people. They attempted to show that Jesus was limited, as were other men, when faced with problems that puzzled learned men. Jesus' answers had demonstrated not only a mastery in the techniques of debating, but also a deep and wise grasp of the principles involved. His authority stood stronger than ever after these encounters. Since the answers of Jesus only reflected negatively upon His enemies, they no longer asked Him any more questions.

WHOSE SON IS HE?

Then Jesus Himself took the offensive and put a question to them. They had challenged His Messianic claims by their questions. Jesus now challenged their concept of the Messiah with His question. The Jews claimed that the Messiah would be the son of David. Jesus said,

> *How can the scribes claim, "The Messiah is David's son?" David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." If David himself addresses Him as "Lord," in what sense can He be his son? (Mk. 12:35-37)*

The scribes, by their emphasis on the messianic descent from David, were failing to see the lordship of the Messiah. The title *"Son of David,"* by its narrow interpretation, misrepresented the truth about the messianic kingdom. Jesus was conscious of a greatness that could not be ascribed to his descent from David, but resulted from His unique relationship with the Father. Jesus exposed the narrowness of the messianic concept taught by the rabbis. If they accepted the teaching of Jesus, it would revolutionize their concept of the Messiah. They would have to sacrifice their concept of a Messiah who would establish an earthly kingdom for one who, as the Servant of God, would bring men into Friendship with God. The teaching of Jesus implies the Divine Sonship of the Messiah when He speaks of Him as *"Lord."* The good scribe had to take this step in order to enter into the reign of God. He must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ!

This section of the Gospel of Mark brings to a conclusion Jesus' public confrontations with the scribes and the Jewish leaders. At this point, Matthew introduces a sweeping denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees

that indeed manifests the bitter feeling in the early Church between Christian and Jewish communities. (In a few words, Mark paints an equally effective picture.) They are charged with ostentation, with an unhealthy craving for social positions and flattery and terrible inconsistency between their frequent acts of worship and the mean and uncharitable lives they lived: *"These men devour the savings of widows and recite long prayers for appearance sake."* Jesus warns that men who do such things will receive a greater punishment than men who do evil deeds but do not hide their evil behind a mask of piety. The Lord who appears so tolerant apparently is very intolerant of hypocrisy.

This past warning is really addressed to people to be aware of religious leaders who hide inhumanity behind outward titles and trappings of their office and displays of piety. *"By their fruits you will know them."*

RICHNESS OF THE HEART

The day closes with a scene in the Treasury of the Temple. Jesus watched people giving their offerings for the Temple worship and for the poor. Many wealthy people put in sizable amounts, but one poor widow came and put in two small coins, worth about a third of a cent. Jesus called His Disciples over to Him and said,

> ***I want you to observe that this poor widow contributed more than all the others who donated to the treasury. They gave from their surplus wealth, but she gave from her want, all that she had to live on. (Mk. 12:43-44)***

It was the end of the day – the public ministry of Jesus had come to an end. Mark closes the ministry of Jesus with this story.

It is so simple – we could easily dismiss it with little attention at all. And yet, the haunting idea keeps returning that, in some way, it is summing up the life of Jesus. In some way, this poor woman symbolized Jesus Himself. The person and the gift of this woman went unesteemed in the eyes of the world. By the world's standard of personal worth, she has no value. Her contributions do not make the world go around. But there is another scale by which things are measured – the Divine scale. According to the Divine standard, she is highly esteemed because in Heaven, love is the measure of worth. She made a contribution to the Temple – a contribution for the

service of God. It was given for the glory of God. To this service and to this glory she gave all she had to live on – all that sustained her earthly life. It is another way of saying she gave her life.

Love is measured by the gift. When love is perfect – it gives all. It does not reckon the consequences. It does not count the toll. There is no thought of tomorrow. It is beyond logic and reason.

There is a modern play dealing with the lives of men and women who are professional dancers. It is a demanding life – a vigorous life – filled with frustrations, disappointments and agonies of suspense – all for a few moments to dance before the lights, a career brief at its longest. In the play, the characters are asked if they would choose such a career again if they had it all to do over again, knowing now the price to be paid and the scant rewards it brings. The answer comes in the form of a song that says, "I do not regret what I did for love!" How true it is! The only things we will never regret when our life is said and done are the things we did for love.

Indeed, our widow in the Gospel symbolizes that total love of God demanded by the First Commandment – love that comes from the whole heart. She is contrasted with the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Scribes. They were educated, they were socially prominent, they were esteemed as benefactors of society, they were the pillars of the Church and Community. They had so much to give and gave much, and yet, on the Divine scale, were found wanting. It was not what they did or did not do. It was WHY! All their apparent civil and religious contributions were manifestations and extensions of self. In their hearts, there was no love of God. All was done for self. Paul knew the consequences of life lived without love of God when he wrote that if I have not love *"I am nothing. I gain nothing!" (1Cor. 13:2-3)*

Indeed, the widow symbolizes Jesus. He, too, appeared poor in the eyes of men. He did not have proper education or come from the right social background. He did not say or do the acceptable thing. He was not only not esteemed by society, but despised. He appeared before men as one of the little ones of the earth. But according to the Divine scale, all was different. *"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."* The widow gave all she had to live on for the service of God and for His honor and glory, and so did Jesus. He gave His life, and that life contributed more than all others combined to the service of God and to the glory of His name, because the gift of His life was the purest gift of love Heaven ever beheld! Would Jesus do it

all over again? Yes – for there are no regrets for what one does for love.

Many Christians bear so little fruit. They make such a small contribution to the service of God and His glory because of what they see in others. The talents, the abilities of others paralyze what is in them. They hold on to their two mites feeling they have nothing to give and meanwhile, the world goes to Hell. They sit on their hands and time passes by and their lives are filled with regrets.

God does not measure our gift or service by the gift or service of another. God looks into our hearts and not into our hands to see what degree of love our gift and service express.

When Therese of Lisieux was pondering the possibility of an early death and the short time she had to become a saint, she consoled herself with the thought, *"It does not take much time only much love."* And she knew she could pick up a pin out of love and it had value on the eternal scale. Pope John knew the secret of the poor widow when he said, *"The heart that loves always has something to give!"* And we might add – no regrets!

CHAPTER 15

THE PAROUSIA

INTRODUCTION

There is no chapter in the Gospel of Mark more difficult to interpret than Thirteen. It presents a scriptural puzzle for many modern readers. It has been subjected to a great deal of misinterpretation. Understanding of the message being conveyed necessitates an understanding of Jewish literature from the time of Jesus. It is a very Jewish section of the Gospel expressing its truth clothed in Old Testament concepts and ideas. All the symbolisms used have parallels in other Jewish writings. We need to understand their meanings in these writings in order to properly interpret them in the Gospel.

In what degree this chapter represents the earthly teachings of Jesus or the Risen Jesus speaking through prophecy to the early Church is difficult to determine. We see Jesus speaking of His Second Coming in this chapter as if it is a presumed fact. And yet, up to this point in the Gospel narrative, Jesus has revealed only His death and Resurrection. Both of these truths the Disciples failed to understand. Later, we will see that the death of Jesus left them in disbelief. These truths were most certainly compiled by the Church to deal with concrete religious problems within the early Christian Community, one of the major problems being the Second Coming of Jesus. Apparently there was then, as now, a great deal of fanaticism on this subject.

An adequate interpretation of Chapter Thirteen will not give us a compendium of the teachings of the Scriptures, nor the Church on the Parousia and the end of the world. To see these doctrines in their fullness, they need to be studied in the light of the full revelation given by the Scriptures and the inspired teachings of the Church.

In brief summation, we may say that it is dogma of the Church that at the end of the world, Jesus Christ will come again in glory to pronounce judgment. This is a matter of faith! (The rest of what we hear on the matter ranges from teachings that are certain with solid scriptural foundation, to

illusions preceding from an over-active imagination.) There are scriptural signs for the Second Coming:

> **1. The Gospel must be preached to the entire world.** ***"This Good News of the Kingdom will be proclaimed to the whole world as a witness to all the nations. Only after that will the end come." (Mat. 24:14t) (Mk. 13:10)*** **This does not imply that the end will follow immediately.**
>
> **2. The Jews will be converted. Paul tells us that he reveals a secret to us,** ***"When the fullness, that is the number ordained by God, of the Gentiles has entered the Kingdom of God, all Israel will be converted and saved – he teaches a universal conversion of the Jews." (Rm. 11:25-32)***
>
> **3. There will be a falling away from the faith. Paul asserts that before the coming again of the Lord,** ***"the mass apostasy"*** **must come first, that is the falling away from the Christian Faith. (2Thes. 2:3)**
>
> **4. Lastly, the revelation of the Antichrist that will cause the falling away from the faith.**

As Paul wrote:

"On the question of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him, we beg you, brothers, not to be so easily agitated or terrified, whether by an oracular utterance, or rumor, or a letter alleged to be ours, into believing that the day of the Lord is here. Let no one seduce you, no matter how. Since the mass apostasy has not yet occurred, nor the man of lawlessness been revealed – that the son of perdition and adversary, who exalts himself above every so-called god proposed for worship, he who seats himself in God's temple and even declares himself to be God – do you not remember how I used to tell you about these things when I was still with you?" (2Thes. 2:1-12)

The Antichrist appears in the power of Satan, works miracles in order to lead men into falling away from truth and godliness in order to destroy them. The Lord Jesus will, on His arrival, kill him ***"with the spirit of his mount"*** **– that is, destroy him with a power proceeding from Him. According to Paul and John, the Antichrist is to appear as a definite human**

personality who is the instrument of Satan. The Didache speaks of a *"seducer of the world."*

It is a definite teaching of the Church that the time of the Second Coming is unknown to men. St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

> ***As regards specific times and moments, brothers, we do not need to write you; you know very well that the day of the Lord is coming like a thief in the night. (1Thes. 5:1-2)***

Paul warns against any exaggerated anticipation of the Parousia. St. Peter associates the delay of the Parousia to the patience of God who wishes to give sinners time to repent.

> ***In the Lord's eyes, one day is a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day. The Lord does not delay in keeping his promise – though some consider it "delay." (2Peter 3:8-9)***

In spite of the uncertainty of the time of the Parousia, people in primitive Christian days counted very strongly on the probability of its prompt occurrence. *(Phil. 4:5 / Heb. 10:37 / James 5:8 / 1Pet. 4:7)* A testimony of the ardent longing for the Parousia is the Aramaic invocation *"Maranatha"* or *"Lord, Come!" (1Cor. 16:22) "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20)*

DAY OF THE LORD

The Jews believed that God would one day directly interfere with the history of mankind. Through God's direct exertion of power in the affairs of mankind, Israel would come to rule the world as befitting the People of God. They referred to this day as *"the day of the Lord."* Israel believed the world to be so corrupted, that reformation was impossible – re-creation was demanded. Therefore, God would completely destroy the old world and re-create a new. The Messiah would destroy the enemies of Israel. As Israel grew weaker and its humiliations more unbearable, it took hope in its religious destiny. The prophets and visionaries expressed this hope of Israel in apocalyptic writings – these writings were composed of dreams and visions. They used symbolic images to paint their revelations. These works were primarily poetic, rather than prosaic. They were never intended to be interpreted literally, but symbolically. These works are known as Apocalypses. The Greek word *"apolalupsis"* means, "an unveiling." The

books were created during times of special trial for the Chosen People. These works were intended to show that the present sufferings had been foreseen and permitted by Yahweh, and were but preludes to a great manifestation of God's power – the coming of *"the day of the Lord"* – when evil would be destroyed and Israel exalted. The Apocalypses endeavored to teach that just as sufferings have been foretold and have come to be, just as certainly will the triumph and victory be. They are but its birth pangs. They intended to strengthen the people of God amidst their sufferings and persecutions by teaching that sufferings were but bitter means to a sweet end. The apocalyptic writings were never intended to be taken literally, as they were neither history nor maps of the future. They were word pictures revealing religious truths.

It was the literary custom to attribute these books to the spirit of some great personage who lived some ages before. We have a good example of this in the book of Daniel. The visions and dreams in this book are attributed to Daniel, a young Jew, who lived in Babylon at least until 538 B.C. The book was actually composed by an unknown author around 167 B.C. It was composed during the bitter persecution suffered by the Jews under the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. During this persecution, he endeavored to eradicate the Jewish religion by having swine flesh offered on the altar of the Temple, establishing public brothels in the sacred courts of the Temple and setting up a statue of Zeus within the Temple to be worshipped by all Jews.

Chapter Thirteen of Mark appears to be a combination of the apocalyptic literary form and another literary form that uses a farewell discourse to convey certain teachings. It was believed that when great religious leaders such as Jacob, Moses, Samuel and David approached death, they delivered a last will and testament to family or disciples or subjects. It could include a survey of the past and its lessons; it usually spoke of things to come, especially the dangers and sufferings to be expected along with exhortations to remain faithful and steadfast. These teachings were believed to flow from Divine Revelation and offered a firm foundation for perseverance during the foretold adversities. We find in the Gospel of John the best example of the *"farewell discourse"* of Jesus.

The colorful material presented in Chapter Thirteen comes from Jewish apocalyptic writings. People with an Old Testament background understood the images and expressions used by Jesus. If we are to understand these teachings, we must know what these images and symbols signified in

apocalyptic writings. The whole setting for Chapter Thirteen appears staged and inserted into the Gospel narrative. It serves to set the coming Passion of Jesus in proper perspective. The readers are expected to bear in mind that the sufferings endured are but the path to the glory described in Chapter Thirteen. Mark creates a continuity with the previous material by relating a prophecy made by Jesus as he leaves the Temple for the last time. One of the disciples commented on the grandeur and size of the Temple, *"Teacher, look at the huge blocks of stone and the enormous buildings."* Josephus, the Jewish historian, gives this description of the Temple:

> *The outward face of the Temple... was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendor and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays. But this Temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow, for, as to those parts of it which were not gilt, they were exceedingly white.... Of its stones, some of them were forty feet in length, seven-and-a-half feet in height and nine feet in breadth.*

This massive structure gave the appearance it would last forever. Jesus replied to the Disciple, *"You see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another – all will be torn down." (Mk. 13)* "Not one stone will be left upon another" was an ancient expression for utter destruction.

FALSE MESSIAHS AND SIGNS

Following the prophecy, Jesus was seated on the Mount of Olives, a mount higher than that of Moriah. From this position, Jesus looked down upon the temple area. The mountain was the traditional place of revelation. According to Zechariah, the Mount of Olives would be the scene of the coming apocalyptic judgment, *"That day his feet shall rest upon the Mount of Olives, which is opposite Jerusalem to the east." (Zech. 14:4)* Mark relates that Peter, James, John and Andrew came to question Him privately about the coming destruction. These revelations are given privately only to the Disciples longest in the company of Jesus. This form of presentation was used when a certain public proclamation of Jesus had been misunderstood, seeking to add corrective light on the problem. No doubt it was directed toward a disturbing problem within the Christian Community. We ought to see the following discourse as an effort of the Church to apply the teachings

of Jesus to a present, urgent and bewildering problem. Some suggest it was intended to clear up certain misunderstandings about the destruction of the Temple and its relationship to the Second Coming or the Parousia. The Greek word "parousia" means "presence" or "to become present" – "to come." Strictly speaking, it does not designate the "return," but simply the appearance of Jesus. The theme of these prophecies is *"Be on your guard. Let no one mislead you." (Mk. 13:5)*

The prophecies begin with these words and repeat them as a refrain in Verses 9:23-33 and the entire section ends on the note – "Be on guard!" Apparently, the Christians for whom Mark wrote, were being misled into believing the Parousia had come. Certain men proclaimed themselves to be the returned Christ. *"Any number will come attempting to impersonate me. 'I am He' they will claim, and will lead many astray." (Mk. 13:6)* Other Christians were reading, as ominous signs, the news of wars among nations and rumors of wars, earthquakes and famines that the end was near. These were not signs of the end. Jesus said, *"Such things aye bound to happen, but this is not the end." Mk. 13:7)* These things will always happen and men must not be disturbed by them as if they were things out of the ordinary. They are not signs of the end of time! At most, they are no more than early birth pangs. Christians are warned to guard themselves and not be running after false Messiahs and studying portents. Care for themselves does not mean care for their physical lives, but their spiritual safety, because their commitment to Jesus will be tested. For their belief and love of Jesus, they will be brought before Jewish and Gentile rulers. Persecutions by the powers of this world and universal hatred lie before them. Their persecution will be so bitter it will extend to their own families, leaving them no one to trust. This must not overcome them – God permits this. He will use all this evil for His Divine purposes.... Christians have a work in this world and they must not lose sight of it, even amidst great persecutions. They must bear witness to Jesus. They are to proclaim the Gospel message. All these trials will afford them opportunities to fulfill their mission. Their very lives will be a witness for Jesus. They are not to worry about their defense before their persecutors; the important thing is to witness – they give to the Kingdom of God. Persecution will drive them throughout the world and the Gospel will be preached and it will spread. This is what is important. This is their mission. They must not waste their time studying signs and portents of the coming end – it leaves them open to be seduced by false Messiahs who play upon their illusions and dreams, while in the meantime, they neglect the mission assigned to them.

THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

Mark now comes to a real cause of alarm among Christians – the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. Jesus Himself had indicated it to be a sign of the end. Mark calls special attention to it as his readers stand in the shadow of the approaching event. It was an event caused by Divine decree. Truly *"the day of the Lord."* Jesus used a quotation from Daniel indicating when the event would occur, *"When you see the abominable and destructive presence standing where it should not be – let the reader take note."* [We certainly cannot picture Jesus saying to the Disciples, "let the reader take note," since the written Gospel came many years after the death of Jesus.] Of course, in Daniel, this refers to the desecration of the Temple by Antiouchus Epiphanes. Luke supplies us with the interpretation when he shows Jerusalem surrounded by armies to be the sign of the end. The abomination of desolation would be the Roman armies. This would be a sign for Christians to flee the city of Jerusalem. Some among the multitude given over to destruction would be God's chosen ones and on their account, God would shorten these days. During this time, false Messiahs again appeared, differing from the previous false Messiahs by working signs and prodigies as proof of their claims. Because of the times, the danger of deception would be greater. Even the elect – who did not belong to the unprepared multitude – were in danger of being led astray, *"So be constantly on guard! I have told you about it beforehand."* These words, in the Greek, strongly oppose any interpretation that makes this warning refer to a time when the Disciples, to whom it was addressed, would no longer be living. These prophecies were to be fulfilled during the generation to whom they were addressed.

Jesus then implied that this period would be *"the day of the Lord."* To express the concept that God personally enters into the affairs of men, and to express the doom of nations coming under judgment, the Scriptures say, *"The sun will be darkened, the moon will not shed its light, stars will fall out of the skies and the Heavenly Hosts will be shaken."* This is a poetical portrait of what it means for God to interfere in the history of mankind. The Scriptures are not predicting that these events will actually occur. The Old Testament is full of such figures of speech. Isaiah spoke of the destruction of Babylon, *"The day of the Lord comes.... The stars and constellations of the heavens send forth no light; The sun is dark when it rises, and the light of the moon does not shine." (Is. 13:9-10)* Isaiah foretold the doom of Edom with these words, *"The heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll, and all their hosts*

shall wither away, as the leaf wilts on the vine or as a fig withers on a tree." (Is. 34:4) **The prophet Joel saw a plague over Israel as a sign of "the day of the Lord." Joel expressed it thus:**

> *And I will work wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood, fire, and columns of smoke; The sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, At the coming of the day of the Lord, the great and terrible day. (Joel 3:3-4)*

GATHERING OF THE ELECT

Jesus declared that the fall of Jerusalem would inaugurate a special manifestation of God in the world. It is a preparation for a *"Coming"* that would not occur before the Fall of Jerusalem. The Fall would mark the end of an old order of time and precede the beginning of a new order. Apparently, Jerusalem was the great obstacle, at that time, to the universal spread of the Kingdom. Under its influence, Christianity threatened to become a satellite of the Jewish religion with its legalism, rites and worship grafted into it to such a degree that it could never be a universal (catholic) religion. Jesus expressed the manifestation to take place in the same type of picturesque and symbolic language as before, *"Then men will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory."* This language comes from Daniel 7:13 wherein the Chosen people are pictured as the Son of Man, to distinguish them from the people of the earth referred to as beasts. We read in Daniel:

> *One like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven; When he reached the Ancient One and was presented before Him, he received dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed.*

Jesus implied that this prophecy, following the destruction of Jerusalem, was being fulfilled. The expression *"comes on the clouds,"* symbolizes the power of God. Isaiah spoke of God coming to judge Egypt as, *"See, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud on His way to Egypt." (Is. 19:1)* The Son of Man coming on the clouds symbolized that the kingdom established on earth was not an earthly kingdom, but one coming out of Heaven. This everlasting kingdom, spoken of by Daniel, is the kingdom of the saints. Christ is said to have assumed the seat of power at the right hand of God. As Matthew

expresses, *"Soon you will see the Son of Man seated on the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of Heaven." (Mat. 26:64)* This implies that the Messianic King rules not on an earthly throne, but a heavenly one, and the government of the world has been committed to Him. It also implies that the "coming" of Jesus was not some single and isolated event, no more than the sitting at God's right hand would be. This quotation teaches that Jesus had assumed power in Heaven and continuously exercises this power on earth.

The gathering of the elect from the four corners of the world would begin after the fall of Jerusalem. God has always been gathering His elect. All the processes that had brought men to true knowledge of God and His Christ, have gathered the elect. It was time for the universal gathering of the elect. *"He will dispatch His angels and assemble His chosen from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of earth and sky." (Mk. 13:27)* By the gathering of this elect, the Kingdom of God would be established on earth. This work would be accomplished by the angels of Jesus. "Angel" means messenger. The name certainly applies primarily to the Apostles whom Jesus sent in His name and secondly, to every disciple who carries the Gospel message. Angels, likewise, represent the invisible heavenly powers operative on this earth. There is a Divine dimension to all the human efforts of the saints – behind all the work done by the Church on earth stands the Presence of the Lord Jesus and His Heavenly Hosts.

Our Lord teaches that just as there are signs in nature to foretell the coming events – a budding tree foretells the nearness of summer – so there are signs in the world's events that are as reliable – the besieging armies around Jerusalem, the sufferings of the siege – these are but signs of the coming of God's Kingdom. *"I assure you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." (Mk. 13:30) "This generation"* denotes the men living at that time. This statement means that all those events, and not just part of them, were to take place during the lifetime of Jesus' Disciples.

Jesus here answered the question asked in verse four. *"Tell us, when will this occur?" "As to the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in Heaven nor even the Son, but only the Father." (Mk. 13:32)* Jesus told them it will be in their day – but the specific day or hour – no one knows. They were given the signs and they were to be on guard – they must watch. The Apostles, like doorkeepers in a house, were especially to be on watch, for they had responsible missions in God's Kingdom.

Chapter Thirteen appears to teach that Disciples are not to be concerned about the end of the world, but rather about the Coming of the Kingdom. This Kingdom comes through the apostolic efforts of the Disciples. And, even the most negative elements in their lives, as persecutions, offer an opportunity to witness to the Gospel – to spread the Kingdom. All Christians must be on guard that they are not turned aside from their real mission in the world by a fanatical interest in signs and wonders and longings for the end of the world.

St. John's Gospel teaches that the coming of the Holy Spirit is indeed a Second Coming – a second Presence of Jesus on earth – and His Abiding Presence should be rapture enough upon this earth. The angels of the Lord might well say to many today what they once addressed to the Apostles, ***"Men of Galilee... why do you stand here looking up at the skies?" (Acts. 1:11)***

Yes, truly, this Jesus who has been taken from you, will return, but in the meantime,

> ***You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you; then you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, yes, even to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)***

Yes, Jesus will return as a thief in the night and He better find us at work within the Kingdom! For as the Church dogmatically confirms, ***"He shall come to judge the living and the dead!"***

THE NEW COVENANT

With this, Mark now introduces his readers into the last two days of Jesus' earthly life. Since the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the chief priests, instead of the scribes, have been presented as the protagonists against Jesus. They had met and agreed to arrest and kill Him, but had decided to wait until after the feast of Passover when many of the supporters of Jesus would have left the city. Mark notes that the ***"feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread were to be observed in two days time." (Mk. 14:1-2)*** **During this time, Jesus was entertained at the house of Simon, the leper, in Bethany. While at the feast, a woman entered and anointed His head with a costly aromatic nard, valued at more than three hundred days wages. Some of the Disciples were**

indignant at this waste and as Mark states, *"infuriated at her."* Jesus saw not only an act of exquisite love in her gesture, but a prophetic symbol of His death. Jesus defended her and foretold that the beauty of her act would be kept alive in the memories of men wherever the Gospel is proclaimed. Apparently, Jesus never forgets what we do for love! We know that one of the angry Disciples was Judas. Apparently, from this very feast, Judas went to the chief priests and offered to hand Jesus over to them. The chief priests were jubilant and this news altered their plans. They would arrest Jesus whenever the treachery of Judas made it possible.

On the first day of the Passover feast, the Disciples asked for instructions in regard to their preparations for the Passover meal. The fact of their celebrating the feast with Jesus instead of their families indicates the close relationship between Jesus and His Disciples. It was a relationship greater than the natural ties of family. Jesus told two of them to go to the city and to follow a man whom they were to meet there carrying a jar of water. At the house, which he entered, they would find the owner prepared to show them a large room ready for their purpose. There they would prepare for the Passover in the room called the Cenacle.

Jesus entered the city with the Twelve after dark. As they were reclining at the Passover meal, Jesus announced that one of them, a Disciple eating with Him and near enough to dip into the same dish with Him, would deliver Him up to the chief priests. This is a fulfillment of the Scriptures but nevertheless, woe to the man who betrayed Him. [Foreknowledge does not mean forewilling – Judas moved freely to accomplish this evil.] It would have been better had he never been born....

> ***During the meal, He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. "Take this," He said; "this is my body." He likewise took a cup, gave thanks and passed it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out on behalf of many. I solemnly assure you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the reign of God." (Mk. 14:22-25)***

It was a farewell feast and Jesus told them that He would not meet them again until He shared with them the new wine of the Kingdom of God – the Holy Spirit!

The Lord speaking through the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed,

The days are coming... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... but not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. [The Passover meal was eaten to celebrate this covenant.]... No, this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel when those days arrive.... Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their hearts... they will all know Me, the least no less than the greatest. I will forgive their iniquity and never call their sin to mind." (Jer. 31:31-34t)

It was the belief of the early Church that Jesus established this covenant with His Disciples. In our earliest written records, St. Paul quotes these words of Jesus, *"This cup is the new Covenant in my blood." (1Cor. 11:25)* We read in St. Luke: *"This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, which will be poured out for you." (Lk. 22:20)* Matthew writes, *"for this is my blood, the blood of the Covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 26:28t)* Mark writes, *"This is my blood, the blood of the Covenant, to be poured out for many." (Mk. 14:24)* "Many" in Arabic is equivalent to "all." These Scriptures confirm that the New Covenant was inaugurated by Jesus with His Disciples during the Last Supper.

In early Hebrew society, written documents were seldom used. The spoken word was invested with a ritual solemnity, which gave the word a kind of concrete reality. The spoken word once uttered could not be annulled or retracted. If it were a blessing or curse, it followed forever after the person to whom it was directed. A covenant was a solemn ritual agreement which served the function of a written contract. It forged a union between two otherwise separate parties. These covenanting parties bound themselves by a ritual agreement, which included terrible curses upon the party violating the covenant.

In Chapter Fifteen of Genesis, God enters into a Covenant with Abraham and here is described the ritual that was probably often employed. Abraham killed a sacrificial victim and divided it into two parts. In a vision, Yahweh passed between the parts; in the covenant ritual, no doubt, both parties passed between the parts, chanting upon themselves a fate like the slaughtered animal if they violated the covenant.

A covenant must be seen as more than a contract. It established an artificial blood kinship between the parties and was second only to the bond of blood.

The word used to signify the relationship between covenant parties was *"hesed,"* meaning affection and loyalty. It was the same word used to express love between members of a family. The contracting parties symbolically became one blood, one family.

In the Synoptic Gospel, we read that the Blood of Jesus is the Blood of the New Covenant – Blood that is being shed for the remission of sins. According to the Semitic mentality, a covenant had to be sealed with blood. We read that on Mt. Sinai, Moses sprinkled part of the blood of the victim on the altar, representing Yahweh, and part on the people. He then said, *"This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you." (Ex. 24:8)*

Blood is a symbol of life in the Old Testament, not death. The Jews believed that Life was a gift from God shared with all living things – life returned to God at the death of a living being. They believed blood to be the seat of life. They believed that a thing or person was purified by being sprinkled with *"living"* blood. To sprinkle blood was to bring all it touched into contact with the life of God. To offer the blood of an animal was not just a symbolic offering of the life of the animal, but a real offering of life – as the blood contained the life. The prohibition against the drinking of blood arose from the sacredness of blood.

Frequently, with the striking of a covenant, a meal was given. The covenant meal did not establish the unity between the covenanting parties – this flowed from the covenant itself – but it celebrated the establishment of the covenant and it strengthened the covenant relationship. This eating together brought peace to the members of the covenant. It was unthinkable to the two who had been divided and, now entered a covenant, could remain hostile. The Old Testament looked with horror upon the man who turned against one with whom he had eaten, *"Even my friend who had my trust and partook of my bread has raised his heel against me." (Ps. 40:10)* (The literal meaning of *"friend"* in this text means "my man of peace.") Peace was the expected result of those who entered into a covenant. A Christian should understand what it means to him personally when the Scriptures says, *"He made peace through His Blood!"*

The Church realized that the Last Supper was the Covenant meal, celebrated in anticipation of the new and perfect Covenant, to be inaugurated upon Mt. Calvary with the death of Jesus. Jesus commanded that this covenant meal, established by Him, be re-enacted through the ages as a perpetual memorial of His life-giving-death. In actual fact, it was to re-present Him within the Christian Community. We call the New Covenant meal the *"Eucharist."* The Eucharist, by its reception, symbolizes and causes man's unity with God. When Jesus said, "This is My body," the Greek word used signifies the entire person rather than just a physical body. Once it is realized that the Eucharist contains the Body and Blood of Jesus Himself, it is easy to conclude that by partaking of it, the faithful are united in a real way with Jesus.

Paul teaches that union with Jesus creates Christian unity, *"because the bread is one, we, though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread." (1Cor. 10:17)* Since Jesus is the Bread and the Bread is one, His Body is one. Because we partake of the body of Christ, we become one with Him. *"Now you are the Body of Christ, member for member." (1Cor. 12:27)* The Eucharist, which contains the Risen Christ, strengthens the union with God and our fellow man.

Only under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has the mystery of the Last Supper unfolded within the Church. When it was understood that a New Covenant had been established through the death of Jesus, the mystery was interpreted against the Old Covenant that served as its symbol and its shadow. The Church recognized the Crucified Jesus as the true Lamb of God sacrificed upon a cross that became the Christian altar. This sacrifice freed man from an enslavement far worse than Israel suffered in Egypt. It released man from a bondage to Satan resulting from sin. As slaves of sin, all men were doomed to eternal death. The Church understood the mystery of the horrible death endured by Jesus. Jesus accepted the sins of men as personally His and bore, in His spirit and body, the bitter consequences of sin – Hell's hatred of mankind bore down fully upon the Humanity of Jesus, destroying His physical life. Jesus entered Heaven as the High Priest carrying His own Blood in reparation for all men's sins. God accepted the death of Jesus as adequate reparation for sin and marked the debt owed God – *"Paid in Full!"*

The Precious Blood of Jesus became the saving element of mankind. As the blood of the paschal lamb marked the houses of the Jews, protecting them

from the Angel of Death, so the souls of Christians are marked with the Precious Blood of the Lamb of God – guarding them from eternal death. St. Peter expressed this when he said,

> ***Remember, the ransom that was paid to free you – was not paid in anything corruptible, neither in silver nor gold, but in the Precious Blood of a Lamb without spot or stain, namely Christ – who, though known since before the world was made, has been revealed only in our time, the end of the ages, for your sake." (1Pet. 1:18-19)***

Augustine once said that God made man without asking him, but God cannot save man without man's willing it. A man cannot be saved unless he wills to be saved. Likewise, he must will the proper means for salvation. Although Jesus died for all men's sins, a sinner must personally accept Jesus as His Savior in order for the atoning blood of Jesus to be applied to his or her soul. This demands that a man recognize, before God, he is damned, unless Jesus' Crucifixion stands between himself and God. A man must accept the reparation made by Jesus and realize that his salvation does not flow from his good works, but the Divine work of Jesus. All the good deeds of Christians flow from the merits Jesus achieved by His sufferings and death. As Catholics, we must never lose sight of the fact that the Sacraments are truly encounters with the Saving Person of Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit. Our salvation flows solely from the Person of Jesus and our holiness from His redemptive work. The Sacraments always need to be seen as encounters with Jesus and His Redemptive Love. What was done for us as children at baptism, we need to constantly reaffirm as adults. We need to grow consciously aware and to confess that – *"Jesus is my Savior – by the Blood of the Lamb I am saved."* It is a confession our own lips and heart must make.

The Eucharist is the heart of our religion. It makes it possible for us to personally encounter the Resurrected and Heavenly Jesus. If such encounters with the Divine Flame fail to set afire our souls, it only testifies that our souls are more slag than fuel – sin has dampened or extinguished the coals of love.

Let me try to summarize and perhaps clarify what has been said here: Mount Calvary is our Mount Sinai. Jesus came to Calvary to enter into a new Covenant with the Father. This covenant was made possible by the full

and total submission of the humanity of Jesus to the Will of God. Jesus inaugurated this Covenant with the Father – in His name and in the name of all men who accept His Lordship. In the covenant ceremony, a victim is slain and the blood of the victim is sprinkled, by the officiating priest, on the parties entering the covenant. On Calvary, Jesus is the High Priest of the sacrifice and He is the victim of the sacrifice. *"No one takes my life from me – I freely lay it down!"* Jesus freely sacrificed His life to God – an offering pleasing unto God. The Blood of Jesus became the Blood of the Covenant – sprinkled upon all men who enter, with Jesus, into this covenant relationship with the Father. (In Baptism and Penance, a soul is *"washed in the Blood of the Lamb."*) After Moses established the Covenant at Mt. Sinai, he was called alone to the top of the mountain to communion with God. Jesus was also now called to God. He entered into the Eternal Presence – not empty-handed as Moses, but carrying the offering of His own Precious Blood. There He stands, eternally as High Priest, before God, to intercede for all men. To Him, Power, Glory and Dominion have been given. An eternal Covenant has been established. He once said to Peter, "Where I am going you cannot come – later you will follow me." Here, no man could enter before Jesus. No man can enter now but through Jesus.

The Eucharist brings this Jesus – resurrected and glorified – into our earthly, human dimension. By reception of the Eucharist, we enter into the very being of Jesus. Since this Jesus is eternally within the Presence of the Father, it brings the communicant into the Father's presence. *"No one comes to the Father except through me!"* For this reason, the more a person submerges himself or herself into Jesus, to that degree the person submerges himself or herself into the Father – into the Divine Presence. Jesus, through the Eucharist, truly brings us to Mt. Sinai – into God's Presence. The beauty and holiness of Jesus hides our own ugliness and sinfulness. But Jesus does not merely cover over our sinfulness as some have taught. His love is too great for this. He actually wills to share His beauty and holiness with us. His love seeks to transform us. As we are willing to shed our sinful self, He infuses into our spirit His own life. It is a continual on-going process in the earthly life of the communicant – the putting off of self and the putting on of Jesus. Herein lies the real rapture of the spirit – when this process is completed. Indeed, the Eucharist is the ever-open door, not only to Jesus, but to God. Jesus works for the day, and looks forward to the day when He can proudly present us to the Father – when we can stand unashamedly in God's presence as genuine reflections of His Glory – no longer a disfigured Image of God. Then we will take the place He has constantly been preparing

for us by all our earthly communions with Him.

Augustine put these words on the lips of Jesus, *"You do not change Me into you as food of your flesh, but you are changed into Me."* According to Augustine, a Parousia truly comes through the Eucharist. The Parousia does not come from outside the Christian Community, but from within the Christian Community – in you and me. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!

CHAPTER 16

THE PRICE OF REDEMPTION

INTRODUCTION

During the celebration of the Passover meal, the Jews praise God with the words of the Great Hallel, consisting of Psalms 114-118. Jesus sang these Psalms for the last time with His Disciples before leaving the Cenacle for Gethsemani. The words of the Psalms gave expression to the feelings and sentiments filling the heart of Jesus on the eve of His death:

> ***O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds. (Ps. 116:16)***
>
> ***My vows to the Lord I will pay in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem. (Ps. 116:18-19)***
>
> ***The cup of salvation I will take up, and I will call upon the name of the Lord. (Ps. 116:13)***
>
> ***I believed, even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted." I said in my alarm, "No man is dependable." (Ps. 116:10-11)***
>
> ***The cords of death encompassed me; the snares of the nether world seized upon me; I fell into distress and sorrow, and I called upon the name of the Lord. "O Lord, save my life!" (Ps. 116:3-4)***
>
> ***Return, O my soul, to your tranquillity, for the Lord has been good to you. For He has freed my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I shall walk before the Lord in the land of the living. (Ps. 116:7-9)***
>
> ***The stone which the builder rejected has become the cornerstone. (Ps. 118:22)***
>
> ***Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His kindness endures forever. (Ps. 118:29)***

As Jesus left the Cenacle, He took the same path traveled by David who had to flee Jerusalem when his own kingship was threatened by his son, Absalom. Jesus and His Disciples crossed the Kedron Valley to an olive grove called Gethsemani (meaning an oil press) on the west slope of the Mount of Olives. It was indeed a path of sorrow for Jesus as for David. As they left the Cenacle, Jesus informed the Disciples, *"Your faith in me shall be shaken,"* for they were to see the Good Shepherd struck down to the earth and His apparent weakness and powerlessness would scandalize them. They would temporarily lose faith and hope in Jesus. But the Good Shepherd would rise again from the earth and go before them to Galilee. This time He would lead them as the Risen Lord.

When Jesus said, *"For Scripture has it, I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be dispersed!"* He sought to teach that what would occur, God had willed. Often during the Passion narrative, a reference is made to the Scriptures – this indicates to the readers that what occurred is in keeping with the Will of God.

When we think of evil flowing from the Will of God, we must understand that this evil flows from the permissive Will of God. God cannot directly will moral evil. God can only directly will good since of His nature God is love. The evil flows directly from the exercise of man's free will. God directly wills man to be free. The freedom of men and angels flows directly from the love of God. Since God made man with a free will, God permits man to misuse his will and choose evil instead of good. When man chooses to do evil, the evil flows from man's refusal to love. Therefore, God is said to <u>indirectly</u> will evil. This is another way of saying that evil flows from the permissive Will of God. God permits it! He is said to permit evil because the power of His Love is greater than the power of evil. From the unlovingness of men, the Love of God will bring forth love. God will bring a greater good out of the evil. He will do this because He is God and *"God is Love."*

The early members of the Church were not theologians. They simply accepted all foretold in the Scriptures to be the Will of God. The only thing

that made the sufferings and death of Jesus tolerable and acceptable was that everything had been willed by God as the Scriptures indicate. When the Gospel relates, *"for the Scriptures says,"* it is but another way of saying, "God wills it!" These men would have made no distinction between the

direct and the indirect or permissive Will of God.

When Peter heard the prophecy of Jesus, he vehemently denied that it applied to him – perhaps to others, but certainly not to him, *"Even though all are shaken in faith, it will not be that way with me."* Jesus particularly confirmed the truth of the prophecy in regard to Peter, *"I give you my assurance, this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."* Peter still remained adamant, *"Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you."* With some people, you cannot tell them the truth about themselves – you have to let them learn the hard way. Peter's words but echoed the feelings of the rest of the Apostles. As we are told, *"They all said the same."* *(Mk. 14:27-31)*

This scene indicates the lack of humility in the Disciples. Pride comes before the fall! Rather than accept Jesus' warning – flowing from His insightful knowledge of human weakness and His first-hand observations of His Disciples' frailties – they preferred to rest complacently in the strong feelings of devotion and admiration they felt for Jesus. The Scriptures warn that gold is tried in fire. Fire reveals the true nature of the metal. Often an object, seemingly gold, is revealed to have been only gold plated. Apparently, at this stage, the Apostles were only gold plated Disciples.

We are encouraged to be humble and truthful about the future. We do not know what will happen within us when confronted by trials and sufferings now alien to our experience. This truth lies behind the saying, "Do not judge another Indian until you have walked a mile in his moccasins!" The Holy Spirit warns, *"You who stand – take heed lest you fall!"* If we are overconfident and foolhardy, we may walk into dangers we are not sufficiently prepared to encounter. More often than not we are overcome. If our enemy, as Paul writes, is not flesh and blood, but powers from on-high, then flesh and blood will not overcome the enemy. Over and over Jesus warned His Disciples to pray, *"Pray that you be not led into temptation." "Pray that you will be delivered from the Evil One." "Pray always that you may come through all that lies ahead of you."* A wise and humble monk once cautioned a younger monk, *"Pray that the urge to do wrong and the opportunity to do wrong do not come at the same time!"*

AGONY IN THE GARDEN

Jesus knew the hour of terrible trial and test had come – not only for

Himself, but in a certain degree, for all His Disciples. His repeated warnings to them to be on their guard and pray went unheeded. His personal example to them was not followed. The Disciples rested, self-complacent in their commitment to Jesus. They slept while He prayed, even though He had commanded them, *"Stay awake! Be on guard and pray that you may not be put to the test." (Mk. 14:38)* Jesus stressed the need to pray because *"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." (Mk. 14:38)*

Only in this text is the spirit contrasted with the flesh in the teachings of Jesus. The Greek words used are *"pneuma"* and *"sarx."* The pneuma and the sarx, or the spirit and the flesh, denote the two extremes of human nature. The spirit of the pneuma describes the highest element in man. Some refer to it as the higher part of the soul. The mystics call it the *"divine spark"* in man. Here "spirit" designates God and His world – His Personal Presence and His Grace. The Spirit of God is in man and is God's gift to man. The "flesh" designates the entire person of man alienated from God and His grace – in other words – all man has become through sin.

The actions of the spirit flow from the operations of God. It is the Power of God in man. Spirit-power is God-power! It is God's Will to continuously bestow this power on man, thereby giving him victory over his own weak flesh. Human nature fears sufferings, dangers and death. In the face of these things, fear subjects man to temptation. If the Disciples desired to stand fast in faith, they must open themselves in prayer to God's power to prepare them for what was to come – to strengthen them for the test. They did not pray. They slept! Like a black, ominous cloud, the trial came; they were confused and uncertain, fear seized them and they abandoned Jesus, leaving Him all alone with His enemies. We will see later that Peter sought to follow Jesus *"at a distance."* This ended in a denial of Jesus. Certainly, in this Gospel narrative, the Disciples' behavior, particularly Peter's, is contrasted with the behavior of Jesus.

To appreciate the Passion of Jesus, we must realize that through the Incarnation, God's Son became a complete and total human being. He was humanity perfected and uncontaminated by sin. Jesus was so perfectly human that we can never appreciate the depth of sensitivity and emotional response that was His. Sin hardens man – it dehumanizes him. Sin never personally touched or contaminated His human nature and thereby His capacity to love and be loved by God and man. It is of the essence of man's nature to love and to be loved. No human heart ever desired to love and be

loved more than the heart of Jesus of Nazareth.

Our sinful environment appears to pre-condition our hearts. We almost appear to be born with our guard up – with defense patterns of human behavior that harden and make us callous to an unloving environment. Men become cautious about loving others, a possible source of pain. Perhaps it is our survival kit for the Hell we have made.

Jesus' whole being flows from the love of God – the gift of God's love to mankind – to every human being. Jesus had no defense or caution when it came to love. When this is understood, we can know, in some degree, how the public life of Jesus was filled with deep spiritual sufferings, for during the days of that life people refused His gift of love and refused Him their love. If you have ever had the gift of your love rejected, you have a hint of the quality of suffering endured by Jesus during His earthly life. Jesus saw no man as His enemy. All men were children of God. They were His brothers and sisters and His potential friends. He never alienated Himself from any human being. But men, bit by bit, alienated themselves from Him. First, the scribes and Pharisees – because of His loving interpretation of the Law and appeal to sinners; then His own kin and neighbors, because His loving deeds surpassed their concept of love. Then the leaders of His people – because His love of God and truth threatened their selfish world; then the authorities, who should have protected Him, because it was politically expedient to be a *"friend of Caesar"* rather than of God. Then the crowd, which had previously welcomed Him, because He failed to fulfill their unrealistic dreams for national glory and lastly, His own Disciples, because they became afraid of being His friend.

In the Garden of Gethsemani, the psychological awareness of His complete and total aloneness and alienation reached its zenith. The Disciples were physically present, but they were not truly with Him. It was only a matter of time – a few more moments – then they physically deserted Him, leaving Him to face His agony and death alone. Jesus was alone in the Garden. This symbolized man's total rejection of Him and the withdrawal of man's love from Him. A heart that sought but to love and be loved still loved men who offered Him nothing but their hatred and indifference. Titanic waves of fear and distress engulfed His soul and He confessed, *"My heart is filled with sorrow to the point of death."* These words expressed the thoughts of one who was dying from sorrow – from a broken heart. Death was easier than life! He asked Peter, James and John to watch with Him – to companion Him in

this darkest moment. He truly needed them, but they slept while He suffered and prayed. Mark relates,

> *He advanced a little and fell to the ground, praying that if it were possible, this hour might pass Him by. He kept saying, "Abba (O Father) you have the power to do all things. Take this cup away from Me. But let it be as you would have it, not as I."*
>
> *(Mk. 14:35-36)*

In this prayer, Jesus asked that God's Kingdom might manifest itself to humanity in a way other than through the chalice that so overwhelmed His spirit. It was Jesus' wish and prayer to have the cup removed, but in prayer, He realized it was the Father's Will that the cup not pass, but that His Son drink it to the dregs. His prayer became a prayer of submission. Amidst His fears, He found victory over fear. (His prayer of submission filled Him.)

Calling God *"Abba"* revealed that, despite all His pain and agony, He knew that God's love endures with a Fatherly care and concern for Him. As far as we know, no Jew before ever called upon God using this form of the name "father." Jesus knew He had a special relationship to "His Father," which was different from that of all mankind. Only through Jesus did God become "Our Father."

Jesus' prayer of submission gave Him the power to willfully welcome and embrace all that lay ahead. His silence in His defense symbolized His total submission to the Father's Will. The Father took away the fear from Jesus, but nothing but death would alleviate the deadly pain in His heart.

Jesus then announced to the Apostles, *"The hour is on us. You will see that the Son of Man is to be handed over to the clutches of evil men. Rouse yourselves and come along. See – my betrayer is near!" (Mk. 14:41-42)* Translated, the words *"evil men"* means "sinners." The word – sinners – was a synonym for "Gentiles" – the ungodly. It indicated that the hour of total rejection of Jesus, by His people, had arrived. It can truly be seen as rejection of God by Israel – of handing God over to the "ungodly." Mark writes,

> *Even while He was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, made his appearance, accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs. These people had been sent by the chief priests, the scribes, and the*

elders. The betrayer had arranged a signal for them, saying, "The man I shall embrace is the one; arrest Him and lead Him away – taking every precaution." He then went directly over to Him and said, "Rabbi," and embraced Him. At this, they laid hands on Him and arrested Him." (Mk. 14:43-47)

When Jesus submitted to His arrest, fear seized the Apostles and Mark writes, *"with that, all deserted Him and fled."* Mark adds an interesting note that has caused much speculation through the ages, *"There was a young man following Him who was covered by nothing but a linen cloth. As they seized Him, he left the cloth behind and ran off naked." (Mk. 14:50-52)* Some hold it was a *"cameo"* appearance of Mark himself in his Gospel.

Mark indeed contrasts the behavior of Jesus in the Garden with that of the three Disciples as a lesson for the Christians at Rome. A Christian must not rely on the fact that his or her spirit is willing, but must be mindful also of the weakness of the flesh. It is essential that Christians *"watch and pray,"* so when the hour of trial comes, they may endure. It is implied that the Disciples might have stood firm instead of forsaking their Lord at the time of arrest. It may not have been just a coincidence that Peter denied Jesus three times and was found asleep on three occasions.

MYSTERY OF JUDAS

From the wording in the Greek, Judas' greeting to Jesus indicated a profuse demonstration of friendship. At that moment, all the world could offer Jesus was a pretended friendship – coming from one of the Chosen Twelve immeasurably increased the pain it inflicted upon Jesus. The mystery of Judas remains forever hidden in the secrets of his own heart. John declares he was a thief. Maybe he embodied the principle that no man can serve two masters – man cannot serve God and money – he will love one and hate the other. No man knows the internal conscience of another. All we know is that Jesus chose Judas to be one of the Twelve. He was a most intimate companion of Jesus. Jesus evidently had a preferential love for Judas. Judas rejected Jesus! Maybe Judas embodied all those who expect a material and worldly return for discipleship? Maybe he followed Jesus for all the wrong reasons – no one really knows. We do know that the evilness of his deed came down upon him and he despaired, killing himself. The demons who encourage us to sin will always leave us alone with the discouragement sin brings. If Judas had only repented, what an example he

would have been to sinners! What sinner would ever despair of reconciliation with God if he had the example of Judas reconciled with Jesus? By his suicide, Judas stole from the Christian Community – even in his death!

Mark wrote for Romans and it appears he cautiously avoided anything suggesting that Jesus was a political Messiah or that Christianity was a politico-religious movement. Mark omits any mention of an enthusiastic and disturbing entrance into Jerusalem of Jesus and His Disciples on Palm Sunday. He does not directly mention any soldiers present at the arrest of Jesus. Mark relates that during the arrest of Jesus, a bystander caused a violent instance by cutting off the ear of one of the arresting men. The implication being that he was not an Apostle and yet we know it was Peter. Jesus' attitude at arrest did nothing to encourage resistance – He merely surrendered. Mark states that Jesus protested being arrested as a bandit or revolutionary, *"You have come out to arrest me, armed with swords and clubs as if against a brigade. I was within your reach daily, teaching in the temple precincts, yet you never arrested me." (Mk. 14:48-49)* When Jesus appeared before Pilate, a reference to Jesus being the King of the Jews occurred five times. Pilate, himself called Jesus *"The King of the Jews,"* and offered to release Him. Certainly no Roman magistrate would do such a thing if he believed that Jesus' claim to being a king was a threat or a rebellion against Rome and its authority. Jesus appeared so harmless in the eyes of the Romans, that His claim to kingship was taken as a joke by the Roman soldiers. On the other hand, Mark seeks to emphasize that Jesus' arrest and subsequent death resulted solely from religious motivation, centering around Jesus' claim that He would build a new Temple. He even states that Pilate knew Jesus had been delivered up to him out of envy.

Mark's Gospel presentation certainly helps to form the classical Christian position concerning the arrest and execution of Jesus Christ. This position holds that Jewish authorities were the prime movers behind the whole plot because they did not believe the Messianic claims of Jesus. They charged Him with blaspheming and they blackmailed Pilate into carrying out a sentence that legally, under Roman domination, they could not execute. Some scholars maintain that the Romans were the prime movers. They had feared Jesus as a possible troublemaker and they had forced Jewish cooperation in His arrest. Today, many Christian scholars adopt a theory of moderation, that although the Jewish authorities were deeply involved, all the main aspects of the arrest and trial were carried out by the Romans.

One historical fact is clear – Jesus of Nazareth was sentenced by a Roman prefect to be crucified on the political charge that He claimed to be *"the King of the Jews."* On this, Christian, Jewish and Roman sources agree. The real problem concerns whether and to what degree the Sanhedrin or the Jewish authorities played a role in bringing about the crucifixion of Jesus.

On the night Jesus was arrested, Mark mentions the presence of men with clubs and swords. Only Roman soldiers could carry swords. John actually mentions their presence at the arrest. With the presence of Roman soldiers, as part of the arresting party, it is difficult not to see a strong hand of Rome behind the scene. Roman soldiers would not have been there without the consent of the Roman authority.

It was obviously in the interest of the Christian Community to avoid blaming the Romans for the death of Jesus – under whose tolerance and authority the Community lived. The Church especially did not want it said that there was any justification in the claim that the Lord was a political revolutionary against Rome. The process of exonerating Pilate and the Romans can be traced from the time of Mark's Gospel. It is highly likely that it began before the written Gospel era. As the Gospels were produced by the Christian Community, the position of the Romans seemed to improve. In the earliest Gospel account, Mark writes that Pilate attempted to have Jesus released, but makes no great issue of his reluctance to sentence Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, Pilate's reluctance was much more noticeable: not only did his wife tell him of her dream that Jesus was an innocent man, but Pilate publicly washed his hands of the business proclaiming, *"I am innocent of this man's blood."* In Luke, Pilate solemnly stated three times that he found Jesus not guilty. He sent Jesus to Herod in order to avoid passing Judgment on Jesus, and even offered the Jewish leaders the compromise of having Jesus whipped, rather than put to death. In John, Pilate made a determined effort to pardon Jesus and actually did have Jesus scourged and presented to the people in an effort to win their sympathy. Pilate stood in awe of Jesus and seemed to fear that he was dealing with someone Divine. This process of bettering Pilate's image continued beyond the New Testament. In the Syriac tradition, the Passion Narrative of Matthew was re-written to make it appear that the Jews alone ill-treated and crucified Jesus. A later Christian legend tells of Pilate's conversion to Christianity. In the Coptic and Ethiopic Churches, Pilate and his wife, Procla, have qualified as saints whose feast is celebrated on June 25th.

In the first years after Jesus' death, His Disciples met opposition from the Jerusalem leaders, even as Jesus had met opposition. It seemed to have abated for awhile but was re-kindled after the fall of Jerusalem. By the time of the writing of the Fourth Gospel, the Disciples of Jesus and the disciples of Moses were locked in bitter struggle. This opposition must have been more painful for the Jewish Disciples of Jesus to bear, as it came from their own people for whom it was less excusable to have been blinded to the Light of the World. In the eyes of these Christians, the Jews bore the greatest guilt for His death.

According to non-Christian tradition, both Jewish and Roman, neither Pilate nor the Jewish priests of the house of Annas were admirable figures. Annas, according to Josephus, was appointed high priest by the Roman prefect Quirinius in 6 A.D. and deposed by Valerious Gratus in 15 A.D. His five sons eventually became high priests. The house of Annas was noted for its greed, as well as for its wealth and power. The high priest Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas. That there was collusion between Caiaphas and the Romans is suggested by the fact that he was able to hold office for eighteen years. Ten of these years were under Pontius Pilate, so that the two men must have been able to work together when it served their purposes. It is noteworthy that as soon as Pilate was removed from office, Caiaphas was deposed as high priest.

Jewish sources give us a rather full picture of the character of Pilate. He appears to have been an inflexible, merciless and obstinate man, continually given to corruption, violence and cruelty of every kind. Even when allowance is made for possible exaggeration, his presentation in the Scriptures hardly seems compatible with a man of such character. Pilate's term as prefect was marked by outbursts of Jewish nationalism and he would have had every reason to be sensitive about someone who was hailed as *"the King of Jews."* According to Josephus, Judea was alive with guerrilla bandits. Jesus was a Galilean, and Pilate had already had trouble with Galileans. Among Jesus' Twelve was Simon, the Zealot – a revolutionary. As the Passover drew near, Jesus was a possible source of disturbance in the crowded city which had recently seen an insurrection. It was understandable why Pilate might have decided to take no chances and to put pressure upon the Jewish authorities to arrest Jesus before the feast. This need not mean that Pilate intended to crucify Jesus, but only that he wanted information and to remove Jesus during an explosive period.

The Sanhedrin did fear Jesus' power over the crowd and the effect this could have on Rome. We read in John – they asked themselves,

> ***"What are we going to do now that this man is performing many signs? If we let Him go on like this everybody will believe in Him and the Romans will come and take away our holy place and our nation." (Jn. 11:47)***

It is likely these political fears played a role in causing the chief priest to work with the Romans in apprehending Jesus. Many of them may have used a political charge as a smoke screen for personal religious animosity to Jesus. If the priests wanted to get rid of Jesus because of their fear of Rome, this did not exclude a desire to get rid of Him because He had attacked what was sacred in their eyes. There had been a similar reaction to Jeremiah: *"The man deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city." (Jer. 26:6)*

A successful Messiah who was nationalistic would have meant political independence for the Sanhedrin and the glorification of Jerusalem and the Temple. A Messiah who at the same time threatened to overthrow the Temple could well have provoked religious opposition. Apparently, the arrest of Jesus was joint cooperation between the Jewish leaders and Pilate. They had Jesus arrested in a solitary spot, lest he cause an uprising among the crowds present in Jerusalem for the feast. The arresting party was well-armed and expecting trouble.

JESUS ON TRIAL

Jesus was carried before the Sanhedrin for trial. They proceeded against Him as a prosecuting body, seeking testimony by which they may put Him to death, instead of sitting as judges on the question of guilt. They found, however, only false witnesses who testified that Jesus had threatened to destroy the temple built with hands, and to build another in three days, without hands. The question about Jesus' intention to destroy the temple could have certainly been interpreted as revolutionary. Apparently, Jesus did make such a statement. John clarified that Jesus had spoken of His own body as the Temple to be destroyed that would three days later rise from the dead as the New Temple *"not of this creation."* This prophecy would be fulfilled by the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The high priest then questioned Jesus in regard to this testimony, and Jesus implied, by His

silence, that there was nothing to answer. Then the high priest asked Him directly if He was the Messiah, which was the real question at issue, *"Are you the Messiah – the Son of the Blessed One?" (Mk. 14:61)* Then in answer, the high priest received an answer. The time had come for Jesus to make His confession before the tribunal of the nation. To be silent then would have worn the look of abdicating His claim at the critical moment of His life. *"Then Jesus answered, "I am – and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of Heaven." (Mk. 14:62)* Jesus cited here again the language of Daniel 7:13 – applying it to Himself. It is as if He had said, "You will see fulfilled in Me the fullness of the Messianic prophecies." It denotes the place that Jesus was to occupy in Heaven and it pointed out that there would be earthly evidences of this power. They were to see with their own eyes, the advancing Kingdom of the Son of Man in the world. This denotes the intervention of Jesus as the Messianic King in the affairs of the world. The whole statement means that they would see Him exercising the Messianic power. "At that, the high priest tore His robes and said, *"What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What is your verdict?"* They all concurred in the verdict *"guilty,"* with its sentence of *"death."* Jesus was to die for He was witness to the Truth. One of the main themes of Mark's Gospel is that Jesus only gradually unfolded, to his Disciples, the secret of His own personality and that the Disciples were slow to comprehend His teaching. It was only at the very end of His life, when He was tried before the Sanhedrin, that Jesus revealed His true identity. After this testimony, Jesus made no secret of His claims – He admitted to Pilate that He was King. Mark stresses several times that it was the King of the Jews who was crucified.

We are now told of the contempt the Sanhedrin had for Jesus, *"Some of them then began to spit on Him. They blindfolded Him and hit Him saying, 'Play the prophet!' – while the officers manhandled Him." (Mk. 14:63-65)* Romano Guardine reflects, *"The Lord is in prison.... How baseness rears its head.... From what evil depths must it spring, this hunger for revenge against holiness! It is in truth the hour and the power of darkness."* The very moment Jesus made the *"good confession of faith"* before His enemies concerning the truth of His Divine vocation, Peter denied the truth of His vocation. Three times Peter denied his association with Jesus. We are told, *"He began to curse, and to swear, I do not even know the man you are talking about!" (Mk. 14:71)*

Peter lost his faith and now he lost his courage and honesty. His courage was

supported by his faith and fell with it. Why should he run any risk for a hope that had failed him? When Peter recalled the prophecy of Jesus concerning his denial, he wept over his own weakness. But he did not take back his denial. Jesus was very much alone. The faithfulness of the Son of Man and the unfaithfulness of man stood now in sharp contrast! In John's Gospel, Jesus had affirmed, *"I Am!"* – signifying the fullness of life, or godliness and Peter had equally affirmed, *"I am not!"* The denial had separated Peter from life itself. In the mind of John, if one was not a Disciple of Jesus, He was not – it is the road of non-being!

Mark no doubt placed these examples before a Christian Community, in which profession of faith in Jesus could lead to death. He emphasized that any situation which calls for the confession of one's faith is appropriate for such a confession. When a Disciple of Jesus is confronted by some person, even a servant girl, about his commitment to Christ, it must be acknowledged. When a Disciple fails to testify, when questioned, to his or her Christian discipleship, the failure is sinful.

The morning following Jesus' condemnation, the Sanhedrin met to form its plans, *"They bound Jesus, led Him away, and handed Him over to Pilate." (Mk. 15:1)* Pilate was no friend of the Jews. He despised them, but collaborated with them when convenient. Jesus must have been no more to Pilate than a helpless pawn in another political chess game. When Jesus appeared before Pilate, Pilate was already informed of the charge against Him. He said to Jesus, *"Are you the King of the Jews?" "You are the one who is saying it,"* Jesus replied. The answer appears uncertain to us. It may have been a qualified admission open for further clarification. Pilate was not anxious to pursue the subject. At this point, he introduced a character called Barabbas, a convicted murderer. He offered the Jews a choice between Barabbas and Jesus, the King of the Jews. The chief priests and the entire crowd rejected Jesus and called for His crucifixion. The entire Barabbas incident can be seen as a means by the Roman procurator to avoid having to pass a sentence of death on Jesus and to place the full blame for His death upon the Jews. With the chief priests and the people clamoring for the death of Jesus, Pilate could follow the standard practice and policy of Rome and hand Jesus over to them.

There would be no reason against the crucifixion of Jesus from the Roman viewpoint now that the people had joined hands with the rulers against Him. Underneath the scene there may be more – the sinless one, Jesus, was

murdered so that the sinner, the murderer, might live. Mark, likewise, uses this incident to emphasize that, as the Messiah, Jesus was crucified. For Mark, the title – *"King of the Jews"* – was equivalent to Messiah. Jesus did not die for any evil deed, but precisely because He was the Jewish Messiah.

Pilate now subjected Jesus to the cruel torture of scourging, an instrument of death in itself, and then handed Jesus over to the Roman soldiers for execution. Mark relates,

The soldiers now led Jesus away into the hall known as the praetorium; at the same time they assembled the whole cohort. They dressed Him in royal purple, then wove a crown of thorns and put it on Him, and began to salute Him – *"All hail! King of the Jews!"* Continually striking Jesus on the head with a reed and spitting at Him, they genuflected before Him and pretended to pay Him homage. This Roman circus with Jesus as its "clown" had all the appearance of Divine Love being in the midst of Hell itself! *"When they had finished mocking Him, they stripped Him of the purple, dressed Him in His own clothes and led Him out to crucify Him." (Mk. 15:16-20)*

Jesus went to His death totally rejected by this world and literally excommunicated from His people – symbolizing, in their minds, that He was forever cut off from God.

After a sentence of death by crucifixion had been passed, a tablet was prepared, setting out the grounds of condemnation; this was hung on the person or carried in front of him on the way to execution and when he was crucified, it was displayed on his cross. Such a notice would contain the name of the prisoner and the place of origin. In this instance, it read: *"Jesus of Nazareth – King of the Jews."* By this title, Pilate indicated that Jesus died condemned of no crime – but as the Messiah. By the gesture, Pilate no doubt intended to ridicule Jewish expectations. It appears to be no more sincere than the homage paid to Jesus by the soldiers.

As Jesus had been exhausted by the scourging, they pressed into service one Simon – a Cyrenian, and made him carry the Cross. Apparently, God does press people into His service whether they like it or not – whether convenient or not.

When Jesus reached Calvary, they tried to give Him a wine drugged with myrrh, but He would not take it. The drugged wine was given to criminals

to dull their sensibilities and so moderate their sufferings. This was in keeping with the Scriptures: *"Give strong drink to one who is perishing and wine to the sorely depressed; when they drink they will forget their misery and think no more of their burden." (Prov. 31:6-7)* Jesus refused the drink, as He desired to be conscious during His sufferings.

DEATH OF JESUS

Mark's account of the Passion is sober and concise. He did not seek to arouse sympathy or hatred. The Passion was viewed primarily in the light of Psalm 22 and Psalm 69. These events have not been determined by an accident or human design. God's Will has been the decisive factor. It had all been the inestimable price for the redemption of the human race. In Mark's mind, the physical anguish did not constitute the real suffering of Jesus. He does not describe it. Rejection and hatred caused the real suffering. Mark had traced it from Chapter Three in every conceivable variation and in increasing measure, culminating on the Cross with the two men condemned to die with Jesus. Mark writes, *"The men who had been crucified with Him likewise kept taunting Him." (Mk. 15:32)* They renounced their companionship with Him as destiny had decreed, and in so doing, made the loneliness of the Passion complete. He did not even belong to those who suffered with Him.

As the end of His life approached, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, *"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"* which means, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" They are the opening words of Psalm 22. The prayer gives expression to the terrible and absolute loneliness suffered by Jesus. Not only has He been abandoned by men, but in this atmosphere of total hatred, there was no awareness; there was no experience of God who is Love. There was a sense of having been abandoned by God. Yet the prayer expresses a faith in God's Love that endures in every adverse experience – even when God is only experienced as the Absent One. The cry expresses belief that God is real even when experience and thought cannot lay hold of Him – even when the believer feels forsaken and when the resources of thinking and experience have been exhausted.

Jesus' death is described with stark simplicity. There is no reference to an unshakable inner peace. One dying under such conditions could only die in agony!

Mark, alone, groups together two events which happen at the death of Jesus – the rending of the Temple curtain and the exclamation of the centurion that Jesus was the Son of God:

> ***And the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The centurion, who was standing in front of Him, had seen how He had died, and he said, "In truth, this Man was the Son of God!"***
>
> ***(Mk. 15:38-39)***

For Mark, the tearing of the Temple curtain symbolized that from the moment of Jesus' death, the presence of God was no longer the privilege of the Jews alone; and the pagan centurion – who confessed the Divinity of Jesus – was speaking on behalf of all Gentiles who were to later profess belief in His name. Here, Mark presents his great miracle, the conversion of the centurion that occurred not because of the words or deeds of Jesus, but through the saving power of Christ's death. The conversion of the centurion gave the reason for the death of Jesus and revealed the true nature of the Person upon the Cross. A New Temple is being created and *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations!"*

There are no friends or Disciples left to bury Jesus. According to Jewish law, a condemned criminal was to be buried in a common grave. We are told that Joseph from Arimathea, a distinguished member of the Sanhedrin, was bold enough to seek an audience with Pilate and urgently requested the body of Jesus. We read, *"Joseph took Him down, wrapped Him in linen and laid Him in a tomb which had been cut of rock." (Mk. 15:42-46)*

Mark relates that at the crucifixion, some women were present at a distance. *"These women had followed Jesus when He was in Galilee and attended to His needs." (Mk. 15:41)* Among these were Mary Magdalene and another Mary. Mark carefully noted that they had observed where Jesus had been buried.

UNFINISHED ENDING

The Gospel of Mark ends with these words:

> ***"When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, brought perfumed oils with which they intended to go and anoint Jesus. Very early, just after sunrise, on the first***

day of the week – they came to the tomb." They were saying to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" When they looked, they found that the stone had been rolled back (it was a huge one). On entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, dressed in a white robe. This frightened them thoroughly, but he reassured them, "You need not be amazed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the One who was crucified. He has been raised up – He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. Go now and tell His Disciples and Peter, He is going ahead of you to Galilee where you will see Him just as He told you." They made their way out and fled from the tomb bewildered and trembling and because of their great fear, they said nothing to anyone. (Mk. 16:1-8)

With this account, the Gospel of Mark ends. The remaining verses represent a compilation of the events narrated in the other Gospel accounts. They may well be a reflection of Mark's thoughts, for most scholars believe the original ending of the Gospel was lost. It probably included the appearance of Jesus to the Apostles and to Peter. It was considered highly improbable that Mark would close the Gospel account with only the witness of the women to the empty tomb – for according to Jewish Law, a woman's testimony was not legally acceptable.

The Gospel proclaims the astounding news – Jesus had risen from the dead. If He had not risen from the dead, the world would never have heard of Jesus of Nazareth. For His Disciples and friends, Jesus came to a tragic end and to His enemies, a well-deserved one. It was only the subsequent experience of a Risen Jesus that changed despondency to joy and fear into audacious courage.

Those who had put their trust in Him were rewarded beyond human expectation. It took awhile, no doubt, to assimilate what Jesus Risen from the dead truly implied. Once grasped, it enkindled a flame – inextinguishable – a destiny to set their hearts on fire and the world aflame. For Jesus was not a memory from the past, but a living presence, encountering men through the ages. Time would not dim His memory – time was forever His environment. His Church – His Body on earth – had work to accomplish to bring all men to a saving experience with their Living Redeemer and Savior, who ransomed their lives by the shedding of His

Precious Blood. He laid down His Life that all men might become *"Friends of God!"*

Mark's Gospel account is ended, not finished! Our Bible Study ends without being completed. Mark left us before the empty tomb and in the shadow of the Cross – to forever contemplate the mystery of Jesus Crucified and Risen as the Lord of the Kingdom to Come!

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APPENDIX

INVITATION TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

SEVEN YEAR CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY

By: Rev. James P. O'Bryan, S.T.

This Bible Study is set up for the laity to present. Depending on the number of participant will determine whether the study should be presented in the parish hall, class size rooms, or in homes. This is a study of the New Testament over a seven year period. It consists in lectures, summaries of lectures and weekly worksheets for all participants. The study consists in listening to a weekly printed lectures or a cassette tape of the same lecture. Each student receives a summary of the daily lecture and a worksheet for the following week.

The study weeks average about 24 for each year. There is a two hour study as a group once a week. The format for each week meeting is as follows:

1st hour: Students break into assigned small groups of ten or less for a period of prayer. This followed by each member sharing their worksheets with the rest of the group. A leader is appointed to coordinate this hour.

2nd hour: The lecture for the following week is then begun. Either reading the lecture or listening to it on tape may be chosen. The summary sheet covers all that the student needs in order to complete the work-sheet for the following week. (Copyright laws apply to the summary and worksheet. However permission is given to reproduce summary and worksheets when one purchases this Bible series.)

A more recent method for small groups has been set up that may be done satisfactorily in people's homes. Instead of using the Lecture, the Bible and the Summary/Worksheets are used. The weekly lesson is studied all together. Members of the group take turns reading aloud the Summary and the daily reading requirements from the Bible references in the worksheet. Questions from the worksheet are answered as they go along. Therefore there is no

homework. A Leader is necessary at each meeting. One can be chosen for the whole study, or the attendees can take turns leading the group. This method works well for all are taking part, studying together, and sharing.

The summaries and worksheets for the gospel accounts of Mark, Luke, Matthew and John and the Acts of the Apostles have been published recently for personal study and meditations. These are now available in a *7"8.5"* plastic spiral binder which can be used in place of the separate printed summaries and worksheets.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PARISHIONERS INVOLVED IN THE BIBIE STUDY AT THE PARISH LEVEL

Secretary

Will place announcement of day, time and location in the Sunday bulletin 2-4 weeks prior to the Bible Study beginning. A flyer can also be posted on the parish bulletin board.

Accept registrations by mail, phone, or personally.

Collect fee ($5) if applicable the first night of the Bible Study. The registration fee can be used to defray the cost of the study and is also a form of commitment by persons attending to complete the study.

Be responsible for coffee at break. A love offering basket can be put out to pay the cost of coffee during the break.

Each week reproduces the Summaries/Worksheets for enter group and distribute to each Group Leader.

Lecturer

Opens with a short prayer.

Prepares and delivers the commentary on Sacred Scriptures for the week.
Presents material with personal enthusiasm.

Each lesson contains a great deal of material. It need not all be presented.
Time allowed is 45-60 minutes per lecture.

Total Class Time -2 Hours Each Week

Group Leaders

Throughout years of experience, it has been found that it is imperative to strictly follow the discipline listed below.

1. **After community prayer, group shares worksheet answers for the week.**

2. **Working in a clockwise order, students to left of the leader answers the first question. Number 1 is answered; then ask if anyone has an additional or different answer. Move then to the next student, who answers question number (2) and so on, through all the questions of the week.**

3. **It is the group leader's responsibility to confine discussion to the subject matter being dealt with in the weekly lesson. (Sharing problems or special prayers can be done after lesson is completed.)**

4. **If a student has a question on the subject and no agreement can be reached, put that student in charge of finding the answer through a priest of any Catholic resource. The answer is to be brought back to the group the following week.**

5. **Only student who have done their written homework may participate in the discussion. They are encouraged to attend, listen, and write down answers. There is much to learn from one another, so incomplete homework is no reason to stay away.**

6. **If the student is self-centered and tries to dominate the discussion, the group leader must speak to him privately and gently explain the problem, requesting his cooperation within the study guidelines. If the student persists in unacceptable behavior, that student is asked to remain silent or leave the study. (It is better to lose one destructive student than to lose the entire group.)**

7. **Try to bring out the best in each student.**

8. **Occasionally there is just one correct answer; when given, do not allow haggling.**

9. **At the end of the discussion period, distribute next week's Summary/Worksheet for the students' homework.**

10. **Time allowed is 45 minutes for small group sharing. If time runs out before ALL questions are answered, BREAK away. People need the coffee break in order to move around and relax. This is very important.**

11. **The first night of the study is a good time to explain the expectations of the group sharing as a community of love, kindness and consideration. This is not just an intellectual study.**

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY
CLASS FORMAT

First Hour - Small Group Sharing

Students break into their small group (10 or less)

Prayer said aloud together. (Song may be sung)

Sharing begins (approximately 45 minutes)

Break for coffee (20 minutes)

Second Hour - Lecture

Prayer said aloud by lecturer. Lecture begins for the following week's study (Approximately 45-60 minutes)

Total Class Time - 2 Hours Each Week

Personnel Needed

Lecturer: To make presentation of lecture

Small Group Leader: One for every 10 persons sharing answers

Secretary To be responsible for reproducing the Summary/Worksheets and to distribute to each Group Leader before class each week. Will take care of advertising prior to start-up of study, accept names for registration and collect $5 fee where applicable.

The Bible Study and Books may be ordered directly from:

HOLY SPIRIT MISSIONARY CENACLE APOSTOLATE
P.O. BOX 4522
ORANGE, CALIFORNIA 92863-4522