

Light of the World



The Flight into Egypt Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, North Italy

Meditations on the Gospel
According to Saint Matthew

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

MEDITATION ON THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT MATTHEW

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FORWARD

This present work, *LIGHT OF THE WORLD*, 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. *LIGHT OF THE WORLD* is the summaries and work sheets for the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Saint Mark.

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 Catechical 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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GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

There is only one Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and there are four inspired versions of the one Gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Gospel means "good news." It reveals the "good news" about the salvation of mankind. As 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 brings to us divine revelation. It reveals the love of God in Christ and His work of universal salvation.

The Church emphasizes, *"By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man 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 know God and experience salvation, but we encounter in Christ the fullness of revelation because Christ is God Incarnated. The Church clearly rejects any claims to be public revelation between apostolic times and the Second Coming of Christ, *"...we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (Div. Rev. 1-4)

God chose certain individuals called prophets and apostles to make known divine truth. This Divine Revelation, when revealed through the preaching of prophets and apostles, became Religious Tradition within the community. This Divine Revelation, when recorded by inspired scribes, became Holy Scripture within the community.

INSPIRATION AND REVELATION

However, we must not deduce from the above that the entire written Bible is divine revelation. Much of what is written in the Scriptures concerns itself with the circumstances surrounding the revelation and the effects and the reactions to God's revealed Will. We will have no trouble if we bear in mind the distinction between revelation and inspiration. Revelation concerns those "deepest truths about God and the salvation of man." The word "inspiration" comes from the Latin "inspirare" which means, "to

breathe into.” To say the Scriptures are “inspired” implies that the Holy Spirit of God, in some manner, influences these writings. The Catholic Church, through the teaching of its bishops in council, confirms the divine inspiration of the Bible and defines the nature of inspiration.

“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 that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.” (Div. Rev. 111-11) This teaching is subtle and easily misunderstood. It insists 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 not the purpose or the intention of the sacred authors to teach anything but that sacred truth needful and useful for salvation – regardless of whatever literary means may be devised through which to express these truths. We are not to read more into the Scriptures than was intended by the Holy Spirit. Every word of the Sacred Scriptures is inspired, but not every inspired word is a divine revelation. 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.

INTERPRETATION OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

A proper interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures seeks to know the literary meaning or sense of what was written. The literary sense of the Scripture is that sense intended by the inspired human author and that sense actually expressed by the words used by the sacred writer. Therefore, a proper interpretation of the Scriptures seeks to know what the words actually expressed at that historical moment and what the author actually intended to express in the words and literary form used. Obviously, this is no simple task. Not only must the ancient usage of the language be understood, but equally important would be the circumstances and the culture in which the author lived and wrote.

We must seek to go back, at least nineteen hundred years, to properly interpret the Sacred Writers. The past is the past and different from the present. The past must be permitted to give its own account. The ancient writers and their world must be understood if the full message of the Sacred Scriptures is to shine forth. This demands much scholarship and research.

One of the most valid principles for proper interpretation has been that the best interpreter of the Scriptures are the Scriptures themselves. Any interpretation of a passage from the Scriptures must be seen in the light of the entire revelation. It must be reflected against the background of the entire Scriptures. For an example, we can read in Exodus 33:11: *"The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another."* In the next verse, we read that the Lord says to Moses, *"You are my intimate friend. You have found favor with me."* The most literal interpretation of those words would be that Moses looked upon the face of God. This seems to be plainly stated in the text. Furthermore, a relationship of friendship and intimacy appears to substantiate such an interpretation. However, this is not what the author intended. We have only to read further and we know that the author never intended this interpretation even though his previous words said to Moses, *"But my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives."* Often we must not only read other verses of the text but other sacred books - to maintain the harmony which rightly belongs in divine revelation.

We know there is harmony between the divine realities and truths taught both in the Scriptures and within the Church. For anyone's interpretation of Scripture to be proper it must be in harmony with the teaching of the Church concerning matters of faith and morals. The Bible does not claim to be the fullness of divine revelation. The Church proclaims Jesus Christ to be the fullness of divine revelation. Christ remains with the Church and guides it through His Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit the Church possesses the complete treasure of revelation. She acknowledges this Holy Spirit to be *"the living voice of the gospel"* in the Church. The Church holds that a proper interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures must be in harmony not only with the rest of the Scriptures, but likewise in harmony with the traditional teaching of the Church. Since the Holy Spirit is the author of both - 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."*

Prayer must accompany the reading and studying of Scripture. Unless the Holy Spirit enlightens the reader or student the effort becomes, in the words of St. Jerome, as effective as stones skipping across a frozen pond. Without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the Scripture does not reveal its depths nor serve up that food which gives life and nourishment to the spirit. The Church teaches that divine revelation demands no less than *"the*

obedience of faith,” which consists in a “*full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals.*” The faithful Christian not only believes the truths revealed, but is guided in everyday life by those truths. For the Catholic Church, both the Bible and Sacred Tradition are the supreme rule of faith. There can be no contradiction between the two.

THE FOUR GOSPEL ACCOUNTS

Concerning the four Gospel accounts, in particular, the Church gives to them the position of “pre-eminence” within the Bible and speaks of them as “the foundations of faith.” The four Gospel accounts are a product of the revelation received by the Twelve Apostles from Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This revelation the Apostles preached first in the world and the Christian community conserved correctly. The Church attributes the four written Gospel accounts both to the Apostles and apostolic men such as Mark and Luke. The Second Vatican Council authoritatively taught, “*The Church has always and everywhere held and continues to hold that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin. For what the apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John . . .*” “*The authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explicating some things in view of the situation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus.*” (Div. Rev. VI8-19)

Biblical scholars generally agree that an analysis of the contents of the Gospels reveals the existence of smaller literary units such as miracle stories, parables, accounts of the passion and resurrection narratives. These literary units existed within the Christian Community and were passed on through the preaching and teaching ministries within the Church. Because of a need to preserve the apostolic teachings within the churches, they began to be compiled and joined together in written accounts – ultimately assuming the present four Gospel accounts.

The four evangelists did use the material available to them to present a theological understanding of Jesus Christ for that Christian community for which they wrote. In order to present this material logically, the sacred writers followed a pattern of presentation already accepted within the

Church. The Jesus presented in these four Gospel accounts is indeed the Jesus perceived by the early Church. One biblical scholar has wisely observed, “. . . those who base their faith on the Christ of the Gospels are really basing their faith on what the early Church taught about Christ. From Pentecost on it has been impossible to approach Christ except through the Church’s preaching.” (Raymond E. Brown)

THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

With this foundation, let us now proceed to reflect upon St. Matthew and the gospel account credited to him. Matthew first appeared on the historical scene in the Gospels probably as a government employee of King Herod Antipas working for the office of internal revenue. Matthew gives this account of his call to discipleship: *“As he moved on, Jesus saw a man named Matthew at his post where taxes were collected. He said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Matthew got up and followed him.”* (Mt. 9:9) The name Matthew comes from the Aramaic “mattai” – a shorter form of the Hebrew “Mattanyah” – which means, “gift of Yahweh.” Jesus would teach that no one comes to Him unless the Father draws him. Evidently, Matthew was a gift to Jesus from the Father.

Both Mark and Luke refer to Matthew as “Levi.” Some have suggested a name change because Matthew had such a bad reputation under his old name. However, we know that name changing was not uncommon and it often denoted a complete change of life and personality. In the account Luke gives, he adds this statement, *“Leaving everything behind, Levi stood up and became his follower.”* It is a story of a complete conversion. Luke goes on to say, *“After that, Levi gave a great reception for Jesus in his house, in which he was joined by a large crowd of tax collectors and others at dinner.”* (Lk. 5:28,29) Apparently, Matthew introduced as many sinners as possible to Jesus. The name “Matthew” appears in all four enumerations of the Twelve Apostles. However, only in Matthew’s account do we read *“Matthew the tax collector.”* Obviously he was profoundly impressed that God, in Jesus, could love and call, to be an apostle, anyone like himself.

Early Church records and tradition confirm that Matthew the Apostle wrote the first of the four inspired gospel accounts. By the beginning of the second century, the Gospel attributed to Matthew was accepted in Antioch and Rome – important Christian centers. Writing around 170 A.D., Irenaeus gives this account, *“Matthew wrote a version of the Gospel for the*

Hebrews in their own tongue, at the time that Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel and founding the Church in Rome.” Origen, writing around 233 A.D., said that it was a truth rooted in tradition that the Apostle and publican Matthew wrote the first Gospel in Hebrew characters for converted Jews. St. Jerome wrote around 400 A.D., “*Matthew, also called Levi, first a publican and later an apostle, was the first to commit to writing the Gospel of Christ; he wrote in Aramaic; it was later translated into Greek, but the translator is unknown.*” When the authors spoke of “Hebrew,” it has been understood they referred not to the classical Hebrew of antiquity, but to Aramaic – “the mother tongue” of the Palestinian people of apostolic times.

If Matthew wrote in Aramaic for a Palestinian community, it would have been previous to 70 A.D. Between the years 66 to 70 A.D., during the Jewish war with the Romans, most Palestinian Christians would have fled or been destroyed. As already noted – Irenaeus places its composition prior to 68 A.D. Those who support this theory would place the writing of the Gospel in Jerusalem. Those who argue for a date after 70 A.D., suggest Antioch in Syria as the place of composition.

Despite the testimony of antiquity, the existence of an original Aramaic version is denied by many modern scholars, mainly on the grounds that the Greek Matthew which we possess is manifestly not a translation from Aramaic.

It is commonly held today by scholars to have been originally written in Greek by an unknown author – probably in Antioch around 85 A.D. However many do not accept this theory. In all fairness to modern scholarship, it still must be said that the evidence presented by them is insufficient to reject the traditional Christian belief.

THE INTENTION OF ST. MATTHEW

There is little disagreement among biblical scholars over the purpose for which Matthew wrote. He wrote to assist a people who were making a spiritual transition from being Jews to being Christians. It was a time of traumatic change in faith for them. If Matthew wrote before the fall of Jerusalem, he wrote for a people who were members of what would be seen as a Jewish sect that accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah – a group called “Nazareans.” This community underwent religious persecution rather early in its existence. The ordinary people may have tolerated these

“Nazareans” and even admired them, but the religious leaders and the zealots did not. The deaths of Stephen and James and the attempts upon the lives of Peter and Paul give proof of this. If Matthew wrote after the fall of Jerusalem, he wrote for a Jewish Christian community that had to face the end of temple worship, a religious life and a Judaism they knew. He also wrote for a group of people who found themselves being forcefully excluded from synagogue worship and being attacked as heretics for their faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Matthew presents Jesus of Nazareth to his readers as the kingly son of David and the New Prophet foretold by Moses--and a prophet superior to Moses. He presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Matthew emphasizes particularly that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Matthew pictures Jesus delivering His greatest discourse from a mount. He deliberately seeks to evoke the image of Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Law from Yahweh. Matthew suggests a new authority superior to Moses' and that Jesus himself was superior to the Mosaic Law. By His own authority, he makes and changes divine laws. The changes demanded by Jesus call men to a high level of holiness. The holiness and the perfection of the Heavenly Father became the pattern for human holiness.

Scholars agree, and history confirms, that the genius of Matthew lay in this unique presentation of the teachings of Jesus. Matthew compresses the thought of Jesus into bullet-like quality carrying an explosive force upon impact. It is not without reason that the sayings of Jesus most quoted, in the present and in the past, come from the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew presents Jesus as a Person possessing extraordinary power. He follows a certain recognized pattern in the presentation of miraculous deeds: a person is introduced; the request made and Jesus' response; its effect and its effect upon the crowd or the witnesses. One author observed that these miracles have the appearance of being removed out of time and space and create the impression of an imbreak of heavenly power into an earthly situation.

Jesus appears in the Gospel with respect for the law and authority of Israel. However, when this authority rejects the authority of the Messiah – the power of the kingdom passes out of the hands of Israel. Matthew's originality has been noted in that he identifies the kingdom of heaven with

the Church on earth. It is made clear in those parables recounted in 13:24-30, 36-44, 47-50 that the Church – the kingdom of God – is a visible society upon this earth of which the present disciples are members. It is a hierarchical society, and its future governing body is revealed in Chapter eighteen.

When it is all said and done, Matthew, from the opening scene in his gospel account, has been moving his readers towards that final presentation of the Risen Christ upon the mountaintop; to which his disciples have been summoned to hear his final proclamation, "*All power in heaven and earth has been given to me!*" and, hearing, they believe, and "*leaving everything behind,*" they answer when he calls to them, "*Come follow me!*"

GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS

With the exception of your introductory lesson you will be given Scripture readings and questions for six days. You should prayerfully meditate on them and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in answering the daily questions. Do not worry if you cannot answer all the questions. The Holy Spirit may wait to give you the answer during communal sharing. Your daily meditation on these Scriptures is the important element. The questions are to aid and direct your meditation and your answers are to add to your communal sharing.

SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (MEMORIZE PLEASE)

“TEACH THEM TO CARRY OUT EVERYTHING I HAVE COMMANDED YOU. AND KNOW THAT I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD!” (MT. 28:20)

First Day: Read from Summary: Introduction, and from II Corinthians 5:16-21 and I John 1:1-4.

1. What is meant by Divine Revelation?
2. What do you see to be the very heart and essence of Christian Revelation?
3. Why do you think the Church accepts no further public revelation after the time of the Apostles?
4. What are the two means through which Divine Revelations still exist in the church today?

Second Day: Read from the Summary: Inspiration and Revelation, and from II Timothy 3:1-17.

1. What do you understand by divine inspiration of the Scriptures?
2. What would you say is the difference between revelation and inspiration?
3. What do you understand by “all Scripture is inspired but not all Scripture is revealed
4. What do you learn from the readings from second Timothy?

Third Day: Read from Summary: Interpretation of Sacred Scripture and from John 14:16,25,26; 16:13; 20:30,31; 21:25.

1. How would you describe the difference between a literal interpretation and a literary interpretation of the Scriptures?
2. What do you understand by the expression that the Holy Spirit is “the living voice of the gospel” in the Church?
3. What do you understand by the statement that the best interpretation of the Scripture is the Scripture?
4. What do you learn about the Scriptures from John 20:30,31 and 21:25?

Fourth Day: Read from Summary: The Four Gospel Accounts and from Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1,2.

1. According to the teaching of the Church what is the position of the Four Gospels in the Bible?
2. What does the Church teach about the origin and nature of the Four Gospels?
3. What does St. Luke teach you about the composition of his gospel account?
4. What role do you see the Church playing in the creation of the Four Gospels?

Fifth Day: Read from Summary: The Gospel of St. Matthew and Luke 5:27-32

1. What do we learn from Luke’s account of Matthew’s conversion?
2. What does the call of Matthew teach you?
3. What does the testimony of the early Church tell us about the origin of the Gospel?
4. What do many modern scholars teach about the authors and origin of this Gospel?

Sixth Day: Read from Summary: The Intention of St. Matthew, and Deuteronomy 18:15-21.

1. What do you learn from the reading in Deuteronomy?
2. For what purpose does Matthew write?
3. How does he present Jesus Christ to his readers?
4. What do you learn from Matthew 28:20?

CHAPTER 2

NATIVITY OF THE MESSIAH

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel account of St. Matthew begins with a declaration proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, *"A family record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham."* (Mt. 1:1) When ancient Hebrew scholars in Alexandria translated the inspired Scriptures into the Greek language, they transcribed "Masiah" meaning "anointed one" as "Christos." "Masiah" or "Christ" as translated in English, is a most important concept both in the Old and New Testaments. To understand better the Gospel of Matthew let us briefly review the concept of "Christ" as it appeared in the teachings of Israel. The theology concerning the "Masiah," or the Messiah, developed slowly among the Chosen People coming to full bloom only in the New Testament times. We find a basic understanding of the concept of the Messiah expressed in Genesis 3:15, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel."* The Scripture essentially describes, in this text, the basic conflict between good and evil – in which God proclaims a triumph of good over evil. This victory over evil will be achieved by God who proclaims, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman . . . and her offspring."*

Such concepts as "save," "salvation" and "savior" have their root in the Hebrew language in a word (ys) that implies being "unrestrained," "freed," "to have plenty of room." This concept often appears as the opposite, or the antithesis, to another word whose root in Hebrew (srr) signifies "narrowness," "stringent," "restricted." Salvation signifies being freed from all fetters and restraints. A "saved" bird flies freely through the air and the "saved" fish receives the sea in which to swim. In a word, we can say that salvation means "freedom," whether it be of body or spirit, and the lack of salvation implies "imprisonment," whether it be of body or spirit. We may say that salvation is the freedom to be what one has the power of being. The Hebrew verb "Hosia" expresses the concept of "being saved." It actually implies "to take out of a tight spot," "to help or rescue." It would be a saving act to release a bird from a cage so it could fly into the sky. When used in a military sense, "hosia" means to "win a victory." That person who achieves the freedom of another, or wins the victory, is called,

in Hebrew, "Mosia." A "mosia" is a victorious leader – a savior.

The Old Testament presents Yahweh as the "Mosia" of Israel. The Scriptures present Israel's exodus from Egypt as Yahweh's mighty act of salvation. Salvation comes from Yahweh both to the nation of Israel and to individuals. The Will of God to save Israel finds roots in the covenant promises made between Yahweh and Israel. The salvific Will of God is rooted in His own faithfulness and righteousness. Likewise, divine salvation finds roots within the spirits of those people saved. Faith is a precondition for salvation. We find in Psalm 91 one of the finest expressions of the theology of salvation.

THE ROLE OF ISRAEL

Before we begin our study of this Gospel, let us look at the Old Testament background against which this Gospel account will be presented. Israel first perceives her own share in the drama of salvation as being a descendant of Abraham. Yahweh made a promise to Abraham and entered into a covenant relationship with him. God said to Abraham, "*All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.*" (Gen. 12:3)

After Israel's exodus experience from Egypt and the covenant established with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai, Israel becomes consciously aware of her own role in the divine plan of salvation. Through the mouth of the pagan prophet Balaam, Yahweh confirms her mysterious destiny, ". . . a star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel . . . Israel shall do valiantly, and Jacob shall overcome his foes." Israel and Jacob are synonymous in this prophecy. In the Old Testament, "a star" could symbolize a divine or angelic being or a human being especially endowed with the divine spirit. This prophecy could be interpreted to mean a great leader and warrior will rise out of Israel. Later, the spirit of prophecy pinpoints the tribe of Judah to assume a position of leadership in Israel. (See Gen. 49:8,10.)

HOUSE OF DAVID

A time came in the history of the Chosen People when Israel demanded to be ruled by a king. Yahweh agreed to this. The role of a king in history was not distinct from the historic role of His people. With the rise of a monarchy within Israel, the divine destiny of the Chosen People became integrated with that of the House of David.

In King David, Israel recognized its ideal king. The belief grew and developed – nourished through prophecy – that salvation would come through the intermediary of a descendant of David. A descendant of David would appear who would be the “Mosaia” of Israel. He would not only save Israel, but establish the reign of God on earth. This introduces the concept of the Messiah and the Messianic Kingdom He will establish. “Messiah” became, more and more, to signify that descendant of David who would save Israel and establish the “reign of God” on earth. The People of God put their hope in the Messiah – the Holy One to come. The destiny of Israel would be fulfilled within and through the destiny of the House of David. (See Ps. 2:7,8 and Ps. 45:8.)

The prophet Nathan foretold an eternal destiny had been decreed for the Davidic dynasty. Nathan said to David, *“The Lord also reveals to you . . . Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me: your throne shall stand firm forever.”* (2Sam. 7:11-16) Prophecy now began to center upon the heir of David.

THE MESSIAH

It was the prophets that kept hope alive in Israel that God would fulfill His promises to them through the House of David. These prophecies began to develop the concept of the Messiah and the kingdom to be established through Him. Isaiah writes, *“For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.”* (Is. 9:15) The prophet Micah pinpoints the Messiah’s place of birth and speaks quite mysteriously about his origin, *“But you, Bethlehem-Ephrath, too small to be among the clans of Judah. From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from old, from ancient times . . . his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; he shall be peace.”* (Micah 5:1,3) The universal mission of Israel through the Messiah is now beginning to unfold and be understood. To Israel, Isaiah makes this hopeful promise, *“But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse. On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a sign for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious . . .”* (Is. 11:1,10) Israel will be reconciled with Yahweh through the Messiah and enter an everlasting covenant with Yahweh.

Both Isaiah and Micah see Zion or Jerusalem as the center from which the

word of God will go forth to all the nations and produce universal peace. Hosea sees the salvation of Israel as a return to the desert and a re-establishment of the covenant under Sinai conditions. Israel believed all this would be achieved through the promised Messiah, *"My servant David shall be prince over them, and there shall be one shepherd for them all; they shall live by my statutes and carefully observe my decree . . . with my servant David their prince forever."* (Ex. 37:24,25)

It is against this backdrop of ancient prophecies and the Jewish interpretation of these prophecies that Matthew presents Jesus of Nazareth as Christ. In this Gospel account, Jesus is the fulfillment of the messianic promises and expectations.

ORIGIN OF THE MESSIAH

In the opening sentence of his Gospel, Matthew calls the Lord *"Jesus Christ."* "Christ" has become part of the formal name of Jesus. For all practical purposes, the two could never be separated. Now and forever – Jesus Christ!

Matthew states an accepted messianic fact when he opens his Gospel account with *"A family record of Jesus Christ."* With this opening title, he proclaims Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah. When he speaks of Him as being "son of David, son of Abraham" – he states the obvious. The Messiah would obviously be the descendant of David as foretold in the Scriptures, but, even more important as Paul demonstrated, the Messiah would be the descendant of Abraham as a fulfillment of the covenant promise Yahweh made to the great patriarch. By relating the Messiah to Abraham, Matthew quite subtly implies He is the savior of the Gentiles through whom, in keeping with the promise to Abraham, all the Nations will be blessed.

Matthew gives a genealogy of Jesus. By means of this genealogy, Matthew demonstrates that Joseph, the supposed father of Jesus, was a pure Israelite of Davidic origin. Jesus was born in the House of David. Among the Jewish people, such genealogies which supported the purity of an Israelite's bloodline were extremely important both from a civil and a religious standpoint. From the point of view of ones civil rights and privileges, only a pure Israelite could be a priest of the temple, or could marry into the priestly families, be a member of the ruling body of Israel – the Sanhedrin, or a member of a criminal court, or even a member of a

local community council. Before entering into a marriage contract – or receiving a civil appointment – genealogies were examined.

Even more important were the religious aspects. The belief existed that one inherited the merits of ancestors. This spiritual inheritance aided prayer, supplied for personal defects, afforded special protection in times of danger, expiated for sins and thereby appeased God's wrath and delivered them from the fires of Gehenna, plus assuring them a place in the Kingdom of God. With a good and pure genealogy, one's soul rested quite securely.

Men of Israel were warned not to marry women whose ancestry was not as pure as their own, because affliction would fall upon their children. According to Jewish belief, an assurance of salvation and a participation in the messianic kingdom depended upon racial purity. Above all, it was most blessed to be a pure child of the Covenant – a direct and uncontaminated descendant of Abraham.

Abraham, David, and Jesus are the central personalities in the genealogy. The messianic promises began with Abraham, became personalized in David and fulfilled in Jesus. The genealogy ends with Jesus, as the promises made to Abraham and David find fulfillment.

Matthew's first section – Abraham to David – harmonizes with the genealogy found in I Chronicles 2:1-15, in which Tamar appears as the mother of Perez. Matthew, likewise, agrees with the Book of Ruth, which gives a short genealogy from Perez to David. Here, Ruth appears as the wife of Boaz and mother of Obed.

Matthew's second section is largely in harmony with the genealogy of David given in First Chronicles 3:1-24. However, there is an omission of three kings. Uzziah appears in the Chronicles under the given name of Azariah, rather than his regal name of Uzziah. Also, we read that Josiah became the father of Jechoniah. In reality, he was the grandfather of Jechoniah but the father of Jehoiakim. The names are obviously similar and Jechoniah could have been omitted by a translator error and by so doing lose a generation out of the genealogy.

Matthew's third section has little agreement with I Chronicles beyond its first generation. From the third generation on down to Joseph, Matthew apparently followed a genealogy of David which was familiar to him.

JOSEPH AND MARY

In his opening chapter, Matthew intends to tell us Who the Messiah is. In order to do so, he must introduce his readers to two persons important and special in the life of Jesus, in the order of their appearance – Joseph and Mary. The names they bore in life suggest that Yahweh knew them before He formed them in the womb and before they were born. He had dedicated them to their unique vocations and roles in salvation history. For the Semitic people, a name was considered an essential expression of personality – “*a counterpart of its bearer.*” The name Joseph means “may he add.” We read in Genesis that when Rachel bore a son, “*she named him Joseph,*” meaning, “*May the Lord add another son to me.*” (Gen. 30:24) Joseph by trade was a “tekton” – a worker in wood – perhaps a cabinet-maker. The Scripture proclaims him to be a “just” man. It is Luke, perhaps, who best explains the meaning of “just” when he speaks of Zechariah and Elizabeth, parents of John the Baptist, as being “*Both just in the eyes of God – blamelessly following all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord.*” (Lk. 1:6)

The first to appear in the Old Testament with the name Mary or Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron. Both of the brothers bear Egyptian names and most agree that Miriam or Mary is of Egyptian origin coming from the root “myr” or “myt” meaning “beloved.” With the addition of “yaw” or “yau” to the root, it becomes “Beloved of Yahweh.” Perhaps Luke made a play upon this meaning when he recorded that Gabriel said, “*Do not fear, Mary. You have found favor with God.*” (Lk. 1:30)

Matthew has identified Jesus as “*son of David.*” He, then, proceeded to demonstrate how Jesus was the Son of David by giving a genealogy that ends with Joseph. Matthew wrote, “*Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. It was of her that Jesus who is called the Messiah was born.*” (Mt. 1:16) The implication is clear: Mary is the Mother of the Messiah, but Joseph is not the father of the Messiah, even though he is the husband of Mary. Not for a moment does Matthew leave his readers hesitant about the true paternity of the Messiah. Mary conceived a child through the operation of the creative power of God by which means the Son of God became Incarnated. The angel Gabriel has said to Mary, “. . . *for nothing is impossible with God.*” (Lk. 1:36) Matthew emphasizes that the only earthly parent of Jesus is the Virgin Mary.

Jesus was not the natural son of Joseph, but he was publicly acknowledged as being the son of Joseph, *“Is not this Joseph’s son?” the people asked.*” (Lk. 4:22) This implied that Joseph had acknowledged publicly that Jesus was his son. The law based paternity upon the man’s acknowledgment of the child. If a man named the child, he legally acknowledged the child to be his own. For the Semitic people, legal paternity was real paternity. Matthew explains how this came to be, and thereby reinforced the true natural paternity of Jesus, *“Joseph her husband, an upright man unwilling to expose her to the law, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream and said to him, ‘Joseph, son of David, have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son and you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.’”* (Mt. 1:19-21)

We see three things here: Jesus is not the natural son of Joseph, Joseph is a just or upright man (he follows the laws and observances of his religion), and he acknowledges Jesus to be his son. The Law read, *“If a man, after marrying a woman . . . and evidence of the girl’s virginity is not found, they shall bring the girl to the entrance of her father’s house and there her townsmen shall stone her to death . . . Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst.”* (Deut. 22:13,20,21) Joseph was not a legalist – one who followed the letter of the Law. However he obeyed God’s Will by discerning the mind and intent of the lawgiver – he discerned the spirit behind the Law. The statement “purge the evil from your midst” opened the door to divorce as the solution. By this means, Joseph could comply with the Law in spirit and cause Mary the least harm. Divorce consisted of a written notice of dismissal before two witnesses. This could be done without any public accusation of Mary. Matthew implies that Joseph would not have accepted Jesus as his son if God had not enlightened him concerning the true paternity of the Child. The love of the Will of God was the one thing all three – Jesus, Mary and Joseph – would have in common, and it was the foundation of the Holy Family they constituted.

Matthew concludes his opening scene with these words, *“All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him ‘Emmanuel,’ a name which means ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke he did as the angel of the Lord had directed him and received her into his home as his wife. He had no*

relations with her at any time before she bore a son, whom he named Jesus.”
(Mt. 1:22-25) These verses are filled with interest and meaning which must be left for another lesson.

The Church has given this advice to Christians (and some of the greatest saints have echoed it), when one has problems and heaven seems unresponsive – the Gate appears to be closed – then “**GO TO JOSEPH!**” In his debt are two important people: Jesus, The Lord; and Mary, His Mother.

NATIVITY OF THE MESSIAH

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“BECAUSE HE CLINGS TO ME, I WILL DELIVER HIM, I WILL SET HIM ON HIGH BECAUSE HE ACKNOWLEDGES MY NAME.” (PS. 91:14)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction; Genesis 3:14-15 and Psalm 91.

1. What do you understand by the concepts salvation, saved, and Savior?
2. What does the reading from Genesis teach you about salvation?
3. What do you learn about salvation from Psalm 91?
4. In the light of such understanding, what does it mean to you to be saved?

SECOND DAY: Read “The Role of Israel”; Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 3:15-17; Numbers 24:14-18 and Genesis 49:8-12.

1. How does Abraham fit in the story of salvation?
2. How did St. Paul interpret the promise to Abraham?
3. What does the prophet Balaam reveal about Israel?
4. What do we learn about the Messiah from Jacob’s testament?

THIRD DAY: Read “House of David”; Psalms 2:7-9, 110:1-3; II Samuel 7:11-17 and Mark 12:35-37.

1. What is the role to be played by the House of David in salvation?
2. What do we learn from the words of Nathan to David?
3. What do the Psalms reveal about the Messiah?
4. What does the reading from Mark appear to imply?

FOURTH DAY: Read “The Messiah”; Isaiah 9:1, 5-6, 11:1-9; Micah 5:1-3 and Ezekiel 37:23, 26-28.

1. What does Isaiah teach us about the person of the Messiah?
2. What does he tell us about the rule of the Messiah?
3. What does the Prophet Micah reveal about the Messiah?
4. What will be His work according to Ezekiel?

FIFTH DAY: Read “Origin of the Messiah”; Matthew 1:1-17; First Chronicles 2:1-15, 3:1-24 and Ruth 4:18-22.

1. Why was a genealogy important among the Jews?
2. What do we learn from the genealogy given in Matthew about the Messiah?
3. How does Matthew’s account compare with those given in the Old Testament?
4. What was the importance of Abraham, David, and Jesus in this genealogy of Matthew’s?

SIXTH DAY: Read “Joseph and Mary” and Matthew 1:18-25.

1. What do the words “Joseph” and “Mary” mean?
2. Who is the Messiah?
3. How is Jesus of the House of David?
4. How does Matthew use Joseph to demonstrate the virgin birth of Jesus?

CHAPTER 3

THE STORY OF WISE MEN

INTRODUCTION

The gospel account of Matthew begins by telling us Who the Messiah is. Jesus Christ is from earth for He is the Son of the Virgin Mary. Christ is from heaven, for, by power of the Holy Spirit, Mary conceived Him. The Virgin Birth of Jesus is sustained both by Matthew and Luke. Our author saw this truth reflected in the words Isaiah spoke to King Ahaz. Matthew writes, *"All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet, 'The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel.'" (Mt. 1:22-23)*

Matthew explains now why the Messiah is called "Jesus" instead of "Emmanuel." The Messiah is "Emmanuel," but He bears the name which expresses His relation to the human race. The angel said to Joseph, ". . . you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." (Mt. 1:21.) The name "Jesus" comes from the Hebrew "Yehosua" which was later shortened to "Yesua" or "Yesu." "Yehosua" – translated "Joshua" – was the name given by Moses to his successor, with its root in "Sw" (to help) meaning "Yahweh helps." However, the shorter form "Yesua" was connected with the root "ys" (to save). Therefore, the name Jesus carries the meaning of "Yaweh saves." Matthew seeks to tie the concepts "Emmanuel" and "Jesus" together, because together they express both the nature and the vocation of the Messiah.

From its conception, the Christian Community highly extolled the Name of Jesus. From the moment of its commission by the Risen Jesus Christ, the Church would do all, be all, become all in the Name of Jesus Christ. "In the name of" meant in the "person of" and with the "power of." Christians are exhorted, *"Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus. Give thanks to God the Father through him."* (Col. 3:17) "In the Name of Jesus Christ" truly signifies that Jesus is alive and operative in His People on earth.

WISE MEN FROM THE EAST

Matthew identifies the place of Jesus' birth as Bethlehem of Judea. Bethlehem was a village about five miles south of Jerusalem. It has been identified with the Ephrath mentioned in Genesis – the burial place of Rachel and the birthplace of King David. The name "Bethlehem" may mean "House of Bread."

Jesus' date of birth is placed within the reign of Herod the Great. He is known to have died in 4 B.C. It is believed that Jesus was born about two years before the death of Herod. This places his birth at 6 B.C. – six years "before Christ." This resulted from a miscalculation in the sixth century. In 533, Dionysius Exiguus proposed to record years from the birth of Christ instead of the foundation of Rome. By a miscalculation, he established the birth of Christ to have been 754 A.U.C., which he established to be 1 A.D. However, Herod died in the year 750. The birth of Jesus probably occurred in the year 748 A.U.C., which, according to our present reckoning, would be 6 B.C.

Matthew tells us that after the birth of Jesus, Magi came from the East to pay Him homage. In our translation, the "magos" or "magi" are called "astrologers." Originally, they were Medians who later came to be a priestly cast among the Persians. The Magi were esteemed as wise men possessing secret power and knowledge. They specialized in the interpretation of dreams. They were students of astrology and believed the stars foretold and directed the destinies of people. It was widely believed that extraordinary manifestations of lights occurred in the heavens when great people were born or earth-shaking events would occur. The ancient world would have expected a heavenly light of great magnitude to have heralded the birth of the Messiah. The belief of a great leader rising out of Judea had spread beyond the Jews.

Remarkable astronomical phenomena did occur around the time Jesus was born. Observing these astral phenomena, astrologers from the East could have interpreted this to mean that a world ruler had appeared among the Jews. There is no doubt it was Matthew's intention to recall to his readers' mind that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Balaam, "*A star shall advance from Jacob and a staff shall rise from Israel.*" (Num. 24:17) The Magi coming from the East to behold the Light of the World recalled the words of Isaiah, "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a*

great light; Upon those who dwelt in the land of the gloom a light has shone.”
(Is. 9:1)

THE GUIDING STAR

The star led the Magi. They came seeking divine truth through a natural sign. Nature led them to Jerusalem. Paul wrote to the Romans, “*Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God’s eternal power and divinity, have become visible, recognized through the things he has made.*” (Rm. 1:20) Paul speaks of a natural revelation, which becomes a light within the hearts of men. This natural light and men’s response to it will be the measure by which many human beings will be judged.

Many people sincerely seek God through the channels opened to them. Some people have only their conscience to guide them to God. For one reason or another, supernatural revelation is not available to them. They will be judged justly by God. However, being saved only, does not fulfill God’s Will for mankind. Paul wrote Timothy that God “*wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth.*” (1Tim. 2:4)

Matthew makes it clear that one cannot come to supernatural revelation through nature. Natural revelation leads only so far. Natural light and logic led the Magi to Jerusalem, but it could not lead them to the Messiah. Now they must turn to the inspired sources. They asked the Jews – the recipients and custodians of divine revelation, “*Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We observed this star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.*” (Mt. 2:2) They knew He existed and who He was – to a limited degree – but without supernatural light, they would never find Him in this world and come to that joy that possessing Him alone can give.

REACTION IN JERUSALEM

The prophet Micah foretold that a ruler of Israel would come out of Bethlehem from the clan of Judah. However, as the prophecy is quoted in Matthew, the words of the prophet, “*whose origin is from old, from ancient times,*” are omitted and in their place are added the words spoken to David in II Samuel 5:2 – when Israel requested King David to rule over them, “. . . *who is to shepherd my people Israel.*” As Matthew presents the prophecy, it stresses the shepherd-like quality of the Messiah’s rule. Jesus is the antithesis to the present and reigning King of the Jews – Herod the Great.

Apparently, the chief priest and scribes and “all Jerusalem” were more disturbed by the fact of Herod being alarmed about the message of the Magi than they were over the message itself. An alarmed and threatened Herod could cause serious social and political repercussions.

The Scribes had an academic interest in the scriptural references to the Messiah. They could quote them. However, because a man knows the Bible it doesn't mean he has found God. These Scribes were professional religious – not necessarily men of faith. They centered their time and interest upon supporting, maintaining and nourishing the religious system which sustained their lives. They had neither faith nor interest in the sign or quest of the Magi. Jesus once said to them, “*Search the Scriptures in which you think you have eternal life – they also testify on my behalf. Yet you are unwilling to come to me to possess that life.*” (Jn. 5:39-40) Still, it should be noted that the Scribes, by their knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, were able to correctly direct the Magi to Him – even though they themselves would not seek Him.

BETHLEHEM

The Magi leave the city which will one day witness the murder of the very One they presently seek to honor as the King of the Jews. Even as they leave the city, its murderous intentions cling to their garments in the hypocritical words Herod whispered in secret to them. We are told the star reappears and causes them exceedingly great joy. Now it has become a supernatural sign to guide their steps once their minds have been enlightened by the Holy Scriptures. The reappearance of the star in such a dramatic fashion following the episode in Jerusalem was a great confirmation that the journey had not been made in vain. From this point, the light of the star recalls the pillar of fire, which led the Israelites through the darkened desert to the Promised Land. We are told the Magi were led to the house where the Child dwelt.

Joseph is not mentioned in the adoration of the Magi. Some see this as another confirmation of the virginity of Mary. However, it is more probably a reference to kingship. In the Davidic dynasty, the mother of a newborn or newly installed king was honored as “*the Great Lady.*” When Bathsheba appeared before the new crowned Solomon, we read, “. . . *the kings stood up to meet her and paid her homage. Then he sat down upon his throne, and a throne was provided for the king's mother, who sat at his right.*” (IKgs. 2:19)

Matthew invokes a picture of the Magi offering gifts before the thrones of Jesus and Mary – the King and His Queen Mother. We are told that they paid Him “homage.” In the Greek, “proskynein” translated “homage,” which is used by Matthew 13 times, can be describing the homage offered to a person of dignity or authority and the adoration and worship paid to a deity. Here, it has been interpreted to mean both: homage to a King – adoration to God’s Son. The gift of gold – the gift of kings – symbolizes the royalty of the Child; the gift of frankincense – the gift of divine worship – symbolizes the divinity of the Child; the gift of myrrh – the gift for death and pain – symbolizes the humanity and sacrifice of the Child.

FLIGHT TO EGYPT

When one is dealing with a serpent, in order not to be stung, one must be as wise as a serpent. The Magi deceive the deceptor and quickly, quietly and secretly, remove themselves beyond his jurisdiction. The Magi return home before Herod knows they are gone. In the face of might and injustice, often the only recourse open to the weak and poor is flight. The Holy Family flees to Egypt and joins that great mass of misplaced persons and refugees from tyranny. Since 30 B.C., Egypt was under the rule of Rome as an Imperial Prefecture. Tradition believes the Holy Family joined the Jewish colony in Cairo. Near the ancient Qaraite Jewish Synagogue in Cairo stands the church Abu Serghis, which contends to be built over the spot where the Holy Family lived. Many scholars see in these episodes a symbolic re-enactment of the life of Moses and Israel’s exodus from Egypt.

Matthew quotes the prophet Hosea, “*When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son. (Hos. 11:1)* He does not imply that the flight into Egypt was willed by God no more than he implies the slaughter of the children was willed by God. He recalls the words of Hosea as a reminder that the love of God has protected the Child in exile.

In the concluding part of this narration on the childhood of Jesus, Matthew tells his readers how it is that the “*son of David*” came to live in Nazareth, from which no good can come, and in Galilee, from whence no acceptable prophet comes.

This reference to the prophetic calling of the Messiah as a “Nazarean” (Mt. 2:23) has caused scholars considerable trouble, for there is no clear

Scripture reference to this. However, the word “nazir” in its root “ndr” means “to vow.” It carries the idea of a person being vowed to the service of God. A “nazir” would be one consecrated to God by a vow. It likewise carries the concept of holiness and often is translated into the Greek as “Hagios” meaning “holy.” Calling Jesus a “Nazarean” may intend to compare Him to such holy men as Samuel and Sampson – who were both dedicated to God before birth. In Judges 13:2-7, the angel of the Lord told the wife of Manoah that she would have a son who would be from birth a “Nazirite” to God and he would deliver Israel from its enemies. By calling Jesus a “Nazarean,” Matthew reminds his readers that Jesus has been set aside from conception for the service of God – to save his people.

Matthew has presented the infancy of Jesus before introducing us to His public life. By so doing, he has been able to reveal the true nature of the Messiah. In the episode of the Magi’s coming to Jerusalem and Herod’s reaction to the news of the Messiah’s birth, he has been able to explain how Jesus can be the Messiah and still come from Nazareth in Galilee. In the material of this drama he sees a forecast of the Messiah’s future destiny. He will be accepted by the Gentiles, and despised and rejected by the Jews who will conspire with the political powers for His destruction. It tells a story of belief and acceptance followed by adoration and a story of disbelief and rejection followed by persecution. In the Infancy Narratives, the stage is set for what must come.

THE STORY OF WISE MEN

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“WHATEVER YOU DO, WHETHER IN SPEECH OR IN ACTION, DO IT IN THE NAME OF THE LORD JESUS. GIVE THANKS TO GOD THE FATHER THROUGH HIM.” (COL. 3:17)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, Acts 3:1-10,16 and 4:5-12.

1. What is implied in the name “Emmanuel”?
2. What does “Jesus” mean?
3. What do the names “Emmanuel” and “Jesus” tell us about the nature and vocation of the Messiah?
4. What does “in the name of Jesus” mean to you?

SECOND DAY: Read “Wise Men from the East,” Mt. 2:1-2 & Luke 2:1-7.

1. What is the meaning of “Bethlehem” and what was it noted for in the Scriptures?
2. How do you account for the fact that Jesus was born about 6 B.C.?
3. Who were the Wise Men?
4. What was the ancient belief about the stars?

THIRD DAY: Read “The Guiding Star,” Romans 1:18-21 and 2:5-16.

1. What is meant by natural revelation?
2. How can people be saved who only possess natural revelation?

3. What is the importance of supernatural revelation?
4. What do you learn from ITim. 2:4?

FOURTH DAY: Read "Reaction in Jerusalem" and Mt. 2:3-8.

1. What does Matthew teach us about the Messiah by adding the quote from Samuel to the prophecy of Micah?
2. Why do you think the chief priests and scribes did not go to Bethlehem?
3. In what way did the Scribes help the Wise Men?
4. What do you learn from this?

FIFTH DAY: Read "Bethlehem," Mt. 2:9-12, Isaiah 60:1-6 and Luke 2:8-20.

1. How do you explain Herod's reaction and what does he symbolize to you?
2. What scene from Scripture does the reference of finding the child with Mary his mother invoke?
3. What is being implied by the word "homage"?
4. What do the gifts teach about the Messiah?

SIXTH DAY: Read "Flight to Egypt" and Mt. 2:13-23.

1. How do you explain Herod's reaction and what does he symbolize to you?
2. How would you explain the massacre of the children with the goodness of God?
3. What is meant by calling Jesus a Nazarean?
4. What did the Infancy Narratives teach you about the Messiah?

CHAPTER 4

THE DESERT REVISITED

A PROPHET IN THE LAND

Matthew introduces his readers into the public life of Jesus of Nazareth with the appearance of one John the Baptist in the Judean desert. This man came as a prophet with an Elijah-like appearance. Once in the land of the Jews, the voice of prophecy rang loud and clear.

The voice of prophecy suddenly grew silent in Israel. A prophetic hush fell upon the land lasting four hundred years, in which time a profound silence was broken only by "*a whisper of the Spirit*" heard in the teachings of the Rabbis.

The period of prophetic drought ended and a spirit of prophecy broke over the land of the Jews when John the Baptist "*came ploughing across a sea of sand like a steel battleship prepared for war.*"

Matthew abruptly introduces John into his gospel narrative. He presumes his readers know about this man. The Palestinian people apparently did so. "*All regard John as a prophet*" – we are told. (Mt. 21:26) The name "John" comes from the Hebrew "Yohanan" which means "Yaweh is gracious." It is believed he was born into the tribe of Levi to the elderly Zachary and Elizabeth, about a half-year before the birth of Jesus. Tradition places his birth at Ain Harim, a village about three and a half miles west of Jerusalem. It was Luke who told us, "*He lived in the desert until the day when he made his public appearance in Israel.*" (Lk. 1:80)

According to Matthew, John appeared in the desert valley formed by the River Jordan and the Dead Sea. He would have been preaching near the city of Jericho and the Qumran Monastery. The author of the Fourth Gospel speaks of John baptizing "*across the Jordan.*" This would place his area of operation in Perea – outside the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem – and under the authority of Herod Antipas who, subsequently, arrested John the Baptist. The wide range and depth of John's influence

upon people is certainly suggested by the fact that many years after his death, his disciples appear upon the New Testament scene. We are told of Apollos “ . . . a native of Alexandria and a man of eloquence, arrived by ship at Ephesus . . . (who) knew only of John’s baptism.” (Acts 18:24-25)

All four gospel accounts are at pains to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus over John. The gospel accounts make it clear that no rivalry existed between John and Jesus. However, one is left with the impression a real rivalry existed between the disciples of John and the disciples of Jesus. Evidently, the disciples of both Jesus and John lacked the greatness of spirit intrinsic to these men of God.

THE VOCATION OF JOHN

The Gospel proclaims the reign of God has come on earth in the Messiah. The reign of God signifies submission to the rule of God. We pray for the coming of God’s reign when we pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The reign of God presupposes obedience to the Will of God. Disobedience and rebellion are the antithesis to God’s reign. The reign of God is not merely the internal conformity of one’s will to the revealed commands of God. In the obedient spirit, God is present in presence and power. Within the obedient soul, we can expect a powerful display of God’s Presence. The fullness of God’s reign came in the Messiah because he totally emptied himself out and humbly fulfilled, perfectly, the will of God. God’s reign, and all it implies, is present in all its fullness in the Messiah.

All four gospel accounts present the role of John the Baptist as one of preparation for the reign of God – preparation for the acceptance of the Messiah. John is first seen fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, “*A voice cries out: in the desert prepare the way of the Lord!*” (Is. 40:3) Here, Isaiah speaks of the return from the Babylonian Exile back to the Promised Land. When John preached, it was the hearts of God’s people that were in exile, not their bodies. It was John’s vocation to prepare their hearts and spirits for their return to Yahweh.

The Gospel also intimates, with its description of John’s physical appearance, that he is an Elijah-like character, “*John was clothed in a garment of camel’s hair, and wore a leather belt around his waist.*” (Mt. 3:4) The Evangelists suggest to their readers that John has also fulfilled the popular expectation that Elijah will return shortly prior to the time of the

Messiah – to prepare people for the messianic age. We may be sure that before Matthew wrote this account, he reflected long and hard on the effect the Messiah actually had upon the people encountered by him.

The Messiah found acceptance – generally speaking – among the people from the everyday walks of life and, also, from those people consciously burdened with socially unacceptable sins. He was received among tax collectors and harlots, as well as among simple and sincere fishermen. Men who belonged to the priestly cast – whose economy, authority and social position rested in their priestly status – rejected Him. Those men who were popularly regarded as holy and pious – whose reputations rested upon their external observance of the Mosaic Law – rejected Him. The members of the major political and religious parties of the time – the Sadducees, the Pharisees and their affiliates, the lawyers or scribes, the Herodians – rejected and despised the Messiah. Matthew came to see that the Messiah was accepted or rejected by people, not only by a simple and sincere people of the land and sea, but also by those who belonged to the leading political parties; they came from all parties and from all walks of life.

The real distinguishing characteristic between those who rejected or accepted Christ was the acceptance or rejection of the call of John the Baptist. Those who listened to John were open to listen to Christ. Those who rejected John found it easy to reject Christ.

TRUE REPENTANCE

Before we proceed into an in-depth study of this gospel account, let us make certain that we understand one of the most important elements in our personal salvation – repentance!

The understanding of the concept of repentance lies in our understanding of the concept in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew root “sub” means “turning.” Whether it implies “to turn away from (evil)” or “to turn towards (Yahweh)” depends on the preposition used. From this root comes the Hebrew noun “tesubah” which means “conversion” or “return.” This word is translated into the Greek as “metanoia” which means “a change of mind.” Most scholars agree that “metanoia” does not mean “to have contrition” or “to do penance.”

The Old Testament saw conversion as a moral change in which a person

turns away from former sinful conduct and turns towards God by doing God's Will. Therefore, Biblical conversion is composed of two parts: First, one turns from evil. This is the negative side of conversion. Second, one starts to accomplish good. This is the positive side of conversion. A person who only ceases to do evil is not converted. A truly converted person manifests good works in his life.

There are certain characteristics in true conversion: there is an ideal – which the repentant person sees as an acceptable goal of life. There is a measured distance between the ideal and the converted person. One must realistically assess where they presently stand in relationship to the fulfillment of the ideal. Conversion always involves a religious and moral act that embraces every aspect of human life. Conversion demands constant change as it involves a constant growth towards the idealized goal. When it comes to true Christian conversion we must understand that the content and circumstances of conversion can only be understood in the light of Christ's words and deeds.

Because the person of Christ occupies an essential place in the divine plan of salvation, Christian conversion demands faith in Christ. One must accept that salvation comes through the death of Christ upon the Cross and by personal incorporation into Christ through Baptism. It demands that one find religious security in one's commitment to the Way of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, conversion continues and is brought to completion through His Presence, which produces faith that works through charity.

REJECTION OF REPENTANCE

Many of us are accustomed to picture John the Baptist as an angry prophet who preached fire and brimstone. We formed this picture because the gospel accounts largely present John in angry conflict with hypocrites. However, we need to bear in mind that John's mission was one of love and he could not have fulfilled his mission if he had not been a man of great love. As for John's own personality – there was none more detached from self – we have already noted the devotion of his followers and his great attraction to that large mass of humanity called "sinners." Sinners found him attractive rather than frightening. He gave time to his disciples and taught them how to pray. He taught them a way of holiness which embraced an ascetical life.

However, it was another matter, another story and another man, when it came to people who made a pretense at piety and a sham of true religion – men, who in their hearts, opposed the spirit and work of God, those men who refused to enter the kingdom of God and actively labored to keep others from it – upon such people John descended like a blow torch of truth. His words seared their hypocritical souls and he mercilessly laid them bare. He did not hesitate to tell awful truths to them. They were playing with fire – the fire of Hell. John attacked the foundation of their spiritual security, their descendancy from Abraham. He denied that salvation depended upon their pure genealogies and membership in the People of God. John prophesied that the tree which came forth from Abraham would be cut down and burned if it did not produce good fruit, *“Give some evidence that you mean to reform.”*

John clearly saw that the countdown had begun for the Nation of Israel. If it rejected its Messiah, the Wrath of God – foretold by all the prophets – would descend upon an unrepentant nation. This implied God would lift His protective Hand and Israel’s enemies would triumph. As foretold, they would perish by the sword. And it did come to pass – the Wrath of God fell upon Israel in the form of a Roman sword in the hand of Caesar.

John makes it clear that the coming of the Messiah brings judgment. He used the symbol of the threshing of the wheat, at which time the wheat and weeds are separated: the wheat and weeds are thrown into the air and the winds blow away the lighter chaff. John concludes, *“ . . . and gather his grain into the barn, but the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire.”* (Mt. 3:12)

BAPTISM OF JESUS

John’s invitation of repentance to Israel resounded through the land. Beyond the Judean hills, his voice echoed in the Galilean hills and along the shores of the sea. The invitation was heard in the village of Nazareth and found a total response in the heart of a young carpenter of extraordinary bearing of whom it could be said – by those who knew – this young man from childhood has *“ . . . progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and men.”* (Lk. 2:52) Jesus of Nazareth heard clearly the Voice of God in John’s call to all Israel. It was a moment, long awaited. With it, His mission now begins. The tools of carpentry are laid aside, and serene and secure surroundings are left behind . . . Jesus left His only earthly

home knowing any return could never be the same.

Jesus stood on the shore of the river and saw the streams of sinners coming to John to be purified in the river waters. Jesus knew it was not the waters of the River Jordan which would wash away the stains of sin, but only a river of Precious Blood. These sinners came to John and the River Jordan with hearts thirsting for righteousness and holiness – with a thirst which no river, no spring, no well could quench. Jesus knew they thirsted for the living water of the Holy Spirit. *“There was, of course, no spirit as yet, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.” (Jn. 7:39)*

Falling in line with the sinners, Jesus of Nazareth walked into the River Jordan. Much later, a disciple wrote, *“He pardoned all our sins. He canceled the bond that stood against us with all its claims, snatching it up and nailing it to the cross.” (Col. 2:13-14)* *“After Jesus was baptized, he came directly out of the water. Suddenly the sky opened and he saw the Spirit of God descend like a dove and hover over him. With that, a voice from the heavens said, ‘This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him.’” (Mt. 3:16-17)*

THE DESERT REVISITED

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“SEEK GOOD AND NOT EVIL, THAT YOU MAY LIVE; THEN TRULY WILL THE LORD, THE GOD OF HOSTS, BE WITH YOU AS YOU CLAIM!” (AMOS 5:14)

FIRST DAY: Read Luke 1:5-24.

1. What was the family background of John the Baptist?
2. What do we learn about him in Luke 1:15-16?
3. What does Luke 1:17 teach us?
4. What is signified by calling him “John”?

SECOND DAY: Read “A Prophet In The Land” and Luke 1:57-80.

1. What do we learn about John in Luke 1:76?
2. What do you understand by Luke 1:77?
3. What does Luke 1:80 tell you about John?
4. What ended with John’s appearance in the Judean wilderness?

THIRD DAY: Read “The Vocation of John,” Mt. 3:1-6, John 1:19-28, Isaiah 40:3-11 and Malachi 3:23-24.

1. How would you describe John’s vocation?
2. What does it mean to you to seek first the kingdom of God?

3. In what way does the prophecy of Isaiah apply to John?
4. What is the connection between John and Elijah?

FOURTH DAY: Read "True Repentance," Isaiah 1:16-20, Amos 5:14-15; and Hosea 14:2-10.

1. What does the Old Testament mean by repentance?
2. What are the two parts of repentance?
3. What are the characteristics of true repentance?
4. Why does Christian conversion demand faith in Christ?

FIFTH DAY: Read "Rejection of Repentance," Mt. 3:7-12 and Lk. 3:10-15.

1. How did John deal with repentant people?
2. Why did he act so harshly towards the Pharisees and Sadducees?
3. What was the deciding factor whether men would accept or reject Christ?
4. Why is it said that Jesus brings judgment?

SIXTH DAY: Read "Baptism of Jesus," Mt. 3:13-17 and John 1:29-32.

1. How did the preaching of John affect Jesus?
2. What did Jesus signify by being baptized?
3. What do you think the appearance of the Holy Spirit signified?
4. Where can you see the Holy Trinity intimated in Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus?

CHAPTER 5

SERVANT OF YAWEH

INTRODUCTION

Jesus grew in age in the village of Nazareth. He matured as Israel's child – steeped in the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures. Each Sabbath He stood in the synagogue and, with His people facing towards Jerusalem, prayed, *“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.”* (Dt. 6:4-6) Seated with the congregation, Jesus watched with rapt attention as the “hazzan” called forth seven chosen lectors to read and explain the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures were read in Hebrew and a translation given in Aramaic.

The Torah had been divided into exactly 153 parts, permitting the entire Law to be read within a three-year period. The last of the seven readers was called the “maphtir,” as he read “the last lesson” which was always taken from the Prophets. To be “maphtir” was the most honored position within the service, as it gave the lector the opportunity to preach to the congregation. It was the position offered to noted Rabbis. From the time Jesus was thirteen, He would have been eligible to read publicly in the synagogue, but, until His day of fame, He would never have been invited to be the “maphtir.” All the words heard in the synagogue Jesus treasured, and reflected on them in His heart. There, in the silence of His soul, these holy words nourished His mind and formed His spirit. The knowledge gathered in the light of study became wisdom in the night, at prayer.

Jesus knew – even before lived – His life had been told. The story of the Messiah had been written already. Had His life been foretold? Or, had it been preordained? Was He coerced by God or directed by God? Was His life a matter of pre-determinism and predestination or was His life a matter of human dignity and divine love? When the Potter molded the clay, what was His intention? Genesis states it in these words, *“Let us make men in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion . . .”* (Gen. 1:26)

Jesus was free – as free as Adam had been. He was free to freely love God with all His heart, with all His soul, and with all His strength. The revealed prophecies directed His love, for they but foretold of God's Will in regard to the Messiah. Jesus recognized the revealed prophecies as the indispensable directive of love. His earthly life was not a part assigned in an earth-divine drama, but a vocation to life – freely and totally embraced. Jesus now knew the way; He only waited for the call to begin on The Way!

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM FOR JESUS

God, through John, invited all Israel to repent. In this invitation, Jesus recognized His call to mission. Jesus embodied Israel – He was its corporate symbol – in Him it stood or fell, in Him it lived or died. With prudence, Jesus willed the foreknown. With spiritual insight, He selected the best means – within the earthly circumstances in which he moved – to bring prophecy to fulfillment.

Matthew, indeed, narrates the divine drama. He introduces the star with the word “*appeared.*” The long expected Messiah is present. He is “*Jesus coming from Galilee.*” His first act identifies Him with repentant sinners. His true followers will be composed only of such as these.

Because Jesus identified Himself with sinful humanity, the grace of salvation becomes available to all mankind. Jesus had committed Himself to die when He stepped into the River Jordan to be baptized. He, sinless though He was, identified with His sinful brethren and accepted their burden of sin, which implicitly implied death, “*the wages of sin is death!*” Baptism was a public sign that Jesus accepted His role as Messiah, as Savior and all that it implied – ultimately obedience unto death on a cross.

When a star of such magnitude in the divine drama speaks for the first time, the audience is expected to take notice. We need to hear that first line well and hear it over again. It should be said of us as it was of Mary, “*Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart.*” (Lk. 2:19) Jesus spoke to John in these words, “*We must do this if we would fulfill all of God's demands.*” (Mt. 3:15) This first line spoken by Jesus is of paramount importance for understanding what follows. It best expresses and explains the rest, all of which subsequently comes to be – in word and deed of Jesus – a product of righteousness, which means it is a fulfillment of the

expressed desire of God. As explained, "righteousness" signifies a total conformity to the Divine Will, which encompasses one's purpose, one's thought and action. Righteousness is the most sublime of all human acts! As mentioned previously, such obedience has divine consequences, and these consequences are immediately revealed.

AFTER BAPTISM

The Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove over Jesus. In Old Testament symbolism, the dove signifies "love." Jesus' act is a total act of love and brings to perfection His human spirit. He has become the fitting Temple of God's Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Love. From the moment the mission begins, the Holy Spirit directs and empowers the life of Jesus. The descent of the Holy Spirit may be seen as Jesus' investiture for His heroic mission. God asks not power from humanity for a life of righteousness; God seeks only good will. God supplies the power where there is the good will.

When the evangelist John described the baptism of Jesus, he places these words in the mouth of John the Baptist, "*I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from the sky, and it came to rest on him.*" (Jn. 1:32) The word translated as "rest" carries the concept in Greek of "dwelling," "remaining" permanently. What John says is the antithesis of what Genesis says, "*My Spirit shall not remain in man forever, since he is but flesh.*" (Gen. 6:3) The statement from Genesis implies man must die; this, we know, because of sin. In John, we read the Spirit has returned to man in Jesus. In other words, Jesus possesses Eternal Life. He is the Possessor and Reservoir of Eternal Life. For this reason, man can only come to Eternal Life "in" and "through" Jesus. This makes Jesus the Personal Savior of every saved person.

Following the descent of the Holy Spirit, Matthew relates, "*With that, a voice from the heavens said, 'This is my beloved Son. My favor rests on him.'*" (Mt. 3:17) This declaration from heaven proclaims both the nature and mission of the Messiah. The words of the proclamation intentionally recall the words of Isaiah, "*Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased . . .*" (Is. 42:1) Jesus has been identified as the "Servant" of Isaiah's prophecies. The Messiah is the Servant of Yaweh and will suffer for the sins of the people.

LIFE IN THE DESERT

In many ways, the life of Jesus Christ, as narrated in the Gospel, reflects the history of Israel. Not only does Jesus appear as another Moses, but the Messiah's life, in miniature, retells the story of Israel. However, in Jesus Christ, the ending is different. After the baptism of Jesus, we read in Mark, "*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.*" (Mk. 1:12-13) In the episode to follow, we need to see that it is not only Jesus in the desert but Israel in Jesus in the desert. Through Jesus, Israel reaffirms its covenant with Yahweh. However, this time Israel is different in Jesus.

Let us briefly reflect upon some aspects of that first desert experience: Israel left Egypt. As she passed through the waters of the sea, a life of slavery ended. Once freed of Egyptian slavery, she once again became self-possessed and free to enter into any contractual relationship considered conducive to her welfare. However, slavery had left its mark upon her soul in the form of moral weakness. Only time with its tests and tribulations would reveal it.

Israel established a covenant relationship with Yahweh. Soon she discovered one easy "I do!" becomes a daily "I will," which can take its toll on a commitment. The covenant relationship was all beautifully symbolized as Israel's wedding day with Yahweh. In reality, Israel is a child, and her Lord seeks lovingly to bring her to maturity. When love's first fervor faded and the demands of this marriage grew no less, the bride's goodwill began to falter. It began to manifest itself in little things, such as complaints about the wretched food and bad water and the poor surroundings. Discontentment soon leads to rash judgments, "*Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is not food or water?*" (Num. 21:5) Israel's unhappiness was soon directed against the servants who were made to suffer. Rash judgments led soon to imputing evil motives, "*Out of hatred for us the Lord has brought us up out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites and destroy us.*" (Deut. 1:27) The relationship demanded more than it had bargained for and, at least, more than it was willing to give. In this case, there was not all that much love to begin with, and there was even an unwillingness to be subjected to those trials and tests in which love is exercised and grows. In this marriage between Yahweh and Israel, infidelity and desertion were not too far off, "*Come, make us a god who will be our leader.*" (Ex. 32:1) "*Would*

it not be better for us to return to Egypt? . . . Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt.” (Nu. 14:3-4)

The marriage between Yahweh and Israel indeed was a stormy one. There were prolonged separations in which things went from bad to worse for Israel. The Bride only survived her recklessness because Yahweh’s love was constant, patient, merciful, and redemptive. There were separations and reunions until finally the marriage settled down to a matter of legality, rather than one of spirit: it was a liveable arrangement, a time of old age and dry wood. Yet when it was all said and done – despite everything – the marriage between Yahweh and Israel produced the Messiah – and a new beginning for all concerned. Israel would begin again in Jesus.

JESUS IN THE DESERT

Matthew, likewise, relates that *“Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil.” (Mt. 4:1)* The text mentions that the prolonged fast was followed by temptation. Only then did Jesus experience hunger.

Some have referred to the episode following the prolonged fast as an apocalyptic vision, in which the true nature of the messianic mission is demonstrated through the temptations and Jesus’ response to them. Although these temptations are centered in Christ, they appear to be addressed to the whole Covenant People. These are the temptations to which the church would always be subjected.

The protagonists in the desert drama are Christ and Satan. In them, reigns and kingdoms struggle. It is a matter of light and darkness. In the Hebrew, the word “satan” means “to harass.” As the consciousness of evil developed among the Jews, the title “Satan” was restricted to the devil or the “ancient serpent” of Genesis. All three concepts – “satan,” “devil” and “ancient serpent” – became synonymous for the same person: a fallen angel, the recognized lord of this world and the great enemy of God. Satan appears in the New Testament as the principle and origin of evil, the seducer to evil, and the great invisible enemy and adversary to the Church and the spreading of God’s kingdom.

In the desert, Satan manifests himself to Jesus. It is his intention to destroy the Messiah both physically and spiritually – the starting point of his attack being the spiritual experience enjoyed by Jesus at His baptism

when God testified that Jesus was His beloved Son. Satan intends to destroy this relationship between Jesus and God. He begins by insinuating that there is a doubt about this intimate relationship between Jesus and God. By the insinuation, he seeks to instill doubt in Christ. "If you are the Son of God," it is easily proven to yourself and others by a visible sign – something more than a "word" which can be so easily misunderstood – some concrete sign, like changing stones into bread. There is no evil in what is asked: all the evil is in the motive and intention. He asks Jesus to satisfy a human need, a human necessity – one quite pressing at the time – feed the hungry.

Jesus recalls Moses' words to the Israelites of how God allowed them to experience hunger and then fed them with an extraordinary food. The Lord did this to teach Israel, the Scriptures said, that they might know a person lived not only on bread, but on the Will of God. If Israel sought first as their food the Will of God, all else would be added to them, "*Seek first the Kingdom of God!*" Therefore, it is essential for a true son of God to seek the Will of God as the supreme good and be willing, if necessary, to sacrifice any lesser good – even physical life. This brings us back to love and what a total act of love truly involves.

Some see the first test as a temptation to use the powers of the kingdom of God in a self-serving manner – to become a wonder-worker for the enrichment and glorification of self. Many gifted Christians have been tempted by Satan to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit selfishly – to build themselves up materially and socially. The deeds done are not evil; it is the intention and motivation that is evil. Others see this first test as a temptation to divert the spiritual energy and power of the Church into the remedial of the social ills of the world – to reduce salvation to social justice.

Satan next moves to meet Christ on His own ground: the Scriptures. Since Jesus discovers the Will of God in the Scriptures, Satan will use the Scriptures subtly, with the intention of separating Jesus from the Will of God. He starts with Jesus' confidence in the Word of God and seeks to move Him from confidence to presumption. He tempts Jesus to force God into acting in a way He has not ordained to act. Satan insinuates that the present relationship of Jesus with the Father implies more than it does. He tempts Jesus to demand that His Father be the Father His "confidence" implies He is. He wants Jesus to set the terms of filial relationship.

Satan sets the stage for his test by taking Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple. He urges Jesus to throw Himself down on the rock below, *“You trust in God. You believe in the Scriptures. You have heard the word of God as I proclaimed it to you. You have complete confidence in God’s word. Go ahead, throw yourself down. Think what such a display of faith and God’s protective love will do for your mission – and for God’s own cause. Besides, if you do not do it, well it is obvious you do not trust the word of God. You really lack confidence in your sonship and you lack faith in God’s word.”* Jesus recalls to mind the sin of Israel at Massah, when it demanded a sign from Moses that God was present among them! *“The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord in our midst or not?’”* (Ex. 17:7) Moses had said to the people, *“Why do you put the Lord to a test?”* (Ex. 17:2)

Here we note the danger of interpreting the Will of God in the light of one Scripture, without reference to the rest of the revelation. Many have quoted the Scriptures and given evil interpretations. Jesus reveals His authority to give the proper interpretation of the Scriptures. Subsequently, His Church would claim the same authority.

We learn from this temptation that miracles, signs and wonders must not be the condition for our confidence and trust in God. We must have trust and confidence in the Word of God. However, Jesus warns against rash interpretations of that Word. The subtlety of Satan in this regard has piled up the corpses of many Christians. By this method, he has led many people into imprudent and rash behavior all in the name of fulfilling God’s Word or claiming God’s promises.

In the third test, Satan clearly places before Jesus a choice between good and evil. There is a bold offer and naked request for allegiance. The strength of Jesus has been tested and tried in the fire, and Satan senses His spiritual power and threat to his kingdom. He offers Christ a share in his power. The Prince of this world offers to Jesus the kingdom of this world in return for personal allegiance and adoration. The cards are laid upon the table and the time has come to end the game. It is a time for expulsion – not rebuttal. Addressing him by his title, Jesus directly confronts the Tempter, *“Away with you Satan!”* He expels and dissipates the Prince of Darkness with the blazing light of truth, *“You shall do homage to the Lord your God; him alone shall you adore.”* (Mt. 4:10)

Satan tested the loyalty of Jesus' sonship and sought to pervert and destroy His messianic mission. With the Word of God, Jesus defended Himself on both fronts of attack. He used verses from Deuteronomy (6:13ff) to demonstrate that the Scriptures had revealed the true nature of His messianic mission. The bottom line was always, and in everything, the Will of God.

Jesus came down from His trials with Satan and walked out of the desert the verified Son of God. His life and His mission the Will of God directed and the Holy Spirit inspired. The reign of God had arrived and been confirmed in Jesus. Jesus would now spread the reign of God. On the mountain of temptation, He took the path of deepest humility and placed His total confidence in the Word of God, as a little child would in the word of his father. The Scriptures tell us, "*Be humbled in the sight of the Lord and he will raise you on high.*" (Js. 4:10)

JESUS BEGINS IN GALILEE

Matthew implies that Jesus returned to Nazareth and remained there until the arrest of John the Baptist. Following John's arrest, Jesus begins His own ministry. The voice of John had been silenced by the authority of Herod Antipas, but the voice of God cannot be silenced. Where John ended, Jesus begins. He confirms the mission of John by continuing to proclaim the necessity for repentance before accepting the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus' first act is to preach repentance. Once again the essential importance of repentance, both for the acceptance of Christ and the reign of God, is confirmed. Modern evangelists ought to note, and keep in mind, that repentance is a fundamental step in evangelization. It has been noted in the lives of many nominal Christians that they have come to a more vibrant religious life only after some degree of a conversion experience within their lives. There are blessed souls in the Christian Community who have corresponded with grace from childhood. However, experience indicates that a lot of "early born" Christians are in need of a new "born again" experience.

When the moment came to proclaim the Gospel, there would have to be disciples, for there must be witnesses. The Scriptures tell us that many are called but few are chosen. Matthew records the choosing of the first few.

Many fishing boats sailed the Sea of Galilee in the days of Jesus. Out of all these boats, Jesus entered into two of them from which He chose four disciples. The first, according to Matthew, to be called to discipleship, was "*Simon now known as Peter*" and the next was his brother, Andrew. We were told that Jesus had been observing these two men. Jesus next called to discipleship the two ambitious and high-strung sons of Zebedee: James and John. Jesus later referred to these two as "*sons of thunder.*" For reasons known only to the Lord, He selected these particular men and called them into a unique relationship with Himself. Luke saw them as men whom "*. . . he had chosen through the Holy Spirit.*" (*Acts 1:2*)

Others have noted those special characteristics of professional fishermen, which made them suitable candidates for discipleship. Fishermen must be able to wait patiently and work perseveringly; they must have courage to brave those elements of uncertainty and danger; they need prudence to know when and where to fish and the means to use to catch the fish; they must be people who do not attract attention to themselves. All these characteristics are needed virtues for those who are called to be fishers of men.

SERVANT OF YAWEH

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“BE HUMBLLED IN THE SIGHT OF THE LORD AND HE WILL RAISE YOU ON HIGH.” (JAMES 4:10)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, Psalm 16, Isaiah 53:11-12, and from Luke 4:14-22.

1. How did Jesus come to know and understand the Scriptures?
2. What did Jesus learn about his own life from the Scriptures?
3. What do we mean when we say that the life of Jesus was foretold but not preordained?
4. What did Isaiah 53:11-12 reveal to Jesus?

SECOND DAY: Read “The Meaning of Baptism for Jesus,” Isaiah 43:1-4, 8, 10, and re-read Matthew 3:13-17.

1. What is signified by Jesus’ response to John’s call for repentance?
2. What are some of the effects of Jesus’ baptism learned from the Isaiah reading?
3. What are we told in the first word spoken by Jesus in this Gospel?
4. What does this teach us about Jesus and about being a Christian?

THIRD DAY: Read “After Baptism,” Isaiah 42:1-9 and John 1:31-34.

1. What do we learn about the effect of Jesus’ baptism from the Isaiah 42 reading?
2. What did the coming of the Holy Spirit signify for Jesus?
3. What did the residing of the Holy Spirit within Jesus signify for mankind?

4. What is being signified by identifying Jesus with the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah?

FOURTH DAY: Read “Life in the Desert,” Numbers 11:5-6, 20:2-5, 25:1-5 and from Exodus 16:4-8,17:1-4.

1. Why do you think the relationship between Israel and Yahweh is described as a marriage?
2. What caused this marriage to deteriorate?
3. In what way was this a fruitful marriage?
4. What does the desert experience of Israel teach you about covenant relationships?

FIFTH DAY: Read “Jesus In The Desert,” Psalm 17; Deuteronomy 9:9-10, 25-27 and Matthew 4:1-11.

1. How should these temptations of Jesus be generally viewed?
2. What lesson is there for you in the first temptation and what is the lesson for the Church in general?
3. What do you learn about the use of Scriptures – both good and ill – from the incident of the temptations.
4. What do you learn about temptation and the overcoming of it from the example of Christ?

SIXTH DAY: Read “Jesus Begins In Galilee” and from Matthew 4:19-25.

1. Why did Jesus preach first repentance then good news?
2. Why did he preach repentance without disciples and the good news only after he had disciples?
3. What do you discover from the reading of the call of the first disciples about Christian discipleship.
4. From the reading of Mt. 4:23-25, what would you say is meant by proclaiming “the good news of the kingdom”?

CHAPTER 6

THE TEACHER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

INTRODUCTION

For many of us the New Testament is a familiar field. We have grown accustomed to reading it and hearing it read. Perhaps we have grown too accustomed to its face to discover anything new, or make any rare find. Certainly our study of the Scriptures could be more rewarding if we could discover each passage anew, trying to view it as if seeing it for the first time, hearing it as if it had never before been told. We do see and hear much the same things, but we see and hear them as unique receptors. We need not so much to see more, but to see more clearly and penetratingly – we need not so much to hear more, but to hear more sharply and astutely.

The call of the first disciples is indeed a familiar field for students and readers of the New Testament. As a background for Matthew's presentation, we should note the accounts of this incident as found in John and Luke. In John, we discover that Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, and another person – presumably John, brother of James and the son of Zebedee – were the disciples of John the Baptist. This tells us that they have fulfilled the precondition of discipleship: repentance. They come to Jesus as disciples of John and as a result of his witness to Jesus. Once they experience Jesus, they want to share this experience with those close to them. They immediately become His witnesses. We discover here that true disciples become makers of disciples. If a Christian has never tried to bring another to Christ, perhaps the genuineness of his/her own discipleship is in question.

In the account given by Luke, Jesus deliberately enters into the lives of the first two disciples. Jesus is about His solitary work of proclaiming “the word of God” and “the crowd presses on him to hear.” At the same time Simon, the fisherman, and his brother Andrew with their two business partners, James and John, are busy at their work “washing their nets.” Jesus interrupts their work and seeks their assistance in His work. Jesus presses Simon and his boat into service in order to help Him deal with the pressing crowd.

This act of Jesus forces Simon and his brother to be involved with Jesus and hear Him. Here, there is not too much commitment involved. Jesus moves to personally impress these men. He knows what impresses fishermen – catching fish. He gives an order that requires obedience and confidence upon their part. *“They caught such a great number of fish that their nets were at the breaking point.” (Lk. 5:6)* By themselves they cannot handle the workload. They call their partners in the other boat to come join them. Simon is more than impressed – he is overwhelmed. He has moved from seeing Jesus as “Teacher” to experiencing him as “Lord,” and from seeing himself as a fisherman to experiencing himself as a “sinful man.” *“Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men.’” (Lk. 5:10)* Luke concludes, *“With that they brought their boats to land, left everything, and became his followers.” (Lk. 5:11)*

We note that all four evangelists confirm Simon to be the first among the disciples. All four evangelists suggest that Simon holds a unique position among the disciples of Jesus. He held this position, not because of his personal holiness, but because of choice on the part of Christ.

DEMANDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Regardless of what may have been the preliminary meetings between Jesus and the four fishermen, Jesus, at one particular moment, enters, quite personally, into their lives and invites the four of them to follow Him. The invitation, if accepted, places personal demands on all concerned. True Christian discipleship demands true detachment – a willingness to abandon immediately anything in order to follow Jesus.

From the moment they accepted the invitation, they were part of Jesus’ life; Jesus would be an indispensable part of their lives. Jesus would always be the Presence within their lives and they would always be present to Him. Christian discipleship demands presence.

Christian discipleship demands a particular quality of presence, one to the other. It creates more than the relationship of parent to child or teacher to student. A community is created in which there exists a mutual interdependence between persons involved. They form a union in which there are common interests and responsibilities. It is a community that becomes solidified in feelings and actions. Christian Community demands

solidarity with Christ.

It becomes obvious that Christian discipleship demands commitment. Since Christ invites others to share this same discipleship, Christian discipleship means community and solidarity with the Christian Community and commitment to the Christian Community. Such a union exists between Christ and His disciples that it is impossible to separate the Love of Christ – or devotion to Christ – from the love and devotion of the Christian Community.

The call of the first disciples has instructed us concerning Christian Discipleship in general. We know that Jesus is selective, but selection leaves freedom. One must choose to be chosen. Christ chooses His disciples, but the candidate must also choose Christ. The chosen must respond, *“I, too, choose you Jesus Christ, and I will daily follow you.”* The chosen says one *“I do”* and a lifetime of *“I wills!”*

THE TEACHER AND HIS DISCIPLES

As the reign of God consists in total submission to the Will of God, that Will must not only be revealed, but also, properly and fully understood. So Mark relates that after the four fishermen – Simon, Andrew, James and John – accepted the call to be disciples, *“Shortly afterward they came to Capernaum, and on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and began to teach. The people were spellbound by his teaching because he taught with authority, and not like the scribes.”* (Mk. 1:21-22) We note now it is “they” who come to Capernaum – however, it is “He” who teaches. As long as Jesus remains upon the earth, no disciple will teach – preach, yes! Proclaim the need for repentance and the presence of the kingdom of God – yes! But teach – no! They are disciples; their role is discipleship. They are to hear, listen, question, learn from the Master. One day they would be commissioned to teach – when they understand the entire message. Presently, they are students enrolled in the school of the Master, Jesus Christ.

After the call of the disciples, Matthew presents a general summary of Jesus’ activities: primarily, Jesus teaches; secondly, Jesus proclaims in word and deed the good news of the kingdom. Part of this proclamation includes the curing of every disease, illness, pain, paralysis, possession and lunacy.

The people being restored to fullness of physical, mental, spiritual health through the power of Jesus signifies the Presence of God in Jesus – an effect of God’s reign. It expresses the goodwill of God for all mankind. It teaches what God truly wills for us and intends to accomplish within us through Jesus Christ. We see what it truly means for God to reign in the fullness of His love.

Matthew records that Jesus attracted great crowds of people. To attract great crowds and to make true disciples is not the same thing. Matthew has already suggested that the crowds came because the news of a wonder-worker in Galilee “*traveled the length of Syria.*” It is one thing to come to Jesus because you desire to be cured of some affliction and another thing to come to Jesus because you want to be like Him. When a person becomes a disciple, it is his intention to become like the Master; for that reason the disciple spends as much time as possible with the Master.

The picture now presented by Matthew is one in which Jesus separates Himself from the crowd. He ascends a mountain, which only His true disciples ascend with Him. The crowd remains below. They are unwilling to go up higher with Jesus – to follow Him. In a word, the men are being separated from the boys. Those who follow Him up the mountain, Jesus will teach. They are His true disciples – they will become like Him. To them He explains the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.

What Matthew records between chapters five and seven has been called the “jewel” of his gospel account – popularly, it is known as the Sermon on the Mount. However, in reality, it is a compilation and compendium of the teachings of Jesus. It is more a statement of Christian Principles than a sermon. It is the “Magna Carta” of the Kingdom – the Law of Christian Discipleship. Nevertheless, many scholars suggest that the creation of this section of the Gospel was inspired by a famous sermon delivered by Jesus during His Galilean ministry, which profoundly impressed His disciples, and which Church tradition conserves in essence.

SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, which are announcements. Jesus proclaims the spiritual state of being true disciples. He begins with the word “Makarios,” which was a word used in the classical Greek to describe the state of the gods in contrast to the wretched state of

men. "Makarios" has been translated as "fortunate," "happy," "blessed." These Beatitudes appear in Matthew in such a way as to be applicable to a disciple of Jesus in every age and condition. Matthew presents these conditions of discipleship as spiritual and moral conditions – not so much as physical and economic ones as presented in Luke. For Matthew, true Christian Discipleship creates a unique type of human being, which implies a new spirit which produces good and rare fruit. Jesus proclaims the present condition of true discipleship to be a fortunate one – truly a blessed one, for the final rewards of discipleship are unsurpassed. Jesus enumerates the conditions produced by discipleship and their corresponding rewards.

The first Beatitude truly expresses the foundation of Christian Discipleship: humility. "*Blest are the poor in spirit*" describes that poverty of soul which is fully conscious of the impotence and emptiness of all human resources, and experiences a radical and ultimate need and desire for the presence and power of God. The "poor in spirit" truly experiences self as powerless before God and totally dependent upon God for existence. It is that spirit which the Old Testament called the "*spirit of anawim*" – the spirit of the "little ones" of this world who, because of the circumstances of life, can trust and depend upon God alone for support. The poor in spirit are those who are not only open to accomplish the Will of God, but who see the Will of God as the supreme good and goal of their life. Such a quality of soul not only makes them eligible for the kingdom of God, but it actually creates the reign of God on earth. The reign of God consists precisely of such persons. Such souls, in the face of moral evil in this world, spiritually suffer. They mourn over the rejection of God's will. They experience real anguish in the face of unrepentant sin. They know such evil cannot but bring sorrow to people and the nation.

Jesus says, "*Blest too are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled.*" (Mt. 5:4) This blessing comes not because of the state of sorrow, but because of the reason for the sorrow. It is pain experienced by those who love God and the good of their neighbor. It follows that such souls truly experience a real hunger and thirst that God's Will be accomplished in their own lives and within the lives of others. It is a hunger and thirst of the soul for true holiness. When such souls experience their own lack of conformity to the Will of God, they experience a true emptiness of spirit and restlessness. There is a void and hunger, which only the perfect conformity to God's Will can fill and satisfy. To such souls, Jesus promises that they will not sorrow,

hunger and thirst in vain – they shall experience true holiness and the fullness of God's Saving Power.

In the face of such earthly evils – which cause sorrow of soul and leave within it a hunger and thirst for God's Will – Jesus teaches the way to peace of heart. "*Learn of me,*" he says, "*for I am meek and humble of heart.*" The meek person is one who will wait on the Lord. The meek person is not a weak person, but a person of controlled power who does not, through inordinate zeal and impetuosity, impede the saving Will of God. Jesus teaches Christian meekness when he says, "*You have heard the commandment, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'* *But what I say to you is offer no resistance to injury. When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other.*" (Mt. 5:38-39) Obviously, such meekness is not weakness, but an exercise of the greatest strength of will.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUE DISCIPLESHIP

In a sense, we can say that spiritual suffering, thirst and hunger, meekness of spirit are the passive characteristics of the poor in spirit – the true disciples of Jesus – whereas mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking and perseverance in holiness are the more active and positive characteristics of true discipleship.

The spirit of mercy and compassion moves the soul to identify completely in the suffering of others. The merciful does not remain outside the sufferings of others but enters into the suffering and seeks to bring solace and ease. Mercy is characterized in Matthew as the ability to give to others and to forgive others. It is mercy that best explains the Incarnation of God's Son. In Jesus, God comes and stands in our shoes, assumes our nature and suffers the pain of our sins that we might be healed. The exercise of mercy creates a capacity within the human spirit to receive Divine Mercy. Those who are merciful in this world will experience the Mercy of God in their lives.

The Pharisees were most concerned about external purity – ritual purity. Jesus taught that true impurity comes from the hearts of men – which were the true sources of evil, thoughts and desires. When these thoughts and desires clothed themselves in human will power, man accomplished evil on earth. True purity was a matter of heart. Therefore, it was truly a matter of thought and desire. Purity of heart is found in singleness of purpose,

thought and intention. That heart is completely pure which seeks first and only that God's will be done on earth as in heaven.

Before the Lord enters a human life, he first speaks "Peace!" to its troubled waters. The environment in which God dwells and works is "Shalom." "Shalom" is literally "wholeness." Shalom is the perfect blessing as it expresses that perfect state of being in which all things are as they should be – harmony exists within all things. "Shalom" most signifies the inner life of God. For this reason, those who are the makers of "Shalom" in this world and seek to establish and conserve it – in their lives and in the lives of others – are rightly recognized to be the true children of the heavenly Father. They are the "sons of God."

The Beatitudes begin and end by identifying who is in the reign of God – of whom it consists. It consists of those who are poor in spirit and who persevere in this spirit despite persecution in the world. Those souls who continue to accomplish the Will of God despite the persecutions, the insults, the slanders of evil people, are truly holy people. It is they who establish God's reign on earth and who will share in the fullness of its joys. The true disciples of Jesus are men and women of the spirit – men and women whose spirits are totally submissive to the Will of God and are directed and empowered in all their actions by the Spirit of God. Such men and women are willing to endure suffering, deprivation and persecution to cling to the Will of God and persevere in doing good in the face of evil. To these disciples, the Master says, *"Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven; they persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way."* (Mt. 5:12)

THE TEACHER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

SCRIPTURE MEDITATION AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“DO NOT THINK THAT I HAVE COME TO ABOLISH THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS. I HAVE COME, NOT TO ABOLISH THEM, BUT TO FULFILL THEM.” (MT. 5:17)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction and from John 1:35-51.

1. What does the fact that Andrew and John were first disciples of John the Baptist teach us?
2. How were they led to Jesus?
3. What was their reaction to the discovery of Jesus?
4. What does this teach you about Christian Discipleship?

SECOND DAY: Read from Luke 5:1-11.

1. What were the first two psychological steps taken by Jesus to involve Simon and Andrew in His mission?
2. What was the response being asked of Simon and Andrew?
3. How did this entire incident affect Simon?
4. What do you learn from this incident about Christian Discipleship?

THIRD DAY: Read “Demands Of Discipleship,” and from Luke 9:23-27 and 51-62.

1. What do you see to be the first demand of discipleship?
2. What is meant by “presence” in Christian Discipleship?

3. What is meant by Christian solidarity?
4. How would you describe the price of Christian Discipleship?

FOURTH DAY: Read “The Teacher And His Disciples” and John 3:1-19.

1. Why did Jesus alone teach?
2. When would the disciples be permitted to teach?
3. What did the cures teach about the kingdom of God?
4. What do you learn from the incident between the two teachers, Jesus and Nicodemus?

FIFTH DAY: Read “Sermon On The Mount” and from Matthew 5:1-20.

1. How would you describe the Beatitudes?
2. How does Matthew make them applicable to every Christian?
3. What do you understand by “poor in spirit”?
4. Why could this be said to be the foundation of Christian Discipleship?

SIXTH DAY: Read “The Characteristics of True Discipleship” and from Matthew 5:21-48.

1. Why does the quality of “mercy” best explain the Incarnation of God’s Son?
2. What does purity of heart mean to you?
3. Why are “peacemakers” called the “sons of God”?
4. What do you discover to be the key to the fulfillment of Christian Discipleship and its rigorous demands?

CHAPTER 7

LITTLE LESS THAN ANGELS

INTRODUCTION

God appeared to Moses in the desert at Horeb. There He identified Himself as *"I AM WHO AM!"* " . . . *This is my name forever; this is my title for all generations.*" (Ex. 3:14,15) It is held that "Yahweh" is but the first part of the name and the full name is "Yahweh-aser-yihweh" which means, "He brings into being whatever comes into being." This divine revelation reveals the identity of God. He is the Existant One who creates all things. Yahweh is the power and force of the universe. In Him, all things depend for their existence; in Him, all things continue in existence, Yahweh is Fullness of Being – Infinite Shalom.

This revelation identifies God as a Personal Being, who Wills to communicate Self. Yahweh Wills to communicate with His creation; He enters into a personal relationship with human persons. It is the quality of God's communication with people which best identifies the Divine character. John the Evangelist expressed it in three words, *"YAHWEH IS LOVE!"* Three words express it, but an infinity of words could not explain it.

That day at Horeb, God committed Himself to an on-going personal relationship with human beings that would one day ultimately express itself in God becoming man, in Jesus, and redeeming the world through the life and death of Jesus. In Jesus, Divine Love incarnated Itself. The acts of Jesus define true love and show to people the Way to true life – eternal life in God.

There is a realm of the spirit and there is a realm of the flesh. Human existence encompasses both realms. Paul teaches that we begin in the flesh as children and descendants of Adam, but we ought to end in the spirit as disciples and heirs at Christ, *"Take note, the spiritual was not first; first came the natural and after that the spiritual. The first man was of earth, formed from dust, the second is from heaven. Earthly men are like the man of earth, heavenly men are like the man of heaven. Just as we resemble the man from earth, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven."* (1Cor. 15:46-49)

earth, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” (ICor. 15:46-49) Paul teaches us that Jesus is the “*man of heaven*” and the Source of the life-giving spirit. As disciples, we are called to bear on earth “*the likeness of the man from heaven.*”

Jesus, “the man of heaven,” ascends the mountain and He calls disciples to follow Him. The disciples separate themselves from the crowd to which they previously belonged, and they ascend the mountain behind Jesus. The crowd, itself, remains below with Adam. They choose to remain earth people. Theirs will be the reign of the senses, passions, physical appetites.

LESS THAN AN ANGEL

When we speak of becoming spiritual beings, let us keep one fact in mind: God became man. In Jesus Christ, God remains forever human. A human being can be “filled with enduring love” and glorify God. We do not become less of a human being in coming to Christ and to holiness.

When people accept the call to discipleship, they must separate from the crowd and ascend the mountain after Jesus. They submit themselves to the reign of God, which begins in their human spirit – infused and empowered with the Holy Spirit. They cannot cease to be human beings. To seek to live a pure spiritual life in a human body is more than God intended for us or gave the power and grace to be. The psalmist sang, “*What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor.*” (Ps 8:5-6) We have been created less than angels, and there we must be contented to stand.

When Jesus calls a disciple out from the crowd, the person needs to be re-orientated as to goals, the use of time and energy. Jesus seeks to properly orientate his disciples. Life’s time and human energy are premium qualities not to be imprudently used. So Jesus teaches, “*Remember, where your treasure is, there your heart is also.*” (Mt. 5:21) The soul is with the heart. What fills the heart possesses the soul. Where your heart is, you will discover the energy of your soul invested.

LAMP OF TRUTH

Jesus calls to earthly men and women, "*Come follow me!*" It is an invitation to become spiritual people and to share in the fullness of redemption. Most of the people called experience themselves more as earthly creatures, rather than spiritual beings. As spiritual beings, we possess a capacity to experience God. We have our spiritual limitations, but these are rarely reached. More often than not, the spiritual capability remains more or less undeveloped within people. Much about God is never known because we are not open to the experience of knowing God – our spiritual faculties are often shut down.

Jesus teaches His disciples, "*You are the light of the world . . . your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father.*" (Mt 5:14,16) This demands that we know divine truth and that this truth must be so integrated into our souls that our human behavior reflects divine truth. Then we become a lamp of truth – a beacon of light in a darkened place. Of course, in order to do all this, the human spirit must become a proper receptor for divine truth.

Jesus teaches that if we perceive things falsely and erroneously, our spirits are in darkness. People without truth become lamps without lights, leading the blind, and none of them knows where the pit is, or the edge of the cliff.

The Scriptures insist that the invisible realities of God can be known by way of analogy, to a degree, through studying creation. Today, we are not so much in darkness concerning the nature of God, as we are in darkness about our own human nature – particularly the human spirit. If the created and visible world can aid mankind in knowing the uncreated, invisible God, then certainly this same created and visible world can assist us in knowing and understanding the created but invisible world of the human spirit by the sane process of analogy.

Some believe that by understanding life at its most primitive source, we will best understand life in its highest form of evolution. Science discovered an amazing interdependence of all created elements in the world. Each element of the created universe is positively woven from all the others. Also, "the world does appear to be held together from above and not below."

The same forces and powers of nature work in man as in the rest of created nature. Man is subject to its same laws. However, man is unique. He possesses conscious awareness and can choose – or not choose – to live in harmony with the laws of nature. Man's power does not make him independent, but rather, morally responsible to observe and preserve the laws of nature.

MAN AND EARTH

Creation is a veritable cocoon of life which sacrifices itself so that life – and life more abundantly – may come to be; and not only life more abundantly, but a greater form of life – a more perfected form of life. Nature has moved from energized matter to the production of biological life. It has moved from the biological level to supporting spiritualized beings. It has been noted that the earth moves, seemingly by a superior guidance, towards its spiritualization. The earth grows old and her energy is being exhausted as she moves forward to her final end: spiritualization.

Christians are often inclined to confine Christ within a small circumference. Perhaps we are content to limit Christ within a dimension that leaves us comfortable as it also limits our Christian Commitment. We often see only the Christ of the Cross, risen from the dead – our personal Savior. The Fourth Gospel reveals the Cosmic Christ. The whole world is dependent upon Christ. He is the Savior of the World and all the sons of God are apparently involved in this Divine Salvific Enterprise. As Paul observes, *“Indeed, the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God.” (Rm. 8:19)*

Only two persons truly realize the potential power in the single human personality – Christ and Satan. Between Christ and Satan, there is cosmic conflict. The souls of individual men and women are essential both to Christ and to Satan for victory. People must understand the power of the human spirit. Christ labors to bring the potential power of each human being into fullness of activity for it is a powerful means to produce the glorious plan of God for creation. Satan, likewise, labors. He strives to destroy the spiritual potentiality of the human race by the destruction of the human life in embryo – in its budding potential. When this is not possible, he then seeks to retard personality development. He seeks to turn the spiritual powers of the human soul in upon itself and negate its effects in the world. However, when strong personalities appear on earth

who powerfully radiate spiritual power – as did Jesus – he seeks to seduce these persons and pervert and divert their energy into destructive channels.

CHRISTIAN HOLINESS

Jesus calls His disciples to come up the mountain, sit at His feet, look into His eyes and open their hearts to receive the engrafted Word. To them, he explains the secrets of the kingdom.

Jesus warns His disciples, *“I tell you, unless your holiness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of God.”* (Mt. 5:20) Jesus shows clearly what He means by the holiness of the Pharisees and the surpassing holiness of the disciples. He refers to the disciples as being both the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In these colorful images, two things are being emphasized: Discipleship is primarily a matter of the spirit – of purity of heart; it concerns itself with thought and intention. Also, a disciple produces good and holy deeds that enrich the lives of others. These deeds give glory to God, as such deeds truly manifest God’s power and presence in the world.

In order to press home the point that the internal disposition of people is important in the eyes of God, Jesus offers six examples by way of illustration. All are concerned with human relationships. Nothing is more essential to discipleship than the attitude, the feelings and the behavior of a disciple towards other persons. With these six examples, Jesus demonstrates what He means by fulfilling the Law and also what He requires of His disciples in order to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.”

We know that the scribes and the Pharisees prided themselves upon external conformity to the Law. If their external behavior was in no way contradictory to the letter of the Law and its traditional interpretation, they knew themselves to be holy and religious men. We know also that civil law deals primarily with overt acts. People who transgress these laws are discernible criminals. They will suffer the penalty of their crime if caught and convicted. Jesus speaks of this, but He goes on to say that many who appear innocent before the law and in the public eye will be found guilty in God’s eyes. He points out that there is a law against murder and the public abuse of another person, but He also adds that harboring anger in the heart will not go unpunished. It is anger that breeds murder – it is of the spirit of

murder. Also, if a person holds another human being in contempt, Jesus holds this to be a deadly spirit – for this, *“He risks the fires of Gehenna.”*

Jesus teaches that if we are willfully out of harmony with others, we are out of harmony with God. If we have closed our hearts and remain unrepentant of the injury we have caused them, we will find no acceptance at the altar of God. An unreconciled brother means an unreconciled God, and no amount of liturgical acts can change the fact. A disciple must make reconciliation an urgent priority.

Jesus turns His attention to the ever-popular subject of sexual relationships. He speaks on adultery. Jesus places lustful desires in the same category as adultery. To look at a woman as an object of lust is to violate the respect due a human person. Let us remember that this does not mean a temptation to adultery. Temptations in themselves are not sinful – they are invitations to sin. For the thought to be sinful, the will must enter into the act. With some harsh language and strong metaphors, Jesus emphasizes the need to avoid those things that lead one into such sins – looking and touching, for example.

With this subject still in mind, Jesus turns to the question of divorce. The Lord teaches that to divorce one’s wife is to place an act that exposes her to remarriage. The Lord refers to this as adultery and places the guilt of the sin upon the one who causes the situation and the one who takes advantage of it.

Jesus forbids His disciples to follow the common practice of the time, of taking oaths. Oaths imply a lack of trust and a lack of respect in the word of another. The sincerity and mutual respect that must characterize the disciples make a simple “yes” or a simple “no” a sacred expression of truth.

Jesus rejects the customary principles of self-defense and self-preservation. Evil must not be met with evil. Physical violence is to be suffered, *“Offer no resistance to injury. When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other.”* (Mt. 5:39) We find a proper interpretation of this verse in John, when Jesus replied to the soldier who gave him *“a sharp blow on the face”*: *“If I said anything wrong produce the evidence, but if I spoke the truth why hit me?”* (Jn. 18:23) Jesus did not literally turn the other cheek. He did speak out against violence and injustice, and he teaches His disciples that violence in any form is alien to discipleship.

In five of the cases illustrated, Jesus teaches the way of discipleship with, *"But what I say to you is . . ."* However, in the six illustrations, there is a command, *"You have heard the commandment, 'You shall love your countryman but hate your enemy.' My command to you is: love your enemies, pray for your persecutors."* (Mt. 5:43) Many agree that this command "love your enemies" is the most unique saying of Jesus. It has no parallel in the Old Testament nor in Jewish literature of the time. The fulfillment of this command demonstrates that a disciple is a child of the heavenly Father.

Christ firmly teaches that hatred and all the evil fruits it produces excludes one from the kingdom of God. He confirms – in word and deed – that the power called "love" creates Christians, establishes the reign of God, and ultimately causes the redemption of the entire universe. Paul powerfully teaches that no greater power than love exists in the world and that, in the eyes of heaven, there is no substitute for love. Only the people who live in love abide in God.

LITTLE LESS THAN ANGELS

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“REMEMBER, WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS. THERE YOUR HEART IS ALSO.” (MT. 6:21)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction and from ICor. 15:40-49 and Phil. 3:18-21.

1. How is God identified in divine revelation?
2. Why do we say God is both personal and loving?
3. What do you understand by the realm of the spirit and the realm of the flesh?
4. What does it mean for you to remain with “the crowd”?

SECOND DAY: Read “Less Than An Angel” and Psalm 8.

1. What do we learn about human holiness from the Incarnation of God the Son?
2. What does it mean to be “holy but human”?
3. What does it mean for man to be less than the angels?
4. How do we know where our heart really is?

THIRD DAY: Read “Lamp Of Truth,” Wisdom 13:1-S and Mt. 6.19-25.

1. How does a disciple become a Lamp of Truth?
2. What do you understand by “if your light is darkness, how deep will the darkness be?”
3. According to the scriptures, what can we learn about God from nature?
4. What can nature teach us about the human soul?

FOURTH DAY: Read "Man And Earth," Rm. 8:19-22 and Col. 1:15-20.

1. Toward what does the evolution of life on earth tend?
2. What do we learn about creation from Rm. 8:19-20?
3. What do you understand by the cosmic dimensions of Christ?
4. What does Colossians tell us about Christ's relationship to the earth?

FIFTH DAY: Read "Christian Holiness" and review Chapter 5 in Matthew.

1. How does the holiness of the disciples of Jesus differ from the holiness of the Pharisees?
2. What would you say is one of the most essential dimensions in Christian Spirituality?
3. How would you describe the power of hate in the world?
4. How would you describe the power of love?

SIXTH DAY: Read Chapter 6 in Matthew.

1. What does Matthew 6:1 teach you?
2. What do you learn from the teaching on prayer?
3. What does being worried and anxious about material goods imply?
4. What do you understand by Mt. 6:34?

CHAPTER 8

RABBONI

INTRODUCTION

As our understanding of Christian Discipleship grows, our commitment to Christ should deepen. As the fullness of the divine plan unfolds before the eyes of faith, so too unfolds the depths of Christian Discipleship. Discipleship calls us to repentance, to faith in Jesus Christ, and to incorporation into Jesus through Christian Baptism. It is here that discipleship begins, not where it ends.

We understand that discipleship demands “mission” – evangelism. We are called to proclaim, prudently, to family, friends and strangers, the grace of repentance and to announce sagaciously the Gospel – the divine plan of salvation in Jesus Christ, which embraces all mankind. A disciple is a maker of disciples – bringing others to discover the joy of personal salvation in Jesus Christ. We know that discipleship demands a personal commitment to the person of Jesus on our part and, likewise, a commitment of Jesus to us. We will always be in His Presence and a part of His life. A disciple should remain consciously aware of the Presence of Christ in whose power and grace a Christian lives and acts. Such commitment and presence demands that a disciple be solidly with Christ. Disciples step deliberately into the footsteps of Jesus.

In the beginning, Jesus enters into the boat of our lives, as in the case of Peter and Andrew. Perhaps we would like to limit discipleship to that saving moment. Having Christ fit into our lives could be a very comfortable Christianity. However, the disciples brought their boats to shore. There they left them, so that they could be in the life of Jesus Christ.

Once Jesus said to His disciples, *“You address me as ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’ and fittingly enough, for that is what I am . . . What I just did was to give you an example: as I have done, so you must do.”* (Jn. 13:13,15) The expression “What I just did” refers to the death of Jesus, which was symbolically expressed through the washing of the disciples’ feet. Jesus teaches His disciples that they must also lay down their lives as He has done.

This particular aspect of discipleship is well clarified in the other gospel accounts. We read in Matthew, *"He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me."* (Mt. 10:38) Jesus implies that "taking up the cross" is the daily sacrifice of self demanded by discipleship – "denying his very self." He goes on to teach, *"He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin, whereas he who brings himself to nought for me discovers who he is."* (Mt. 10:39)

Luke states clearly the price of discipleship when he quotes Jesus as saying, *"In the same way, none of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his possessions."* (Lk. 14:33) Jesus demands radical detachment from things, people and self. Is the price of discipleship too high? The words of Jesus make clear what the results will be, both for accepting discipleship and rejecting it, *"Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* (Mt. 16:25) *"He who seeks only himself brings himself to ruin (Judas is a case in point), whereas he who brings himself to nought for me discovers who he is."* (Mt. 10:39)

Discipleship involves one personally in the life and mission of Jesus. Through baptism, a disciple becomes an integral part of the Body of Christ. Because of their intimate relationship with Christ, His disciples truly augment the power of Christ's body in the universe. The disciple in Christ is a principle of unification – a maker of peace and a powerful force in the spiritual transformation of other persons. When all is said and done we, too, have only two choices set before us: we are for Christ or we are against Christ – it is Christ or the Antichrist. *"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters."* (Lk. 11:23)

KNOWLEDGE AND SALVATION

Jesus once revealed to St. Teresa of Avila, *"All the ills of the world befall it from not clearly understanding the truths of the Scripture . . ."* Jesus went on to say, *"Do you know what truly loving me means? It means understanding that everything that displeases me is a lie."* These thoughts re-emphasize the important relationship between salvation and knowledge.

Without the light of Divine revelation, we cannot know the truth about our human nature and its destiny. We cannot discover the path to Life. If we are mistaken about ourselves and our final goal, evil will certainly befall us.

The evangelist John teaches us that we must be rooted in the teachings of Christ if we are to possess God. A disciple has a moral obligation to become "rooted" in Christ. It is of the essence of discipleship.

As children, we were given the truth that properly orientated us towards ourselves and our lives on earth. We understand human nature to be both physical and spiritual. Because we are spiritual by nature, we possess the power to know, understand and reason – we possess the power to make choices – we have freedom of will. For our behavior to be classified as a human act, it must be performed both knowingly and willfully. We act humanly when we know what we are doing and we freely will to do it. Only such acts have moral responsibility – they can be morally good or evil. Knowing and willing are the essences of human behavior.

CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES

Matthew presents the essential teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Here a disciple discovers the working principles of Christian Life. There is an obligation to be rooted in them. Unless we grasp the principles, we can never act with religious maturity, with certitude and serenity.

Matthew presents the Christian doctrine in a context in which it is contrasted with the religious philosophy of the Pharisees and the Scribes of their party. Luke presents the same doctrine without any such reference. Matthew's method enables him to highlight the truth that the human spirit is the true source of moral good and moral evil. The Scripture says, "*A good man produces good from the good in his heart; an evil man produces evil out of his store of evil.*" (Lk. 6:45)

The Pharisees and the Scribes were religious people. They intended to accomplish the Will of God. They determined that the written Scriptures expressed the Will of God. They deduced that in the external observations of the laws of God, they strictly fulfilled the Will of God. Therefore, they were holy and religious people. They were worthy to enter into liturgical union with God for they remained pure and uncontaminated – they remained "separated" from sinful persons, places and things. Jesus teaches that the Pharisees and the Scribes have not gone deep enough. God desires not only liturgical union in which mankind properly worships Him but, more importantly, personal union with mankind. This desired union is essentially spiritual.

Jesus moves the focus of true religious behavior from external behavior to internal disposition. True religion is essentially a matter of heart. This does not imply that good works and deeds are not essential to true religion. However, the emphasis is upon the heart; it is the motivation of the heart that makes an act objectively religious and acceptable to God or determines an act to be hypocritical and unacceptable to God.

REWARDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Matthew understands human nature too well to underestimate the rewards of discipleship. However, the rewards of discipleship depend upon the motivations of the heart. In Matthew's time, three important external works of religion were: giving alms to the poor, praying, and fasting. It is Jesus' intention that His disciples do not give alms, pray and fast in the same manner as the disciples of the Pharisees.

Jesus warns His disciples that if selfishness motivates their religious acts, self would have to find its own reward. When religious acts are accomplished for self-gratification or the esteem of others, there will be no heavenly reward. Jesus is not against our good works being seen – “Let your light shine!” – but he is against them being done merely to be seen by others so that they will esteem us. Jesus calls people who do religious deeds for selfish motives “*hypocrites*.” They give their alms to the poor amidst great public display. Our Lord says that there were those who made sure, at times of prayer, to be standing in public places, so there would be no doubt as to their sanctity. Jesus notes that many desired that their heroism be noticed. They walked the streets like sad-faced flowers out of water and, indeed, all within the household knew when father fasted – even the cat moved with caution.

All these acts receive their true nature from their motivation. On the surface they appear to be religious acts – deeds done for the honor and glory of God – but they are secretly done for selfish motives – even, at times, unconsciously so. Jesus teaches that such motivation turns these deeds into hypocritical acts unacceptable to God.

CHRISTIAN PRAYER

Matthew enumerates three acts of religion and He places prayer between

alms-giving and fasting. Prayer is at the heart of religious acts. Prayer is to the spirit as air is to the body. Prayer is the breath of the spirit – the sign and measure of its supernatural life. In prayer, a divine environment of interpersonal communication between God and the human spirit is created. The spirit that ceases to pray creates a spiritual vacuum in which supernatural life will soon crumble. Teresa of Avila writes, *“There is only one way to find God and that is by prayer.”*

Jesus is our perfect Teacher and He taught in both words and deeds. Prayer permeated the life of Jesus. *“Then he went out to the mountain to pray, spending the night in communion with God.” (Lk. 6:12)* He gave a constant example of prayer. Jesus admonished and encouraged the disciples to pray. The disciples were encouraged to pray with urgency and assurance. Their confidence was to rest upon their being children of the heavenly Father.

Jesus gave this good reason to pray, *“Pray constantly for the strength to escape whatever is in prospect, and to stand secure before the Son of Man.” (Lk. 21:36)* There was a sick woman once whom no one could help. One day she saw Jesus and said within herself, *“If I but touch the hem of his garment, I will be saved.”* Jesus said, *“Someone touched me; I know that power has gone forth from me.” (Lk. 8:46)* Reaching out in prayer to touch Jesus never leaves a disciple the same.

After all this example and teaching, the disciples finally got around to asking Him to teach them to pray. Our Lord taught them the “Our Father.” Matthew inserted the Lord’s Prayer – the supreme example of Christian prayer – into the Sermon on the Mount. Luke’s version is shorter; it is delivered in a context of prayer. Matthew presents it as a teaching on prayer. Many scholars believe that Luke presents the primitive version of the prayer while Matthew, who conserves the essential elements of the prayer, extends it in order to clarify and illuminate the essential petitions of the prayer. In Matthew, it is presented as the perfect prayer of seven petitions.

A ROCK FOUNDATION

As the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount come to a close, we are reminded of our commission to love others. Jesus advises, *“If you want to*

avoid judgment, stop passing judgment. Your verdict on others will be the verdict passed on you. The measure with which you measure will be used to measure you.” (Mt. 7:1-3)

As Christians, we are certainly expected and obliged to make value judgments upon human conduct – ours and others. We may even be obliged to give external correction. However, we must keep in mind that there is a difference between reproving and correcting another person and condemning them. The condemnation is a moral judgment upon the person; it is often followed by rejection and contempt. We are really out of order when we do such and since we cannot read the hearts of others, our judgment is rash – sinful. The Lord suggests that if we were more consciously aware of the evil within our own hearts – the selfishness of our own motivations and our own personal hypocrisy – we would be so overwhelmed with repentance and the need for God’s merciful love that everyone else would look good in comparison. At least we would experience sympathy and understanding for the weakness of other human beings.

Jesus suggests that we should at least be guided in our dealing with others by the golden rule, which even guided pagans as far back as Herodotus in the 5th century B.C., *“Treat others the way you would have them treat you: this sums up the law and the prophets.”* We note that it may sum up the law and the prophets, but it does not sum up the law and spirit of Christianity. The Spirit of Christ demands much more. We find our Golden Rule recorded in John, Chapter 15 verse 12: *“This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.”* This is the rule that narrows the gate to live, and leaves wide the path to destruction.

For the disciples, Jesus is always “Rabboni” – “My Teacher.” A disciple cannot have two teachers. How well Jesus knew others would come in His name and seek to replace Him and His doctrine. He warned His disciples, “Be on your guard against false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but underneath are wolves on the prowl.” (Mt. 7:15) This danger is real enough, and reason enough, to be grounded in the doctrine of Jesus. Jesus is the Teacher of Holiness. If we do not know His teachings, we will be unable to distinguish the sheep from the wolves, the truth from the lie, the wheat from the weeds.

It is one thing to know truth. It is another thing to live truth. If a disciple has been enlightened and yet fails to live the life of discipleship by

disciple has been enlightened and yet fails to live the life of discipleship by rejecting the command to love others as Jesus taught, Jesus warns of serious spiritual consequences for the believer. We can be a member of the Church, involved in Christian Ministry and, in the end, be condemned and rejected by Christ because our Christianity was truly a façade – a social cover.

When the disciple does hear and puts into practice the command of love, he experiences salvation. The daily demands of Christian Love call forth the highest faculties of the human soul. In the constant daily exercise of spiritual power demanded by love, the human personality grows and comes to maturity in Christ. When a life is rooted in the doctrine of Christ – draws its nourishment, strength and direction from His teachings – it is firmly established and constructed. It will endure whatever comes, and be victorious.

The Sermon on the Mount concludes with these words, *“Anyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like the wise man who built his house on rock. When the rainy season set in, the torrents came and the winds blew and buffeted his house. It did not collapse; it had been solidly set on rock.”* (Mt. 24-25.)

It was said that Jesus left the crowds spellbound by His teachings because “ . . . he taught with authority and not like their scribes.” (Mt. 7:29) However, spells have a way of wearing away . . .

RABBONI

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“ANYONE WHO HEARS MY WORDS AND PUTS THEM INTO PRACTICE IS LIKE THE WISE MAN WHO BUILT HIS HOUSE ON ROCK.” (MT. 7:24)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, John 13:13-17 and Luke 14:25-35.

1. What is meant by discipleship demands “mission”?
2. What is the difference between Jesus being in your life and you being in the life of Jesus?
3. What do you understand by the “daily” cross of discipleship?
4. What, in your opinion, is the price and worth of discipleship?

SECOND DAY: Read “Knowledge And Salvation,” and from John 1:1-13.

1. Why is knowledge necessary for salvation?
2. According to John, what is the importance of being rooted in the teachings of Christ?
3. How would you describe the nature and destiny of man?
4. Define and explain what is meant by a true human act?

THIRD DAY: Read “Christian Principles,” and from Luke 6:17-49.

1. What do you see to be the relationship between Christian principles and Christian maturity?
2. What do you understand by Luke 6:45?
3. How does Christian morality differ from the morality of the Pharisees?

4. Which do you consider to be the most important Christian Principle and what does it teach you?

FOURTH DAY: Read “Rewards of Discipleship” and from Mt. 6:1-8; 16-18.

1. What determines the nature of our reward for the good deeds done?
2. What does it mean for our religious works to be hypocritical?
3. What is the Christian Principle to guide you in doing good works?
4. What does this teaching reveal to you about your own good works?

FIFTH DAY: Read “Christian Prayer,” Matthew 6:8-14; 7:7-11; and Luke 11:1-13.

1. How would you describe and account for the difference in the “Our Father” in Matthew and Luke?
2. What do you learn about prayer from the “Our Father”?
3. What is the importance of forgiveness and its relationship to prayer?
4. What does the example of Jesus teach you about the importance of prayer?

SIXTH DAY: Read “A Rock Foundation,” Matthew 7:1-29.

1. What does Matthew 7:1-3 teach you?
2. What is the difference between making a value judgment on the deed done and a moral judgment upon the person?
3. What is the difference between the natural and the Christian “Golden Rule”?
4. What does it mean to you to call Jesus “Rabboni” – “My Teacher”?

CHAPTER 9

IN THE FIELD WITH JESUS

INTRODUCTION

Jesus “*proclaimed the good news of the kingdom*” (Mt. 4:23) in both word and deed. The reign of God had come in Jesus and people experienced the power of the heavenly kingdom, which healed their sick bodies, minds and spirits. As a result of this ministry, we see great crowds coming to Jesus. Matthew goes on to relate, “*When he saw the crowds he went up on the mountainside. After he had sat down his disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them . . .*” (Mt. 5:1-2) Jesus teaches His disciples the spirit of Christian Discipleship. He highlights the essential elements of its spirit. He stresses how vital the understanding and the practice of these teachings are to one’s personal salvation. He talks of the disciple who gains knowledge – perhaps becomes a real theologian – but does not make these teachings part of his own personality by practicing them daily. Jesus compares such a disciple to the man who builds his house upon sand. The construction may be lovely and the edifice impressive, but it lacks a solid foundation. The person may appear to be a good, committed Christian, but the trials and temptations of life reveal reality. He never invested his heart in Jesus, nor became “rooted in the teaching of Christ.” The person who fails to walk in the spirit of Christ is not truly committed to Christ.

When the day of final judgment comes, Jesus warns, “*Then I will declare to them solemnly, ‘I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!’*” (Mt. 7:23) “Evildoers” are not only the people who commit overt acts of evil, but are also the people who, for selfish reasons, refuse or neglect to do good. To do good implies a positive act, where evil is negative – a lack of doing good. To do nothing can certainly be morally evil; it can be the most evil of acts. Many Christians are truly doers of evil because they do so little good. It is better to destroy our illusion about “evildoers” than risk – on some awful, eternal day – hearing from the lips of Jesus, “I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!”

A vital relationship exists between the mission of Jesus to proclaim the

Good News to the great crowds which followed Him and the calling of the disciples up the mountain. Matthew informs us that, when Jesus saw the great crowds, He called His disciples up the mountain and there, upon the mountainside, He instructed them as Yahweh had instructed Moses. When Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, saw the great burden of leadership put upon his son-in-law, he advised him to prudently fulfill his vocation. He encouraged him to choose carefully from among the Israelites good and trustworthy men to assist him in his task of governing this great body of people, *"The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone."* (Ex. 18:18)

This same prudent spirit guides Jesus. He realizes, humanly speaking, the impossibility for Himself alone to proclaim the Good News to *"the great crowd."* Prudence is seeing the goal before oneself and choosing the proper means to reach it. Calling the disciples up the mountain was an act of prudence on the part of Jesus. There was no turning of the back upon the crowd or rejecting them. Jesus prudently chooses the best means available to Him to fulfill His saving mission. By making people His disciples, He multiplies Himself. Through this means, He could continue His mission on earth when His own allotted time on earth ended. His work and mission must go on in time within the human situation and in an incarnational way.

It is one thing to teach the theory of a science, it is another thing to put the theory into practice. We seldom fully understand the problems involved in bringing a good plan or idea into reality. Experience can be the best teacher; it is *"in the field"* that we discover those built-in and external oppositions and are then able to bring a project to its successful conclusion.

FIELD EXPERIENCE

Jesus takes His disciples up the mountain and holds class on the mountainside. There, He explains the theory of discipleship, what is involved and its end results. When class is terminated, Jesus brings the disciples down the mountain and back into the great crowd for their field experience. Now they will learn from their Master in action – from His instructions and responses to other people, from what He does for them, from the way He handles personal situations, and from those trials and temptations in which He will be involved as a result of this ministry. The disciples will discover that the success of the mission depends not only on what is said and done but, even more, on what one is and what one becomes within the ministry.

Jesus explains the holiness in which a disciple must persevere in order to remain in God's reign. No earthly standard – be it secular or religious – can measure the holiness for discipleship. There is one standard for holiness for all Christian Disciples – it is the same for each. Nevertheless, this standard has infinite possibilities. Speaking plainly, Jesus says, *"In a word, you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."* (Mt. 5:48) Jesus centered upon one aspect of divine perfection; in this one aspect, a disciple must seek to imitate the heavenly Father perfectly. By so doing, a disciple will be "made perfect" in the eyes of Jesus. This one aspect is the unconditional love of the heavenly Father for all mankind. Therefore, a spirit of unconditional love is the essence of Christian Discipleship – it causes God's reign. In the human heart where love reigns supreme, God reigns supremely.

As agape-love is a creative and active power, it is best understood in action and through personal experience. There comes a time when we have to stop hearing sermons and start seeing sermons – even start being the sermon if the message is to be understood. Jesus, as humanity's Teacher, teaches us how to love with the Father's Love through the examples and episodes of His earthly life and within His public ministry. His examples show the disciples the way to achieve perfection of heart. As Matthew narrates these examples, we see that Jesus teaches with authority but that He heals with Love.

As Matthew's narrative unfolds, we would be wise to look upon ourselves as students and beginners in the Christian spirit and to observe closely the behavior of Jesus, and seek to understand the truths taught within the concrete deeds of His life. We need to see and understand these practical applications of Christian principles within the circumstances of daily life. We would do well to imitate Mary's behavior, *"Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart."* (Lk. 2:19) *"His mother meanwhile kept all these things in memory."* (Lk. 2:51)

In the section following the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew recounts ten miracles performed by Jesus. The first three are grouped together for memorization purposes. These three miracles teach important truths concerning the reign of God and the mission of Jesus. The healing of a leper heads the list of cures. The choice of this cure as the first miracle described by Matthew is deliberate. The healing of the leper carries a

significant message to the readers.

Leprosy was considered a "living death." For all practical purposes – as long as the person had the disease – he was legally dead. The leper suffered excommunication – not only could he not socialize with people, but he could not worship with them; he was unable to fulfill the obligation to publicly worship Yahweh. This cut him off from his religion and – in his eyes and that of others – cut him off from God. For all practical purposes, the leper was a lost soul. Understandably, he suffered great guilt and shame in his most despairing of conditions; he had so little hope.

From the Old Testament text, we see that the cure of leprosy was equivalent to bringing back the dead. This demanded divine power – an act of God. Such a deed could only be accomplished by "the man of God." This is precisely the point Matthew wishes to make – Jesus is "*the man of God.*" In Jesus is the Divine Presence of God. The words of the leper express the belief that Jesus possesses the power to remove the barriers which separate man from man and man from God. If Jesus wills, He can save, "*If you will to do so, you can cure me.*" (Mk. 1:40) Matthew makes no mention of feelings or emotions in Jesus, "*Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said, 'I do will it. Be cured.'*" (Mt. 8:3) Matthew presents it as a naked act of the will devoid of any emotion. Good will towards others is the essence of agape-love. Good feelings and nice emotions are not. They may accompany the act of love and make it pleasant and easier – however, love or good will must be there when nice feelings and good emotions are absent, and even when they demand and encourage contrary action. When the time came in which obedience unto death was demanded of Jesus, He would receive no help from His feelings and emotions. The opposite was the truth – naked will carried him through – "*Thy Will be done!*"

It is becoming obvious that this miracle symbolizes the act of redemption in which Jesus willfully accepted death upon the cross to free mankind from sin and reunite human beings with God. It expresses the primary effect of God's reign in Jesus – the salvation from sin through the blood of Jesus. It demonstrates to the disciples the extent of good will demanded by the reign of God.

JESUS AND THE GENTILE

The first miracle occurred some place between the mountain and the city of Capernaum. The location for the miracle suggests the social alienation suffered by the leper. We note that the curing of the centurion's servant occurred within the city. The centurion was not legally ostracized from Jewish society. However, as far as the attitude of pious Jews went, this type of man who came to Jesus was a moral leper. As his title indicates, he was a centurion – a soldier in charge of a hundred soldiers, more or less. We presume the man was a pagan. Pious customs forbade Jews to enter into the house of a pagan or to dine with one. Such contact, presumably, caused ritual contamination, making a person unfit to worship God.

The centurion and his sick servant represented another group of human beings alienated from communion with God – in this case because of false religious beliefs. The young servant of the centurion lay paralyzed, which explained his inability to come to Jesus himself. Another must go for him and intercede on his behalf. Here we have a good example of intercessory prayer with Jesus.

Jesus teaches that a vital distinction exists between what is only externally done and what occurs within the heart of a person. He teaches His disciples not to be afraid of external and interpersonal communication with sinners. If they enter such communications with God's love, they will not be contaminated. Sin they must avoid. Sin has its roots in a human heart and not in mere social contact itself. The light of the world does not lose its brightness by shining within a darkened world.

The centurion, in this incident, appears as a human being concerned with the afflictions of another. He is moved by compassion and, even though he is a pagan, he is more "in spirit" with Jesus than many of the Jews. Even though his religious beliefs may be false, his religious spirit is more genuine than the religious spirit of many people who profess correct beliefs. Theologians have called people who live in a spirit of religious truth, but without a formal profession in the faith, "implicit Christians." Their Christianity is discerned, not by what they profess with their lips, but how they live – at the heart they are Christians.

In the case at hand, this centurion not only possesses a compassionate heart for the afflicted, but he has true faith in Jesus. He demonstrates

faith in the power of Jesus' words, which expressed the essence of Gentile faith. He insists that Jesus' Word alone is sufficient to effect a cure – even at a great distance: the Word of Jesus possesses the power to save the paralyzed young man who indeed, represents the Gentile world paralyzed in sin and unable to come to God through Jesus. Jesus must come to him. However, He will not come in His physical person. Men and women with the compassion and faith of the centurion would bring the power of Jesus into the paralyzed, sinful Gentile world. *"I will come and save him!"* Jesus emphasizes that the request of the centurion has been granted on the strength of his trust in Jesus. He "trusted" in the Word of Jesus. He relied upon it. He was not afraid to lean upon it – stake his life and reputation upon it!

IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH

The third miracle occurs within the household of Simon Peter. As related by Matthew, this miracle occurs almost automatically. There is no request for a miracle – only the need for one. In this miracle, we again note the personal "touch." Jesus takes the hand of the sick woman. She is powerfully affected by His personal touch. She is healed – saved. The first miracle was worked for a leper, the second for a pagan and the third for a woman. What do all three have in common? Perhaps we see here the universal mission of Jesus being illustrated. Jewish women were not in the same legal and moral state as the leper and the pagan, but their state was, indeed, one of second class citizenship among the People of God – or even less. The miracle symbolizes the restoration of the woman, by Jesus, to her proper place within the kingdom of heaven. We note, from this recorded incident, that her proper place implies serving Him. It exemplifies what should be the reaction of those being healed and saved by the Power of Jesus – they should all serve Him as Lord.

It is worthy to note that this miracle occurred within the house of Simon Peter, which may well symbolize within the Christian Church. All within a Jewish household were under the authority of the head of the house. In this case, Peter was the visible head of this household but, as he had accepted Jesus as "Rabboni," Jesus was the true authority within this household; He moved with proper authority and freely blessed its members.

The relationship with Jesus is not the same as it is with those outside the household. Here, Jesus possesses a liberty of operation denied to Him by those outside the household – outside the Church. There is no absence of

Love on the part of Christ; since those outside the Church have made no submission to Christ – the reign of God has not been extended over them – Jesus awaits their coming to Him and, perhaps, others telling them about Him. Jesus awaits the request or submission, which gives Him the freedom to move within their lives as Savior. He is always free to move within the lives of the members of the Church unless He is willfully impeded by a member.

THE CURE AND THE COST

Matthew stresses the compassionate love of Jesus to be the motivating cause of His divine deeds. He demonstrates Jesus to be compassionate, as is the Heavenly Father. This compassion leads Jesus to vicariously assume the burdens and the sufferings of humanity. This implies that Jesus assumes mankind's sinful state without assuming their personal condition of sin. Jesus assumes the evil effects of sin – not the sin; He becomes the Redeemer by doing so. Matthew writes, *"Thereby fulfilling what has been said through Isaiah the prophet, 'It was our infirmities he bore, our sufferings he endured.'"* (Mt. 8:17) Matthew reveals the great personal act of love involved in these cures; he presents three deeds which symbolically express the extent of the redemptive Love of Jesus. At this point, he deliberately recalls a verse from Isaiah which brings to mind the Suffering Servant of Yahweh: *"Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed. We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all."* (Is. 53:5-6) Matthew does not want his readers to be impressed only with the deeds of Jesus, but also to impress them with the surpassing Love of Jesus. Jesus works with ease the cures for which He must dearly pay. This is the first indication that He will be *"pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins."* (Is. 53:5)

Power impresses many people. They are drawn to it, and to those possessing it. They often seek to possess it for selfish motives. Men also have been attracted to spiritual power for the wrong motives. We have the example, in the Acts, of Simon the Magician seeking spiritual power for evil motives. Matthew relates that, following these miracles, certain people offered to become disciples of Jesus. He probably implies that there is a relationship between what has occurred and the desire to be a disciple.

Jesus emphasizes that the reign of God demands sacrifice of self. When one sees only the deeds, one sees only the effects of God's reign. One may seek the effects of the reign – the power – and yet reject the reign itself

and, therefore, salvation. Therefore, Jesus stresses the power needed by the disciple to love with singleness of heart rather than the power to work miracles. Such love will always work miracles, and willingly pay the price to do so.

Matthew now relates a scene at sea in which the disciples are suddenly caught in a storm, while Jesus is asleep in their boat. Within the early Church, the death of a Christian was spoken of as "falling asleep in the Lord." Within its historical setting, this miracle confirmed the extraordinary power of Jesus over the powers of nature. Jesus' words imply that fear is out of place when the disciples are with Him. No power in the heavens or on earth can destroy them – their fear of external evils and circumstance is groundless.

Symbolically, this miracle pictures the Church in the world after the death of Jesus. The "boat" represents the Church, within which Jesus is still present. There will be times when violent persecutions will break upon the Church like a sudden storm. Amidst the storm, it may even seem as if the Church will be destroyed. However, the Word of Christ cannot be destroyed and the Church will endure until the end of time on earth. Jesus is Lord above all these circumstances and His saving power will be manifested among them. Jesus demands courage amidst crisis situations, for such courage implies faith and confidence in His Word – and particularly faith in those words with which this gospel account will end, *"And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world!" (Mt. 28:20)*

JESUS AND THE DEMONS

Matthew demonstrates the climax of Jesus' earthly power in a confrontation with two possessed men who lived in tombs and terrified people within the district around Gadarene. This episode emphasizes the complete power of Jesus over the forces of evil. In the presence of Jesus Christ, these evil powers are nothing and are dismissed by a word. The disciple of Jesus ought to be liberated from all fear of demonic or diabolic forces. When "in Jesus," these forces are non-existent for the disciple – dismissed with a word. Resist them and they will flee, we are told in James. With Jesus' permission, the demons entered a herd of swine – a more fitting dwelling for unclean spirits than the human spirit. The demons and the pigs were hurled into the sea "and were drowned." This symbolizes the power of Jesus to destroy all evil. The only power which should concern a

disciple of Jesus is the Power of God.

These dark powers sense in the power which expels them, and what human beings would only slowly realize in the power which redeems them: Jesus Christ is the Son of God. However, this power which destroys demons can create great fear in sinners. The action of Jesus instilled fear within the people of Gadarene when *“the entire town came out to meet Jesus . . . and begged him to leave their neighborhood.”* (Mt. 8:34) Their acceptance of Jesus must wait for another day – perhaps for the day when they may experience, in the disciples of Jesus, the irresistible power of God’s love . .

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IN THE FIELD WITH JESUS

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

**“THERE DOES NOT EXIST AMONG YOU JEW OR GREEK, SLAVE OR FREEMAN, MALE OR FEMALE. ALL ARE ONE IN CHRIST JESUS.”
(GAL. 3:28)**

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, Exodus 18:13-27 and Numbers 11:14-17.

1. Why is it that people can become evildoers by doing so little good?
2. Why is the advice to Moses from Jethro considered prudent advice?
3. What is the prudent means chosen by Jesus to deal with the great crowds?
4. What does this teach you about discipleship?

SECOND DAY: Read “Field Experience,” from Leviticus 13:45-46; 14:1-9; 2Kings 5:6-8, and Matthew 8:1-4.

1. What are the disciples to learn within their field experience?
2. What advantage has their field experience for us today?
3. What do you understand by the unconditional love of God?
4. What do you learn about Jesus, His mission and discipleship from the first miracle?

THIRD DAY: Read “Jesus and the Gentiles, and from Mt. 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10.

1. What do you see to be the teaching of Matthew in this second miracle?
2. What does the reaction of Jesus to the centurion teach you about discipleship?
3. What do you understand by an “implicit Christian” and how would the centurion be an example of such a person?

4. How would you describe the essence of the Christian Faith of Gentiles?

FOURTH DAY: Read "In the Household of Faith," and from I Corinthians 12:12-26; Galatians 3:23-29; Mt. 8:14-15; and Mark 1:29-39.

1. What do all three of these miracles have in common?
2. What does the third miracle teach you about women and the Christian Community?
3. How does the work of Jesus in the household of faith differ from His work among non-believers?
4. What do you learn from this?

FIFTH DAY: Read "The Cure and the Cost," and re-read Is. 53:1-12, Matthew 8:16-27 and Acts 8:9-24.

1. In what way do these cures illustrate the compassionate love of Christ?
2. What do the words of Isaiah teach us about the cost of these cures?
3. What does Jesus seek to teach would be disciples about the exercise of spiritual powers?
4. What does the miracle at sea teach you about discipleship?

SIXTH DAY: Read "Jesus and the Demons," Matthew 8:28-34; and from Mark 5:1-20.

1. What does this exorcism teach you about the power of demons?
2. What is the extent of the power of demons over the disciple of Christ?
3. What does fear of evil spirits indicate within a disciple?
4. Why did the people of Gadarene act negatively towards Jesus and what does this teach you about discipleship?

CHAPTER 10

FOR LOVE OF THE CROWDS

INTRODUCTION

When Matthew relates that Jesus led His disciples into “the Gadarene boundary,” we are being informed they have entered pagan territory. On Jesus’ journey to Gadara, He encountered two mad men possessed by demons. These men terrorized all the people who lived in the region and passed their way. Jesus fearlessly confronted these forces of evil. The disciples were probably somewhat behind Him – following at a safe distance. As in the incident at sea, Jesus could once again ask, “*Where is your courage? How little faith you have!*” (Mt. 8:26)

Jesus’ admonition to the disciples implies that faith provides one with the courage to remain fearless before the forces of evil in this world. These experiences with Jesus “in the field” were intended to instill, increase and perfect the disciples’ faith in Jesus Christ. Obviously, the source of the disciples’ courage would not lie within their weak natures, but rest upon the presence of Jesus within their lives in whom they must possess absolute faith. By such faith they would conquer the world.

The two men meeting Jesus in pagan territory represented the evil power which dominated the world alienated from God. John the Evangelist taught: “*We know that we belong to God, while the whole world is under the evil one.*” (1Jn. 5:19)

The great forces of evil in the world today cause many to live in constant fear. We co-exist with great destructive forces – created by the genius of man – capable of destroying life on this planet. Few doubt what the outcome will be if such forces fall into the hands of mad men. To Christians today, Jesus might say once more, “*Where is your courage? How little faith you have!*” Again, John the evangelist writes, “*For there is One greater in you than there is in the world.*” (1Jn. 4:4) The salvation of the earth cannot depend upon massive powers of destruction, but upon the Divine power in Christ. In Christ, the Christian Community has its

example. Evil must not be ignored, but rather confronted with proper power. Evil must be called by its name and cast out.

God came to save the world "in Christ," and the Church, as the Body of Christ, must assume the responsibility of Savior of the World in Christ with courage and faith. It is precisely now that the Church must face this evil with courage and faith, since the very survival of the world has become imperiled by the existence of instruments of vast, unknowable destructive capabilities. Christians must decide "in whom" they trust: Christ or the Antichrist? In this day of false Messiahs, it is not always easy to discern the Christ from the Antichrist. Matthew wrote of Jesus, "*At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity. They were lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd.*" (Mt. 9:36) However, the sheep of the Lord have not been left in this world without a shepherd. As the Church faces today the most destructive evil ever to rest within the hands of men, we Catholics ought to find ourselves standing, with courage and faith, solidly with our Good Shepherd – the Vicar of Christ on earth.

Jesus Christ confronts the destructive powers of evil without compromise. He forcefully expels them. Christ does not co-exist with evil forces. They are mutually exclusive of each other. As Paul wrote, "*After all, what do righteousness and lawlessness have in common, or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What accord is there between Christ and Belial . . . ?*" (2Cor. 6:14-15)

JESUS RECEIVES SINNERS

Matthew relates that the disciples return with Jesus to Capernaum. This city is now referred to as Jesus' "own town." Capernaum becomes the basis of His operation in Galilee.

We are informed that when Jesus returned to His "own town," some people brought a paralytic to Him. Paul wrote, "*God will pass judgment on the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.*" (Rm. 2:16) Jesus judged the spiritual condition of this man to be sinful; He clearly implied that this man had personally sinned. Jesus expelled devils and demons, but not sinful human beings. Jesus does not drive sinners away. He received this sinner with compassion and declared to him, "*Have courage, son, your sins are forgiven.*" Sinners came to Jesus to be healed; He sought to incite courage in them, not fear.

Matthew seeks to illustrate in this incident with the paralytic that Jesus has come to save sinners, not to reject or condemn them. This point is clearly illustrated by Jesus forgiving the sins of this man brought to Him in faith. In this particular case, we see that the sinner is unable to come to Jesus on his own. He depends upon friends to bring him and stand by him until he is forgiven and healed.

God Wills – for reasons certainly not clear to us – to work in this world in a particular way. From New Testament evidence, it becomes very evident and clear that the eternal salvation of human beings depends upon other human beings. First of all, people are saved through the sacred humanity of Jesus Christ. People must, one way or another, be brought to faith in Jesus and in contact with Him. Many people cannot do this on their own. Their salvation truly rests upon the charity and zeal of others. The Scriptures reveal an interdependence upon other human beings for salvation. Presently, it may be more convenient to our slothful souls to hold otherwise, but it may cause us great discomfort on judgment day to discover that certain people – even loved ones – were lost because of our indifference, ignorance, fear, or selfishness.

For the first time, Matthew writes a negative reaction to Jesus Christ. It came from the lawyers – the scribes. When Jesus declared the man free of sin, they judged Jesus to be a blasphemer, "*This man blasphemes.*" Direct blasphemy is any word or action which dishonors the Person of God. Men blaspheme when they deny the Divine attributes of God or attribute to man what pertains solely to God. The scribes knew sin to be an offense against the Will of God. Therefore, only the offended person may forgive the offense. Only God can forgive sin. They concluded that Jesus, a man, assumed a Divine prerogative and this was blasphemous for any man.

As already mentioned, people believed a cure could come only after the causing sin had been forgiven. Seeking to appeal to their legal minds, Jesus asked, "*Which is less trouble to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Stand up and walk?'*" (Mt. 9:5) Now, to their minds, the same divine power would have been required to do one or the other. To assist their belief, Jesus cured the paralytic. If these scribes had been men sincerely open to the Spirit of God, they would have followed the example of Mary and suspended judgment – "*treasured all these things and reflected on them*" in their hearts. Perhaps they would have come to a saving truth. Jesus gave the scribes

“the proof they need” (Mt. 8:4), “To help you realize that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .” (Mt. 9:6) Matthew speaks of the people praising God for giving such power, not to a man, but to “men.” Here we find, in the Gospel, an expressed belief in the authority of the Church to forgive sins.

As Jesus claims authority to forgive sins without acknowledging the Father as the source of this authority, He implies that He Himself is the source of this authority. As we have seen in the Fourth Gospel, it is the Risen Christ who bestows this power upon the Church. There we read, *“Then he breathed upon them and said, ‘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)*

JESUS' RELATIONSHIP WITH SINNERS

Matthew continues to develop the theme of Jesus' attitude towards sinful people and the depths His relationship with them can take. He uses His own call to the disciples as a prime example. Jesus ignores the social and religious customs and taboos in relationship to sinful people, for they impede His divine commission. His behavior outrages and scandalizes the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus' action teaches that it is not important – as far as salvation is concerned – what a person was before meeting Christ. What matters is the encounter with Christ and what follows. Jesus does not condone any person's sins, but He does not reject any person because of sin.

Jesus meets Matthew in his sinful condition and calls him – while in this condition – into discipleship, which implies an intimate friendship with Jesus Christ. By so doing, Jesus calls Matthew out of his sinful condition. To deliberately remain in this condition would be an implied rejection of the salvation offered by God through Jesus Christ. In this recorded incident, Matthew teaches that true conversion implies immediately leaving behind one's old life and beginning a new life by immediately following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Amidst the joy of his conversion, and to celebrate it, Matthew gives a banquet in honor of Jesus, and invites his friends to meet his Lord. By accepting this invitation, Jesus declares Himself open to receive all such people into His personal friendship. Jesus' presence at the banquet is a call

to repentance. His presence seeks to give sinners the courage "to come home" and to have faith in God's merciful love for them, even when they do not love God. The presence of Jesus at the banquet table of sinners is the sign of God's enduring love for sinners.

At this point, Matthew presents the second negative reaction to Jesus Christ. When Jesus demonstrated that He possessed power to forgive the sins of men, He scandalized the scribes. By His intimate association with sinful people, He shocked the Pharisees. The Pharisees directed their implied criticism of Jesus to His disciples. Jesus overhears this criticism. He responds, seeking to aid them in seeing God as Savior and to understand that God Wills the salvation of all and not only of those pious people called "Pharisees." Jesus seeks to broaden their concept of the God of Israel and to enlarge their hearts in order for them to accept a God of merciful love. If these men constrict their hearts anymore, they will destroy God in their hearts. Through the prophet Hosea, the Lord says, "*For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice and knowledge of God rather than holocausts.*" (Hos. 6:6) Recalling to mind these words and their importance, Jesus says to the Pharisees, "*People who are in good health do not need a doctor; sick people do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice.' I have come to call, not the self-righteous, but sinners.*" (Mt. 9:12-13)

A NEW WINE

When Jesus speaks of not coming to call the "righteous," He does not exclude from His mission of salvation such pious people as Simeon and Anna, who faithfully adhere to the Mosaic Law. Here, Jesus speaks of those men and women who declare themselves "righteous" and "saved." They are consciously aware of themselves as being the "saved." In a word, these people are "self-righteous." "Righteousness," in the Scriptures, is a legal term. It is a state to be declared by a judge. In this matter of moral righteousness, only God judges who has "righteousness." No human being possesses righteousness until the Judge declares it so. People who look upon themselves as righteous and saved are the "self-righteous" who have usurped the role of the Divine Judge.

At this point, Matthew inserts an incident which illustrates how revolutionary is this spirit of Jesus – how it demands new religious form for its adequate expression. Once again, there is criticism of Jesus and His

disciples. This time it comes from a different direction – from the disciples of John the Baptist who make it clear that they are not disciples of Jesus Christ. Matthew relates, “*Later on, John’s disciples came to him with the objection, ‘Why is it that while we and the Pharisees fast, your disciples do not?’*” (Mt. 9:14)

Jesus seeks to teach John’s disciples that their discipleship was not an end in itself but a means. He uses their criticism to point out that the men they criticize have become disciples of the One John foretold would come after him – the Christ. Jesus pictures Himself and His disciples as a bridegroom present with His friends. Such an occasion was not a time for fasting but for joy. Jesus teaches that a day will come when the bridegroom will depart; then His disciples will fast.

With two homey examples, Jesus teaches the disciples of John that they cannot remain John’s disciples and still participate in the reign of God which came in Jesus Christ. They cannot cling to the old and still inherit the new. Jesus tells them, “*Nobody sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. People do not pour new wine into old wineskins.*” (Mt. 9:16-17)

Jesus brings a new spirit to religion, and it is incompatible with the spirit that has gone before. Trying to combine the two will only have disastrous results. One must be willing to leave behind his own particular form of holiness – his own idea and practices of holiness – and be willing to be formed anew by the Spirit of Christ in the Image of Christ. For these disciples, it meant leaving John for Jesus.

We see the beginning of the polarization of the Jewish people over Jesus Christ – a small percentage of the people are committed to Jesus; a large percentage are well disposed but not committed; the powerful political party of the Pharisees with their scribes are alienated from Christ; and the disciples of John appear to be in a state of limbo.

The disciples are beginning to feel the cost of discipleship – of being associated with Jesus. Not only must they associate on an intimate level with “undesirable” people as tax collectors, but they must bear criticism from some of the most respected and esteemed people in Jewish society. No doubt their own process of purification has begun in which their motives for discipleship, in some degree, are being questioned.

DESPERATE CASES

Matthew now returns to the narration of miraculous deeds by Jesus through which the secrets of God's reign are unfolded and the disciples find instruction. He presents two desperate cases coming to Jesus: the head of the synagogue and a woman sick for twelve years.

From another account, we know the man is called "Jairus." He is the head of the Jewish synagogue. Obviously, such a man as Jairus would not have come to Jesus except as a last resort. He had tried other means and nothing prevailed. His daughter died; no one had been able to keep her alive. However reluctant he may be, he comes in faith. His coming indicates he knows Jesus possesses the power to give life to the dead. He implies the Divinity of Jesus when he says, "*Please come and lay your hand on her and she will come back to life.*" (Mt. 9:18) This miracle demonstrates Jesus' power over death – He is the resurrection and the Life!

In this miracle, we have a symbol of Christian Baptism. The dead girl represents the human spirit, dead to eternal life because of sin. Jesus is the life-giving spirit who brings new birth and newness of life. We see, in this case, that personal faith in Jesus is impossible. It is the faith of the father – the head of the household – which supplies the faith for the girl.

This miraculous incident may also symbolize the ultimate conversion of the Jews. Jairus, the head of the synagogue, represents the nation, and the dead girl its spiritual state. The conversion of Israel comes with the realization that only faith in Jesus can bring new life to Israel. Perhaps Matthew has symbolically presented this truth in the episode with Jairus, which reveals the ultimate power of Jesus to save even those who reject Him.

In the woman's case, we are told that her sickness had lasted twelve years. Such an affliction made her ritually impure and a source of contamination for others. She lived in pain and loneliness. The consolations of religious worship and social life were denied to her because of her affliction. From other scriptural sources, we know she had been reduced to poverty. All her resources had been spent vainly, in search of health and happiness. She came to Jesus in final desperation.

This woman certainly symbolizes many people in the world who truly are ill in body and soul, void of health and happiness, and who have squandered their resources in search of life. In their poverty and sickness, they now discover themselves completely alienated from man and God. From this incident, we see that even if society rejects them – regardless of the years squandered – if they come to Jesus in faith, they will hear, *“Courage daughter! Your faith has restored you to health.”* (Mt. 9:22) We see that true healing followed upon the woman turning her whole self towards God. Without faith in Christ, the miracle would truly have been meaningless.

MEANING OF MIRACLES

Matthew now records an incident in which two blind men are cured. In this incident, people come to Jesus with an inadequate faith in Him, which is symbolized in the title “Son of David.” Jesus ignores their petition. He does not wish to identify with such a title. The blind men must continue to follow Jesus. They must go from seeing Jesus as the “Son of David” to confessing Him to be “Lord.” The blind men finally come to Jesus in His home and He questions their faith. They are healed when they profess an adequate faith in Jesus to give light to their eyes.

We see that proper faith is an indispensable condition for the miracle. We have already seen that faith does not have to be present in the recipient of the miracle for healing, but it must be present in the petitioner. People can come to Jesus in any condition and be received – except when they come without proper faith.

Matthew closes this series of ten miracles with the healing of a deaf man. The afflicted man is described as “kophos,” which implies he is deaf, and this man is deaf because he is possessed. He probably symbolizes many in Israel who cannot hear the Word of God in Jesus because evil has deafened them.

The listing of the ten miracles symbolizes, through the number “ten,” the unlimited power to heal possessed by Jesus. Through the cases of those who come to Jesus and find salvation, Matthew teaches the extent of God’s merciful love. There are no limits on God’s love. Only human beings can limit God’s love for them. The whole section, no doubt, finds its inspiration in Chapter 35 of Isaiah, where the prophet foretells that deliverance which Matthew has presently described.

The ten miracles have revealed the Lord's compassionate love and concern for all people. These deeds demonstrate that Jesus comes in the true Spirit of God. This section is concluded with the reactions of people: it sadly reveals the final polarization caused by the words and the deeds of Jesus. As a result of it, the crowds exclaimed, "*Nothing like this has been seen in Israel.*" "*But the Pharisees were saying, 'He casts out demons through the prince of demons.'*" (Mt. 9:33-34) They listen to their scribes and conclude that miraculous powers cannot be denied, but what this power implies cannot be accepted. They opt to sin against the Light, not only to deny the truth, but, much more, to label it darkness. They sin against the Holy Spirit. The storm is gathering and Jesus reads the signs . . .

Despite opposition and rejection, Jesus goes on. Matthew tells us why Jesus must go on, "*At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity. They were lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd.*" (Mt. 9:36) Matthew tells us why Jesus invites men and women to join with Him in His mission, "*He said to his disciples, 'The harvest is good but laborers are scarce. Beg the harvest master to send out laborers to gather his harvest.'*" (Mt. 9:37-38)

FOR LOVE OF THE CROWDS

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“FOR IT IS LOVE THAT I DESIRE, NOT SACRIFICE, AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD RATHER THAN HOLOCAUSTS.” (HOSEA 6:6)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction and from I John 5:1-5 and 19-21.

1. What should be the attitude of Christians towards evil in the world?
2. How should evil be faced by Christians in this world?
3. What do you understand by I John 4:4?
4. What do you understand by II Corinthians 6:14-15?

SECOND DAY: Read “Jesus Receives Sinners,” from Matthew 9:1-8 and Mark 2:1-12.

1. In what manner does Jesus receive this sinful man?
2. What does the example of His friends teach you about sinners coming to Jesus?
3. Why would the cure be proof to the lawyers of Jesus’ power to forgive sins?
4. What do you see to be the root of the lawyers’ problem with Jesus?

THIRD DAY: Read “Jesus’ Relationship With Sinners,” from Matthew 9:9-13; and Ezekiel 19:21-23 and 30-32.

1. What does the call of Matthew tell you about Jesus’ relationship with sinners?
2. Why did the Pharisees begin to reject Jesus?

3. What did the presence of Jesus at Matthew's banquet imply?
4. What do you understand by Hosea 6:6?

FOURTH DAY: Read "New Wine," Matthew 9:14-17 and I Corinthians 4:1-5.

1. What do you understand by the term "righteous" and the evil of being "self-righteous"?
2. What do you learn from Paul's words to the Corinthians?
3. What do you see beneath the criticism of John's disciples?
4. What did Jesus teach by means of the examples in Matthew 9:16-17?

FIFTH DAY: Read "Desperate Cases," and from Matthew 9:18-26; Mark 5: 21-43 and Romans 11:23-29.

1. Why do we call these desperate cases?
2. In what way can the resurrection of the girl symbolize baptism?
3. In what way could this same incident symbolize Jesus' relationship with Israel?
4. What does the cure of the woman symbolize for you?

SIXTH DAY: Read "Meaning Of The Miracles," Matthew 9:27-38, and Isaiah 35:1-10.

1. What do we learn from Jesus' reaction to the two blind men?
2. What is the general significance of the Ten Miracles?
3. In what way does this entire section of Matthew reflect Chapter 35 of Isaiah?
4. What effect does Jesus' healing and teaching ministry have upon people and how does Jesus react to it?

CHAPTER 11

APOSTOLIC SPIRIT

INTRODUCTION

The teachings of Jesus reveal the Compassion of God. Jesus urges His disciples, *“Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate.”* (Lk. 6:36) The Sacred Scriptures present God as One moved by the sufferings of people – as One who feels their pain. Jesus presents God as a Father *“who knows how to give good gifts to his children”* (Lk. 11:13); *who has “no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies”* (Ez. 18:32); *who Wills His “sun rises on the bad and the good, he rains on the just and the unjust”* (Mt. 5:45). Only the Compassion of God offers a satisfactory explanation for “the Word” being made Flesh – for the Incarnation of God’s Son. God, in Jesus, moved into the human situation and suffered, in Jesus, the fullness of human pain unto death itself.

Divine compassion explains the life and mission of Jesus. Compassion motivates the life of Jesus and is the key which unlocks its mystery. It is this spirit which identifies Jesus so closely with the heavenly Father. Matthew tells us that Jesus gazed upon a vast crowd, and their sad condition moved Him with pity. The word translated as “crowd” probably referred to the “people of the land.” These were the poor and ignorant of Israel, who neither understood nor observed the Torah and the prescribed traditions of the ancients.

The physical and spiritual conditions of these people move Jesus to pity, mercy – compassion. He sees them as *“lying prostrate from exhaustion.”* A more literal translation reads: “they were distressed and physically devastated.” These words project the tragic picture of people overcome by the problems and the burdens of life. They are down and out, and unable to get back on their feet. Their lives have lost all sense of direction and they are morally and physically dejected. They wander aimlessly, going from bad to worse – sinking daily deeper into bewilderment and despair – poor sheep without a shepherd. Such should not be the state of God’s People.

Jesus insinuates that the blame for this condition lies with the religious leaders who assumed the position of Moses in Israel. The finger of accusation rests upon the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus told 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."* (Mt. 23:2-3) A more literal translation speaks of the scribes and the Pharisees as sitting upon "the chair" (cathedras) of Moses. This implies that they possess legitimate authority in Israel. Since they possess the authority over the people, they have the responsibility for the people. They are responsible for the people "lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus recognizes His vocation to fulfill the prophecy of Ezekiel, and to be the Good Shepherd "to the crowds without a shepherd."

HARVEST IN THE FIELD

Jesus sees these poor people as a harvest to be gathered into the kingdom of heaven. Apparently, the labor involved in being the good shepherd cannot be accomplished by one solitary person – even if the person is Jesus Christ. Jesus makes His disciples part of the solution to His problem. First, He encourages them to open their eyes and recognize the problem, *"The harvest is good laborers are scarce."* (Mt. 9:37) *"Open your eyes and see! The fields are shining for harvest!"* (Jn. 4:35) A harvest neglected within the field may soon rot and be lost.

"The workers are few" because people are reluctant to undertake such a labor – to get involved with such an exhausting ministry. It demands more than the ordinary love of God and man. Therefore, the second thing Jesus urges his disciples to do is to pray: pray to the "chief harvester." In the Aramaic language, this would be the "rab hesada" – the person responsible for hiring and dismissing harvest workers. Jesus tells them, *"Beg the harvest master to send out laborers to gather his harvest."* (Mt. 9:37-38)

CALL OF THE APOSTLES

As Jesus directed, the disciples prayed. The "Rab hesada" – the "harvest master" – heard their prayer. He made them the answer to their prayer. He called them to be apostles of Jesus Christ.

Matthew informs us that Jesus selected twelve of His disciples to be

“apostles” to whom He gave authority and sent “on mission as the Twelve.” In the Greek language, the word “apostles” comes from “apostolos” which is derived from the verb “apostellein” meaning “to send.” The term is not frequently used in Greek and, where used, it refers to the sending of a fleet or army on an expedition, or to a colony of people settling in a land. It carries the connotation of people being sent on a mission by one in authority to do so. The word “apostolos” appears in the Septuagint Bible—a Greek version of the Old Testament—in I Kings 14:6, where the prophet Abihaj tells the wife of Jeroboam that he has “been commissioned” by Yahweh to give her a message. Within this text, “apostolos” is used to translate the Hebrew word “shaluah” which is derived from the root “slh” meaning “send.”

In the Aramaic language, a “saliah,” or its plural “seluhim,” would signify “a commissioned emissary.” We most probably find the root understanding of the concept “apostles,” as used in the New Testament, in the understanding of the Aramaic concept of “saliah” and its Hebrew equivalent “shaluah.” At that time within Jewish history, a legal institution called the “sheluhim” existed among the Jews from which people in authority sent out commissioned rabbis as their representative with full authority to accomplish a particular task. Within their commission, these “sheluhim” possessed the full power of their sender. This sender acted through his “sheluhim.” The “sheluhim” were official ambassadors.

Jesus saw Himself as the “shaluah” (apostle) of the Father in heaven, and the Twelve disciples as being His “sheluhim.” The Fourth Gospel spoke of the Father sending “*the Son into the world.*” (Jn. 3:17) Jesus declared, “*And whoever looks on me is seeing him who sent me.*” (Jn. 12:45) Jesus told people, “*Whoever welcomes me welcomes him who sent me.*” (Lk. 10:16) Jesus said to His disciples, “*I solemnly assure you, he who accepts anyone I send accepts me, and in accepting me accepts him who sent me.*” (Jn. 13:20)

These Twelve Apostles played a vital role in the mission of Christ and within the foundation of His Church. They became the official witnesses to the Resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ and the authentic teachers of His doctrine. We know from Acts that they were men who had been in the company of the Lord Jesus “*from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us.*” (Acts 1:22)

The Twelve Apostles represent the foundation of the New Israel, which is

composed of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Book of Revelation, speaking of the New Jerusalem, tells us, "*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.*" (Apoc. 21:14)

INSTRUCTIONS TO THE APOSTLES

Matthew makes clear that the Twelve received limited authority from Jesus at this time. He mentions the limits of their authority, "*to expel unclean spirits and to cure sickness and disease of every kind.*" (Mt. 10:1) These were signs of the coming of God's reign. At this time, they do not receive explicit authority to forgive sins nor to teach. This authority comes after the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Matthew makes a point of Jesus sending out only enlightened disciples. Power, unless directed by knowledge, can produce chaos. Goodwill, without the guidance of truth and understanding, may cause more harm than good. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus only sent "*these men on mission as the Twelve, after giving them the following instructions . . .*" (Mt. 10:5)

Many recognize the following instructions as a compilation of Jesus' missionary instructions to the apostles and disciples who would later be sent out on missionary activities. Some of these instructions apply only for the time Jesus remained on earth, and others are general instructions applicable to many times and places.

First, we see that Jesus restricts the mission of the Twelve, "*Do not visit pagan territory and do not enter a Samaritan town. Go instead after the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Mt. 10:5-6) They were sent to where Jesus planned to come. He later states, "*My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Mt. 15:24) From this we understand the personal mission of Jesus to be limited. God Willed first to call Israel into the reign of God through belief and submission to Christ, the conversion of Israel being part of the ideal divine plan for the conversion and salvation of the world. This commission fell to only a few Jews and to the Gentiles when Israel rejected the Messiah. Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "*After all, salvation is from the Jews.*" (Jn. 4:22) The Gospel must first be proclaimed to Israel. The necessity of completing this task before the death of Jesus presently called for restrictions upon the mission of the Twelve.

Jesus does commission the Twelve to herald the reign of God. He makes

them heralds of Good News, "*As you go, make this announcement: 'The reign of God is at hand!'*" (Mt. 10:7) Apparently, this proclamation consists in both words and deeds. Jesus immediately tells the Twelve, "*Cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the leprous, expel demons.*" (Mt. 10:8) There is a relationship between the coming of God's reign and the expulsion of demons, the curing of the sick and the afflicted. Such a commission certainly expresses symbolically the future power of the Twelve – the power to forgive sins and impart the life-giving spirit of Jesus Christ to people dead in their sins.

THE GROUND RULES

Our Lord makes clear that these extraordinary powers, given to the Apostles, are gifts from God – gifts intended to establish the reign of God and to build up the People of God. These gifts must never be bartered for material gains. He tells them, "*The gift you have received, give as a gift.*" (Mt. 10:8) Freely they have received and freely they must give.

As Jesus sends the disciples, without Him, into their first field experience, He lays down certain stringent ground rules to be followed. By doing so, Jesus emphasizes the proper means and methods to complete their mission for Him. They are to be detached from material goods and have no dependence upon them. Their light wardrobe is designed for fast travel. They must realize there can be no dependence upon material goods to accomplish a spiritual mission. For the accomplishment of their tasks, they must have complete reliance upon the gifts of God. As for their physical needs, they must leave these to the providential care of God. Jesus' teaching implies that those who receive spiritual blessings from the apostles will give them, in return, the physical and material support they may need. The apostles are encouraged by Jesus to be discreet about the home in which they stay. They are to remain only in "worthy" households which they bless by their presence. A "worthy" household would be one in which the message of the apostle is accepted in a spirit of faith and the person of the apostle is accepted in a spirit of hospitality. Jesus tells the apostles not to waste time with rejection – leave to heaven the house or town which rejects their message.

Jesus makes clear that people being evangelized have a serious moral obligation to accept, in faith, the gospel message. His teaching seems to imply that grace of faith ordinarily comes with the proper proclamation of

the gospel. However such grace always leaves the recipient free to refuse to believe – Jesus does not compel belief. Nevertheless, He views a rejection of this grace to be gravely sinful. He proclaims it will go better on judgment day for those who have sinned in the flesh than for those who have sinned in the spirit.

SHEEP AMONG WOLVES

Jesus informed the apostles, *“What I am doing is sending you out like sheep among wolves. You must be clever as snakes and innocent as doves. Be on your guard with respect to others.”* (Mt. 10:16-17) Jesus combines a strange pair – a snake and a dove – and encourages His disciples to adopt their characteristics. He encourages His sheep-like disciples to be more like the snake, in order for them to survive among the wolf-like people to whom He is sending them. The snake appears as a prudent creature who knows where he is going and how to get there; the snake knows when to remain concealed and when and where to strike. On the other hand, however, they must remain as harmless as the dove. Their defense must be cleverness and a prudent behavior. In their relationship with others, they must be on their guard not to let themselves be hurt. They are not to go and seek martyrdom: they are commissioned to be evangelists, not martyrs. Jesus expects His disciples to have the good sense to leave a dangerous situation.

Jesus foresees the sufferings and persecutions to be endured by His disciples for proclaiming the Gospel. He seeks to forearm them. The Gospel contains truth capable of revolutionizing religion, society, mankind. Jesus knows the human heart. He understands what would be the reaction of the heart that preferred darkness to light when the truth of light would shine upon it. Jesus makes it clear: a world in darkness hates the light of truth. Avoid it! When the world cannot avoid it because of the bearers of truth in its midst, it transfers its hatred of light to the bearers. The apostles and the disciples will experience that degree of persecution allowed by society. Some will be despised, ostracized, vilified, and subjected to all modes of injustice – beaten robbed, imprisoned, murdered. All these things, Jesus says, they might even do in the name of God and religion.

Jesus warns the disciples that to tell the gospel truth, in any day, is to run the risk of being persecuted, and even killed. He tells them that it will first come from their fellow Jews who will drag them before the Sanhedrin and local Jewish courts. They will be brought before the rulers of their own

people and, later, they will stand before the Gentiles and be judged. Jesus seeks to remind the apostles and the disciples to keep in mind that all this comes to be because they represent God in this world – not themselves. It is God's truth on trial and only God can defend it. They must not become anxious about their witnessing in court – God will speak through them.

CAUSE OF DIVISION

Essentially, Jesus is the Cause of Peace in the world. As Paul wrote, God is reconciling the world to Himself in Christ. Reconciliation with God is peace. Such a reconciliation comes only with the acceptance of Jesus Christ in faith. To reject Christ is to reject God's peace and reconciliation. It becomes clear, in the apostolic ministry of the Church, that many would not accept God's terms for peace on earth. This demands belief in Jesus Christ. Since Christ has come into this world, He will objectively become a cause of division within society – the family. The acceptance or rejection of Christ becomes a personal matter for each and everyone – a decision the human heart alone makes.

Jesus makes it clear that if the gospel message and the acceptance of Christ bring division into one's family, the disciple must choose the Christian Community over the natural family. Jesus makes very clear what it means to love one's family and friends above one's Christian commitment, "*Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me.*" (Mt. 10:37)

Jesus explains that the sufferings of the disciples come because they are identified with Him in this world. It can be no other way because the world so ill-treated Jesus. He bore it all, and solely because He represented God in the world – not Himself. It all boils down, not so much to the hatred of the disciples or the man Jesus, but to the hatred of God in Jesus and in His disciples. It comes down to man's personal rejection and hatred of God.

Because of their close association with Jesus and because of the personal and private instructions received from Him, they have become enlightened. He intends for them to be the "light of the world." Jesus knows men will seek to intimidate His disciples, instill fear within them, seek to silence them one way or another.

Jesus places before His apostles and His disciples the final goal of life to

encourage them to pay, without regret, the price of discipleship. Jesus Christ himself paid the price in full. The importance of their lives must not be lost upon them – they represent Jesus Christ in this world. They have been made heralds of a truth which must be heard. The proclamation of His gospel, in every age, is essential for the salvation of human beings. In the face of darkness and evil, it must be proclaimed. Such obstacles must not frighten disciples into silence and into hiding the light of their life under some bushel basket. Let all things be seen in the light of faith and weighed in the light of eternity. The Christian Disciple has become, in time, the beloved of the Father who holds the power of eternal life and death – whose Eye is upon the sparrow and knows the number of hairs upon one's head. This Father holds in the hollow of His hand the disciples of Jesus Christ. To them again, Jesus says, *“Do not let them intimidate you . . . do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul.”* (Mt. 10:26,28)

This world holds no greater gifts than the apostles of Jesus Christ, and the reception of them and the blessing of them have eternal consequences for those who receive them in faith and love. Jesus has made their reward His personal responsibility, *“He who welcomes you welcomes me, and he who welcomes me welcomes him who sent me . . . And I promise you that whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these lowly ones because he is a disciple will not want for his reward.”* (Mt. 10:40,42)

When the cost of Christian Discipleship is assessed in the light of Final Judgment, the price, even though it be martyrdom, becomes insignificant before this promise made by Jesus Christ, *“Whoever acknowledges me before men I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. Whoever disowns me before men I will disown before my Father in heaven.”* (Mt. 10:32-33)

APOSTOLIC SPIRIT

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“WHOEVER ACKNOWLEDGES ME BEFORE MEN I WILL ACKNOWLEDGE BEFORE MY FATHER IN HEAVEN. WHOEVER DISOWNS ME BEFORE MEN I WILL DISOWN BEFORE MY FATHER IN HEAVEN.” (MT. 10:32-33)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, Numbers 27:12-23 and Ezekiel 34:1-17.

1. What do you understand by the compassion of God?
2. What do these readings from the Old Testament teach you about God's compassion?
3. In the eyes of Jesus, what is the spiritual condition of most of the people? Who is responsible?
4. How do you see the general spiritual condition of people today? What does this tell you?

SECOND DAY: Read “Call Of The Apostles,” and from Mt. 10:1-5; Lk. 6:12-16; Jn. 13:18-21; and 2Cor. 5:18-20.

1. What was the result of the disciples' prayer to the harvest master?
2. How do you understand the term “apostle”?
3. What do you learn from John 13:20?
4. What was the unique role of the 12 Apostles?

THIRD DAY: Read “Instructions To The Apostles” and Luke 10:1-24 and 9:51-56.

1. What authority does Jesus withhold from His Apostles at this time? Why?
2. What do we learn from the fact that Jesus instructs the apostles well before sending them on mission?

3. Why do you think He restricts them to Jewish towns?
4. What does the episode between James and John and the Samaritan teach us about the apostles at this time?

FOURTH DAY: Read "The Ground Rules," from Mt. 10:6-15, Acts 8:14-24; and Luke 22:35-36.

1. What does the reading from Acts teach us about the gifts of God?
2. What do you see Jesus teaching His apostles in Mt. 10:9-10?
3. How can the apostles expect to be supported?
5. How would you account for this change in Jesus' teaching as recorded in Luke?

FIFTH DAY: Read "Sheep Among Wolves," Mt. 10:16-20 and Jn. 3:19-21.

1. How does Jesus picture the environment in which the Apostles will work?
2. How do you understand the admonition to be like the snake and the dove?
3. How would you explain so much persecution because of the gospel?
4. What do you learn from Matthew 10:23?

SIXTH DAY: Read "Cause of Division," from Mt. 10:24-42 and Jn. 15:18-25.

1. Why does Christ, the Prince of peace, become such a cause of division?
2. What do you understand by Matthew 10:37 and what does it demand?
3. Why does Jesus encourage His apostles not to be afraid of anything?
4. How do you see your own judgment in the light of Matthew 10:32-33?

CHAPTER 12

SIGN OF CONTRADICTION

INTRODUCTION

Matthew now presents the turning point in the public ministry of Jesus Christ. Matthew has introduced Jesus as the Teacher of Truth and Righteousness, "*Jesus toured all Galilee*" (Mt. 4:23) teaching publicly in all their cities. He proclaimed in all "their synagogues" the reign of God, "*Reform your lives! The kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" (Mt. 4:17) Jesus appeared in Galilee as the Man of God fully clothed in the armor of God.

In the first sermon he preached, Peter reflected, "*Men of Israel, listen to me! Jesus the Nazorean was a man whom God sent to you with miracles, wonders, and signs as his credentials. These God worked through him in your midst, as you well know.*" (Acts 2:22) Indeed, Jesus had impressed the crowds, and they proclaimed, "*Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.*" (Mt. 9:33) However, despite all these impressive teachings and wonderful signs, a mysterious opposition to Jesus, personally, arose among people, stimulated by certain influential groups in Israel. Matthew had already recorded this negative reaction to Jesus, "*But the Pharisees were saying 'He casts out demons through the prince of demons.'*" (Mt. 9:34)

Matthew develops this theme of protest and the rejection of the Messiah. Now surfaces the struggle between light and darkness. In Jesus, Divine Truth faces disappointment, disbelief, and total rejection. Within the scenes to follow, Jesus will be interrogated, suspected, maligned, accused of being intrinsically evil. Jesus will counter-attack; He will defend His position. Within the process, the true spirit opposing Jesus will be manifested. A line will be sharply drawn, separating the believers from the unbelievers – the friends from the foes. It is a war with no neutrality; to remain neutral to Jesus is to side with the opposition. As Jesus put it, "*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.*" (Lk. 11:23)

AN ENCOUNTER WITH JOHN

Jesus continues His mission in the face of this growing opposition. He continues to proclaim the reign of God and its Divine Truth. However, a striking change occurs in Jesus' mission from this point on. As disbelief and rejection increase, signs, wonders and miracles decrease. They all but cease.

As Matthew continues to unfold Jesus' mission, the relationship between such Divine works as healings and exorcisms of unclean spirits and a particular quality of faith in Jesus Christ becomes clearer. This teaching becomes very evident when Jesus visits His hometown of Nazareth. We are told, "*And he did not work many miracles there because of their lack of faith.*" (Mt. 13:58) If one has no faith in Jesus, one will hardly request miracles from Him.

Matthew begins this next section of his narrative with an encounter between Jesus and John. The imprisoned John sends two of his disciples to interrogate Jesus. Matthew has already presented the disciples of John as negative towards Jesus and His disciples. Their critical attitude towards Jesus was implied in their question, "*Why is it that while we and the Pharisees fast, your disciples do not?*" (Mt. 9:14) John's disciples have a problem accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Seemingly, Jesus does not project for them the proper image of the Messiah. Perhaps John possesses something of the same problem?

The role of the Messiah, as projected by Jesus, is startling to all Israel. His projection of the Messiah is so shocking that most refuse to accept the fact of His messianic role. Jesus does not fit the role-image; He fails to live up to the peoples' expectations.

John heard the rumors among the people about Jesus through his disciples. From what we do know, John appeared to preach a fierce judgment coming upon the world with the advent of the Messiah. John urged immediate repentance in order to escape the impending destruction and condemnation of sinners by the Messiah. Jesus certainly did not live up to John's advance publicity. Rather, the Messiah-in-Jesus appears as a shepherd seeking his lost sheep. When you think of John's expectations of the Messiah and Jesus' projection of the Messiah, it is not surprising that Jesus caused John some difficulties. Someone once observed, "A thousand difficulties with

faith do not equal one doubt.” We need to bear in mind that Mary, Joseph, John, the apostles and the disciples lived with Jesus, as the mystery of His life and mission unfolded.

Never previously had such a revelation of God existed. The appearance of the Word Incarnate eclipsed any previous revelation, and made any future revelation unnecessary. When the Son of God became Man, all mankind began over again in its understanding of God. When the Scriptures confirm that Mary did not understand Jesus, we know that no human being understood. Israel certainly could not have understood such a Messiah. When we are told of Mary’s reaction to Christ – *“Mary treasured all these things and reflected on them in her heart . . . His mother meanwhile kept all these things in memory” (Lk. 2:19,51)* – we are being instructed in how to understand “the Word made Flesh.”

John’s question seems to imply some confusion in his mind concerning the role of Jesus. Is He the Messiah? However, his question implies also that he is open to divine instruction on this matter. Jesus does not directly confirm that He is the Messiah. This would be self-witnessing. Jesus offers as testimony to His messiahship, the revelations of Scripture and the manifest power of God. Jesus’ reply to John is an implied reference to the prophecy of Isaiah, which the Jews expected to be fulfilled through the Messiah. Jesus added to Isaiah’s list the healing of lepers and the raising of the dead; He does even more works than foretold by Isaiah. As the Messiah, Jesus is more than Israel expected – more than foretold. Perhaps the key for John to understand Jesus and the Messianic role portrayed by Him, would be in the words of the prophet Isaiah, *“The lowly will ever find joy in the Lord, and the poor rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.” (Is. 29:19)* In His reply to John, Jesus emphasizes that in His ministry *“the poor have the Good News preached to them.”*

Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, but not the Christ expected by John or any other Jew. Jesus urged John not to lose faith, but to have confidence in the plan of God truly being carried out through His life and ministry. In Jesus, the Messiah of God comes clothed in compassion and pity to save mankind. Jesus inaugurates a time of divine mercy, in order that all men could be saved – *“Blessed is the man who finds no stumbling block”* in a Lord who appears among us *“meek and humble of heart.”*

JESUS' WITNESS TO JOHN

Whether the disciples of John like it or not, Jesus makes them evangelizers of the Gospel, *"Go back and report to John what you hear and see."* (Mt. 1:4) After their departure, Jesus gives His personal testimony to John the Baptist. Through His questions to the people concerning the characteristics and habits of John, Jesus was confirming in their minds the prophetic status of John. Jesus confirmed John to be an official prophet in Israel. He goes on to reveal that because of John's unique personality and mission, he was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. In John, the prophecy of Malachi had been fulfilled. John came as the "angel" of the Lord sent by God to prepare the world for the entrance of His beloved Son.

Israel expected the return of Elijah to herald the coming of the messianic age. If Jesus is the Messiah, then John the Baptist must be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi. Jesus confirmed that Elijah had returned in John. Jesus prefaced His remark with, *"If you are prepared to accept it,"* because the acceptance of this truth depended upon the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus teaches here how the prophecy of Malachi has been fulfilled – Elijah returns in the spirit of John the Baptist. Elijah and John the Baptist still remain two distinct personalities.

Seemingly, Jesus speaks paradoxically of John when He says in one breath that John is the greatest man born of woman, and then in the next breath says that the least born into the kingdom of God is greater than he. In a sense, this statement clarifies the distinction between membership in the Old and the New Testaments – between the Old and the New Covenants.

To understand what Jesus means by the least being the greatest, we have to understand two things – Jesus' own relationship with God and Jesus' own relationship with His disciples. As the Church came to understand both these relationships, she would teach that the disciples of Jesus are incorporated into Jesus Himself through the Sacrament of Baptism. In Christ, the disciples become "a new creation."

Concerning Jesus' own birth and conception, Luke wrote, *"The angel Gabriel said to Mary concerning Jesus, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God.'" (Lk. 1:34-35)* Since there is no

comparison between Jesus Christ and any man born of man and woman – regardless of their personal greatness – or any person baptized into Christ – the least of such people would be greater than the holy men and women of the Old Testament. Such have been “*born again,*” “*begotten of water and Spirit.*” (Jn. 3:5)

REJECTION OF JOHN AND JESUS

It becomes painfully clear, as the gospel narrative unfolds, that people do not respond properly to Jesus Christ. Being impressed with signs and wonders does not necessarily imply a willingness to radically reform one’s life.

Jesus sees the Jewish people as perverse children who refuse to take part in anything not in accord with their own wills. Jesus illustrates their perversity of will by comparing them to children at play who refuse the invitations to play games with others. They are offered a choice, but refuse altogether. John, the ascetical prophet of the desert, warned Israel of the wrath and destruction to befall all who fail to repent – he called Israel to repentance and righteousness of life. Most Jews remained unmoved. Their fear was not sufficient to motivate any drastic change of life. Jesus – the Divine Son sent by the heavenly Father – came filled with compassion and mercy. He invited all to enter the reign of heaven and experience its joy and peace. However, those unmoved by the fear instilled by John remained unmoved by the loving appeal of Jesus. Neither fear nor love could move them. Jesus implies that no matter how the Will of God is presented to these people – in the ascetical way of John or in the joyous way of Jesus – the Divine Will remains unacceptable to them. This obstinacy on their part reveals their intrinsic opposition to the Will of God. These men rationalized away the witness of Jesus and John, claiming one to be a sinner and the other a madman. They rationalized away the Will of God. As Luke later observed, “*The Pharisees and the lawyers, on the other hand, by falling to receive his baptism, defeated God’s plan in their regard.*” (Lk. 7:30) Jesus commented, “*Yet time will prove where wisdom lies.*” (Mt. 11:19)

“Wisdom” refers to the salvific plan of God. Time will demonstrate that Israel rejected God’s plan for its salvation. Jesus – as the Word made Flesh – is Wisdom Incarnate. Time will reveal that “*this Jesus is ‘the stone rejected by you the builders which has become the cornerstone.’ There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by*

which we are to be saved.” (Acts 4:11-12)

THE PRICE FOR REJECTION

Who could measure the sorrow Jesus personally experienced in the face of such wholesale rejection by the people He loved so dearly. Perhaps only Mary, His Mother, understood in any degree the sorrow of her son. Simeon had foretold this sorrow to her and immediately added, *“And you yourself shall be pierced with a sword”* as *“the thoughts (and choices) of many hearts may be laid bare.” (Lk. 2:35)*

To cause sorrow to the heart of Jesus and remain unmoved – unrepentant – is no small sin. People cannot continually reject the mercy of God coming through Jesus Christ and still escape the justice of God. To reject mercy is to receive justice. Jesus warns of this when He sees so little fruit produced by so much loving labor.

Three cities are mentioned as the recipients of many miracles by Jesus: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. Jesus compares the Jewish people with the pagan people. We know how much the Jews despised such people. The Lord said that the Jews failed to repent in the face of great Divine manifestation within their cities, but that the pagan people would not have been so obstinate – they would have repented. He warned that these pagans would fare better on the day of Judgment than these unrepentant Jews.

Of course, these three cities represented the inhabitants of these cities. Spiritual disaster is being foretold, for these people failed to repent in the face of so many divine manifestations within their lives. Divine Love came to them in Jesus through the miracles which touched their physical lives. Nevertheless, they hardened their hearts against Jesus and His invitation. Jesus reveals that the final judgment will be one of justice for those who have rejected the mercy of God in their lives: To whom much has been given, much will be demanded; to whom little has been given, little will be demanded.

The judgment upon the citizens of these cities could well symbolize the judgment to fall upon many who have possessed membership in the Church. In a real sense, Jesus has lived in our midst and our lives have experienced many spiritual graces and signs of God’s providential love for us. Despite all this, many Christian lives express no love of Christ, no true

commitment to His Church. People cannot rest securely because they have never inhabited Sodom and Gomorra. The citizens of Capernaum will receive a heavier judgment than those of Sodom – their evil was of the spirit rather than of the flesh.

REJECTION OF THE WISE AND STRONG

When Jesus compared those who accepted Him with the scribes, the Pharisees and their disciples, He realized that He had been rejected by the leaders of the people – those considered wise. He had been accepted by the “little ones” – child-like and uncomplicated people. They possessed an openness to truth, which made them potentially receptive to the revelations of God’s Holy Spirit. Those men trained in the law and the traditions of the ancient, had actually been hindered in their coming to God. Intellectual pride corrupted their religious spirit. They so identified their understanding of the Scriptures with the Will and the Spirit of God, that they refused to consider the claims of Christ, which called into question their interpretation of the Scriptures. Pride locked these men into resisting the very Spirit of God. They believed that the Torah contained the complete expression of God’s Will for mankind, and since these men possessed almost exact knowledge of the Torah, only they could adequately judge what was of God and what was not of God!

Jesus sees the Will of God being revealed in both the men and women who accepted Him and in those who rejected Him. In a prayer of thanksgiving, Jesus both acknowledges and accepts the Will of God.

Matthew followed the condemnation of the three cities by Jesus, by relating a revelation by Jesus which emphasized the seriousness of the sin involved in the deliberate rejection of Jesus Christ, His teachings, His ministry, His Person. The words of Jesus – now quoted by Matthew have no parallel in this gospel account. It has been seen as a meteor falling out of John the Evangelist’s heaven. Jesus now revealed, *“Everything has been given over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son – and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.”* (Mt. 11:27)

This text clearly manifests Jesus’ conscious awareness of His own Divinity. Jesus identifies Himself as the Wisdom of God. When Jesus equates His knowledge with that of the Father, He clearly manifests His conscious

Divinity. With the statement that only the Father possesses, the adequate power to know the Son and the Son possesses the adequate power to know the Father, Jesus places both the Father and the Son on the same transcendental Divine plane of existence. It flows from this truth that the Son alone can adequately reveal the Divine Nature. This Divine Revelation, Jesus shares with whom He wills. It is the disciples of Jesus who come to a true knowledge of God through their association and understanding of Jesus. This truth is made crystal clear in the Fourth Gospel, "*Lord, Philip said to him, 'show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'*" *Philip, Jesus replied, 'after I have been with you all this time, you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.'*" (Jn. 14:8-9)

In the light of this divine reality, Jesus can validly make this most sublime offer and gift of Love to mankind. It is an offer addressed to those people "*lying prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd*" at the sight of whom "*his heart was moved with pity.*" He offers to become their good shepherd who will lead them to refreshment and peace. Jesus says, "*Come to me, all of you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light.*" (Mt. 11:28-30) The Jews referred to the Mosaic Law as "*the yoke of Yahweh.*"

Jesus invites people to accept the reign of God which comes in Him. Jesus Christ expresses perfectly and completely the Divine Will in this world. Jesus asks people to accept, into their lives, this expressed Will of God – to humbly submit their hearts and spirits to the Spirit of God. This submission becomes the "yoke" of the New Covenant. In reality, the very Person of Jesus becomes the yoke which He asks people to accept and bear.

A person receives the invitation to accept, in faith and confidence, the Person of Jesus into this life – the Lordship of Jesus over this life. Not only must Jesus be accepted by a person, but He must become the model for personal living. It becomes a "light and easy" yoke because of the nature of its Master, "*Learn of me because I am gentle and humble of heart.*" Jesus says He has a gentle and humble personality. We learn all about the gentleness and humility of God by observing and studying the Person of Jesus. To the disciples who are willing "to learn" to be like Jesus, the Lord promises them, "*Your souls will find rest!*" They will find fulfillment of life.

Jesus' invitation always stands – "*Come to Me!*" If in the actual living of daily life the burdens and trials of human existence become too much, too overwhelming, too destructive, we may discover we are going it alone or are seeking the wrong help. Often we do not – as invited and encouraged – come to Jesus who promised the weary and the burdened, "*I will refresh you.*" All this is the language, not of a prophet of God, but of a Son.

SIGN OF CONTRADICTION

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOUR SHOULDERS AND LEARN FROM ME, FOR I AM GENTLE AND HUMBLE OF HEART. YOUR SOULS WILL FIND REST, FOR MY YOKE IS EASY AND MY BURDEN LIGHT.” (MT. 11:29-30)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction and from Luke 2:25-35 and Psalms 95:8-11.

1. Which teaching and miracle of Jesus – presented by Matthew to this point – do you find most impressive? Explain your choice.
2. What does Acts 2:22 teach about the importance of signs and wonders worked by Jesus?
3. What does the prophecy of Simeon reveal about the ministry and the person of Jesus?
4. In what way do you see the words of Psalms 95:8-11 applying to Israel's rejection of Jesus?

SECOND DAY: Read “An Encounter With John,” Matthew 11:1-6 and Isaiah 29:18-19 and 35:1-10.

1. In what way does the rejection of others affect the ministry of Jesus?
2. What does this teach you about your own religious and spiritual life?
3. What does the question of John seem to imply?
4. In what way does Jesus fulfill and go beyond the prophecy of Isaiah?

THIRD DAY: Read “Jesus' Witness to John,” Matthew 11:7-14; Luke 7:29-30 Malachi 3:1-3 and Sirach 48:1-12.

1. What do the questions and descriptions of Jesus, concerning John, confirm about John?

2. What do you understand by the least in the kingdom of Heaven being greater than John?
3. What do you understand by Matthew 11:14?
4. What does Jesus' teaching about John imply about Himself?

FOURTH DAY: Read "Rejection of John and Jesus," Matthew 11:16-19 and Luke 3:7-18.

1. How would you describe the character and presentation of John?
2. How does Jesus differ in character and mission from John?
3. What do these differences teach you about the Will of God?
4. What does the rejection of John and Jesus, by the Jews, imply?

FIFTH DAY: Read "The Price for Rejection," Matthew 11:2-24 and from Lk. 13:34 and 19:41-44.

1. How does personal rejection, by the Jews, affect Jesus?
2. What do the three cities mentioned in this text represent?
3. What price must be paid for rejecting the salvation coming through Jesus?
4. What does this teach you about your own religious life?

SIXTH DAY: Read "Rejection of the Wise and Strong," Matthew 11:25-30; I Cor. 1:19-21, 27-29; John 14:18-11 and Acts 15:10-12.

1. What do you learn from Jesus' prayer of Thanksgiving?
2. What do Matthew 11:27 and John 14:8-11 reveal about the nature of Jesus?
3. Why can we only truly know the Person of the Father through Jesus?
4. What is the yoke of Jesus and how does one accept and bear this yoke?

CHAPTER 13

JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

INTRODUCTION

Reflecting back upon the life of Jesus of Nazareth, John the Evangelist wrote, *"To his own he came, yet his own did not accept him. Any who did accept him he empowered to become children of God."* (Jn. 1:11-12) Many have pondered over that statement and asked, "Why did his own not accept him?"

At the time of Jesus, the leading laymen among the Jews belonged to the powerful and influential religious party of the Pharisees. The members of this party – along with the members of the Sadducee party – appeared on the gospel scene as strongly opposing Jesus of Nazareth. Members of both parties refused to acknowledge His claim to be the Messiah of Israel. However, both recognized the powerful influence exercised by Jesus over the common people. They feared the ultimate effect of Jesus upon the people and their religion. They diligently labored to offset and eliminate His influence among the Jewish people. They began with seeking to destroy His good reputation and ended by seeking to destroy His very Person.

In the gospel accounts, the Pharisees stand out as the foremost enemy of Jesus. They appear as the central force opposing Jesus. Their influence turns the tide of public opinion against Him. The name of "Pharisee" is commonly held to come from the Hebrew "perusim," or the Aramaic "perissazza" – probably meaning the "separated ones." Since being "separated" is such an important element in religious worship – an essential condition for religious purity and consecration – the concept "Pharisee" most likely signifies "holy ones." A person who would join such a religious society desires to be a holy person, dedicated and acceptable to God. He consciously withdraws from the general society, rejecting its moral behavior as insufficient to please God.

Membership in such a party could be motivated by true religious zeal – by an ardent desire to be pleasing to God – which certainly would be laudable.

However, human nature being what it is, people may often be motivated to embrace such a religious life for reasons of personal pride. They do not wish to be identified with the masses – which they often despise. Their “holy life” does not lead them closer to God, but only separates them more deeply from other human beings and from a true evaluation of themselves. Jesus describes such a person in His Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the temple.

At the time of Herod the Great, the Pharisees are reported to number about six thousand. There is no reason to believe that they would have been any less in number in Jesus’ day. From Josephus, who had himself been a Pharisee, we learn a good deal about this religious party. The general goal for a member of the Pharisee party was to become a holy man of God. As Josephus expressed it, *“to be righteous men and to do all those things which made them pleasing to God.”* Faith and reason guided the Pharisees in the fulfillment of their spiritual ambitions. Josephus said, *“They follow the conduct of reason and whatever that (good sense and intelligence) revealed to them as good that they do.”* Through their faith they came to the substance of God’s Will by accepting the Torah as the revealed Will of Yahweh. However, their interpretation of this Will rested more upon their reasoning powers rather than upon prayer and inspiration.

Josephus spoke of the Pharisees as being men *“who valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers, and made men believe that they were highly favored by God.”* He went on to say *“that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses.”*

In the minds of the Pharisees, what was important was the observance of all these rules and regulations which they equated with the Torah. If men guarded the traditions of the ancients, they would adhere to the letter of the Divinely revealed Scriptures and be assured of righteousness before God.

However, the Pharisees were not the only intelligent and knowledgeable people among the Jews. There were many who belonged to the leading priestly families and to families of great wealth and political influence who were trained in both Hebrew and Hellenistic thought. These men rejected and opposed the teachings of the Pharisees. Josephus wrote of them, *“(They) say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are*

“(They) say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the traditions of our forefathers.” These men formed the religious party called the “Sadducees.” In opposition to the Pharisees, the Sadducees taught – in the words of Josephus, *“But the doctrine of the Sadducees is this: That souls die with the bodies; nor do they regard the observation of any thing beside what the law enjoins upon them . . . The Sadducees take away fate, and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at the disposal of fate; but they suppose that all our actions are in our own power. so that we are ourselves the causes of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly.”*

The Sadducees were the only party of power in opposition to the Pharisees. Nevertheless, they had only wealth and political influence on their side. The people had no respect for them and rejected their teachings and leadership. Josephus made clear where the power with the people lay. The Pharisees received a lot of attention from the city dwellers because *“of their virtuous conduct, both in their action and in their speech.”* He deduced that because of their teachings, *“they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers and sacrifice, they perform them according to their direction.”* Josephus continued, *“The Pharisees have the multitudes on their side . . . These have so great a power over the multitudes, that when they say anything against the king or against the high priest they are presently believed.”*

The Torah prescribed many precepts to be observed and the scribes continued to add to them. These lawyers insisted upon the same exact observance of their legislations as that of the Torah. They had a saying, *“It is only Satan and man’s evil nature that raise up any objections against the teachings of the wise.”*

The Pharisees of the gospel time developed amidst a rationalist and legalistic background. Law and its observance were over-emphasized. An over-emphasis of a truth or good often destroys the delicate balance existing in truth and goodness, and automatically does much harm to the cause of truth and goodness.

Balanced goodness always suffers when things are carried to extremes. When these extremes become incarnated within human personalities – or within religious or political parties – much damage often occurs in human

society; we see then what has been called "man's inhumanity to man." Many social injustices occur, many human rights are violated – all in the name of truth, goodness and, most often, in the names of God and religion.

During Jesus' life on earth, the extremes were firmly entrenched and incarnated in Israel. The party of the Pharisees represented the religious Traditionalists, and the party of the Sadducees represented the religious Liberals. They were in deadly opposition to one another. Into this environment appears Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' very being and the influence of His personality within the Jewish society, equally threatened the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Being an alternative to black and white, the light and power He emanated caused mental confusion and emotional turmoil. The righteousness of the members of these parties was being called into question by His presence. The presence of Jesus erased the distinctive lines between the two extremes to the confusion of both troops.

Being ancient and natural enemies, the traditional Pharisees and the liberal Sadducees were able to momentarily put aside their differences in the face of a common enemy: Jesus of Nazareth. Once He was removed, their own battleground would once more be sharply defended. Each side could rest securely, once again, in their own self-righteousness.

THE SABBATH CONTROVERSY

Matthew demonstrates the distinction between the religious spirit of man and the Spirit of God's own Son. This difference is demonstrated within two incidents which occur on the Sabbath. In the first incident, Jesus and His disciples are making a Sabbath-day journey to the synagogue. They pass through a grain field. Some of the disciples pull off some of the ears of grain, shuck them by rubbing them in their hands, and then eat the kernels of grain. Some of the Pharisees who presently keep Jesus under close observation, notice this action. It is indeed a violation of the Sabbath. They protest to Jesus, "*See here! Your disciples are doing what is not permitted on the sabbath.*" (Mt. 12:2) To this accusation, Jesus responds by challenging their interpretation of the law. With examples from Scripture and present temple practice, Jesus demonstrates that precedents already exist which support the truth that the religious regulations are subject to the practical needs of the human being and the practical demands of Divine Worship.

In the case of David and his men, it was the high priest Ahimelech who

allowed the dispensation from the law in the face of the common human need of hunger. The priests in the temple are dispensed from the Sabbath regulation because their service is given to the Lord. The Pharisees are looking at the law and not at the human need. They are not concerned about human needs. Jesus insinuates that their zeal for the law has made them merciless. He seeks to place the Sabbath observance back into its proper perspective – the Sabbath is for man and not man for the Sabbath. It is a time given for physical rest and recognition and worship of God who physically sustains him and makes him holy.

He implies that His own Person is more sacred and more holy than any temple. What can be done without sin in the service of the temple can certainly be done in the service of One greater than the temple. The disciples were in the service of God's own Son. Jesus now declares what is unbearable to the ears of the Pharisees, "*The Son of Man is indeed Lord of the Sabbath.*" (Mt. 12:8)

Jesus demonstrated His lordship over the Sabbath when He reached the synagogue. Present in the synagogue was a man with a shriveled hand. The Pharisees decided to use the man as a test case. They asked Jesus, "*Is it lawful to work a cure on the sabbath?*" (Mt. 12:10) Their motive was impure, as they sought not knowledge from Jesus but evidence against Him. They believed that curing an illness was the practice of medicine, which was forbidden on the Sabbath, unless the sick person be in danger of death. The Pharisees accepted, as licit, to rescue one's animal on the Sabbath; however, they were unwilling to extend aid to a suffering and afflicted human being. To their question, Jesus responded, "*Clearly, good deeds may be performed on the sabbath. To the man he said, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and it was perfectly restored; it became as sound as the other.*" (Mt. 12:12-13) These very religious men experienced no joy over the mercy extended to the afflicted man. In these Sabbath episodes, Jesus teaches that it is not wrong for people to attend to their basic needs on the Sabbath, nor is it wrong to extend aid to those in need. It is always right – in all places and times – to do good to others.

The Scriptures manifest what bitter fruit such a religious spirit can produce in men. The Pharisees are totally blinded to their own spiritual condition. They accuse Jesus of sin because He defends basic human rights and teaches the moral obligation to do good on the Sabbath. These very men now come together and plot murder on the Sabbath, "*When the Pharisees*

were outside they began to plot against him to find a way to destroy him. Jesus was aware of this, and so he withdrew from that place.” (Mt. 12:14-15)

MOMENT OF CRISIS

Israel's rejection of Jesus now awaits but finalization. It has hardened its heart against the Messiah. In the face of this hostility, Jesus assumes a prudent and cautious attitude towards the Jews and the exercise of His ministry. Hostility makes it impossible for Him now to enter into "their synagogues." He centers His ministry within the country areas, avoiding the crowded cities in order to lessen the danger of an attempt upon His life.

At this moment of crisis, Matthew seemingly pauses within his narration to clarify important points. Hatred and rejection do not alter Jesus' essential attitude towards His people. He continues His mission of mercy and moves among them as their Savior. Jesus desires no messianic recognition for His works; the popular idea of the Messiah was not in keeping with the role Jesus must now fulfill. At this time, messianic publicity would but cause greater confusion and disturbance, which Jesus seeks prudently to avoid.

Matthew loosely quotes from the prophet Isaiah; a prophecy, which confirms how the messianic role, assumed by Jesus of Nazareth, is in keeping with the Will of God. This prophecy of Isaiah indicates the direction in which the life and the mission of Jesus will now be directed.

In the face of bitter disappointment – hatred and rejection of Israel – Jesus neither alters His mission nor His heart. He continues in gentleness and humility. He will not conquer this world through the might of arms or through any other secular means, but by the power of His Holy Spirit. With the spiritually weak, He will be gentle so that "*the bruised reed*" will not be crushed. With those within whom Divine Faith and Love faintly flicker, He will deal prudently, so that "*the smoldering wick*" of their spirit will not die. This is His policy. He will never alter it, for it alone reflects the Heart of God in this world.

Jesus turns, in obedience to God's Will, to the Gentiles to whom the fullness of Divine Truth will be declared. This mission will continue until this Divine Truth achieves complete victory within the world. The Messiah whom the Jews despise will become the Hope of the Gentiles.

JESUS AND BEELZEBUL

What Matthew now records is similar to what was written in Chapter Nine. *"A possessed man who was brought to him was blind and mute. He cured the man so that he could speak and see. All in the crowd were astonished. 'Might this not be David's son?' they asked. When the Pharisees heard this, they charged, 'This man can expel demons only with the help of Beelzebul, the prince of demons.'"* (Mt. 12:22-24)

We see the people on the verge of accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Upon their messianic enthusiasm, the Pharisees pour the cold water of their vicious accusation. They seek to turn the people exactly in the opposite direction. Remember the teaching of Josephus – these men had great influence over the common people. They respected and venerated them as their reliable religious guides and teachers.

Their accusation is most deadly – gravely sacrilegious. Jesus accomplishes all His works under the inspiration and through the power of the Holy Spirit. In reality, the heavenly Father works through Him. The Pharisees identify these works as being inspired and empowered by Satan. They attribute what is of the Holy Spirit to be the product of the unholy spirit. The works of the Father are identified as the works of Satan.

The Pharisees accused Jesus of being a magician in league with Satan. The word "Beelzebul" means "Baal the prince," or as translated by some, "lord of the house." The name implies Satan to be the lord of the kingdom of darkness. All the possessed people were within this kingdom and under the will of this evil lord. Jesus seeks to demonstrate logically the foolishness of the Pharisees' accusation.

By His ministry, Jesus was actually exorcising Israel. It was being cleansed and set free. Satan was being expelled from the House of Israel. Such activity on such a grand scale weakened and despoiled the kingdom of Satan. Satan is both evil and intelligent. The only logical deduction is that Satan has met, in Jesus, someone stronger than himself. By a mere command or gesture, Jesus expelled unclean spirits. His ministry clearly manifested His superior power. From the evidence given by Jesus, the only logical and true estimation of His ministry is that, in Jesus, the Kingdom of God has come upon this earth.

WARNING TO HIS ENEMIES

After defending Himself, Jesus turns upon His accusers and solemnly warns them. He does not hesitate to declare the fullness of their evil spiritual state; they are in imminent danger of damnation – yet Jesus does not rob them of hope. Salvation is still possible. However, it implies accepting Jesus in faith – He cannot be by-passed on the Way to God. Those endeavoring to do so will be lost. The Pharisees have blasphemed against the Son of Man and, by so doing, they have bordered upon blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Jesus sternly warns against this sin.

The Son of God appeared upon this earth as meek and humble, and men will be forgiven for their failure to recognize His true nature; but the time will come when Israel will face the fact of His resurrection from the dead and the Holy Spirit will clearly be poured out on His disciples. To continue to persist in unbelief and to attribute all this to the work of evil will be the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. Such a sin produces a spiritual condition which makes forgiveness impossible. Once again, we must emphasize that the reason for the unforgiveableness of the sin rests in man and not God. Apparently, by such a sin, a person closes himself off from the grace of repentance. Jesus solemnly declares the eternal reality of such a sinful condition.

Jesus confronts the hypocrisy of His enemies and demands the justice of being judged, at least, by His good works. He demands His works be reviewed and a decision be made; one is with Him or against Him. Jesus will not accept a neutral position in this regard.

Jesus warns people about their speech. From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Words are easy to form, but the damage caused by them may be irreparable. Men spoke evil of Jesus and their words turned men away from their Savior and His salvation. Today they speak in like manner against his true Church and turn people away from the salvation she offers. To undo the effect of evil speech is like trying to gather the feathers of a pillow scattered by a powerful wind. Jesus warns that people will be held accountable for the evil their words have produced.

WITHOUT REPENTANCE

These enemies of Jesus had not come to faith through His miracles. They now requested a sign from Him that would completely expel all doubt in Him. Jesus knows that, because of the malice of their hearts, nothing will satisfy them. They do not lack signs – they lack repentance. They will receive the call to repentance and they will be given one sign – “the sign of Jonah” – His resurrection from the dead.

Once again, Jesus compares Israel to pagan people. The citizens of Nineveh repented at the preaching of the prophet Jonah. Israel failed to repent and one greater than Jonah preached to them. The queen of the South came, seeking wisdom at the feet of Solomon. Israel rejected wisdom from one greater than Solomon. On the day of judgment, these pagans will bear witness against Israel *“because you failed to recognize the time of your visitation.” (Lk. 19:44)*

In a little parable, Jesus reveals the present state of Israel and gives a warning about its future. *(See Mt. 12:43-45.)* The ministry of Jesus had freed Israel from the power of Satan. However, if Israel fails to acknowledge that the Spirit of God has come to Israel, in Jesus, and refuses to accept Jesus, Israel is destined for great evil. The fullness of evil will come upon Israel. One has but to read the account of Josephus of the last days of Jerusalem before the Romans entered it in 70 A.D. to realize what a Hellhole Jerusalem became prior to its destruction by the Romans.

The Pharisees’ rejection of Jesus surfaces against the vital importance of repentance in the economy of salvation. Many Jews in Jesus’ day rested spiritually secure in the knowledge of being a descendant of Abraham. Early within this gospel narrative, John the Baptist warned both the Pharisees and the Sadducees of the necessity to reform. Being a Jew was not going to automatically insure one of membership in the messianic kingdom. It would demand a faith-commitment to the Messiah. Many people were reluctant to accept Jesus as the Messiah – they withheld their commitment to Him. One day, Jesus used an incident in His life to teach the crowd about the relationship between faith in Him as the Messiah and membership in the messianic kingdom – membership in the Family of God.

(See Mt. 12:46-50.) This incident does not imply that the relatives of Jesus are excluded from the messianic kingdom. It implies that natural kinship – even one as close as the natural mother of the Messiah – is not the foundation for membership in the Messianic Community. The only foundation is obedience to the Father's Will.

Jesus gestures towards His disciples and identifies them as His family. Those who have become His disciples have fulfilled the Will of God. They are the beginning of the Messianic Community and members of the family of the Messiah. Obedience to the Father's Will is the foundation for membership in the Community, which enjoys eternal life in God and assures a person a seat at the Messianic banquet.

JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“HE WHO IS NOT WITH ME IS AGAINST ME, AND HE WHO DOES NOT GATHER WITH ME SCATTERS.” (MT. 12:30)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, from Acts 15:1-5 and 26:9-11; Gal. 2:4-5; and Jn. 7:45-49.

1. How would you describe the party of the Pharisees and the type of religious person produced by this party?
2. How did the Sadducees differ from the Pharisees?
3. Why do you think they acted so violently towards Jesus?
4. What effect did they have upon the early Church?

SECOND DAY: Read “The Sabbath Controversy,” Mt. 12:1-5, Exodus 20:8-11; 31:12-14 and Num. 15:32-36.

1. What does the Old Testament teach about the Sabbath Observance?
2. What would you say is the spirit behind the law?
3. What does Jesus teach in the first Sabbath incident?
4. What does Jesus teach in the second Sabbath incident?

THIRD DAY: Read “Moment of Crisis,” from Mt. 13:16-21 and Is. 42:1-9.

1. Why do you think Jesus demands silence about His miracles?
2. How do you see this as a moment of crisis in the mission of Jesus?

3. How does this affect Jesus' ministry?
4. What do you see being foretold in the prophecy of Isaiah?

FOURTH DAY: Read "Jesus and Beelzebul," and re-read Mt. 9:32-34; Mt. 12:22-30; and 2 Kgs. 1:2-8.

1. What do the readings from Matthew indicate about the Pharisees' responsibility for turning the people from Jesus?
2. What does their accusation imply?
3. Why is this accusation blasphemous?
4. What is Jesus' defense against this accusation?

FIFTH DAY: Read "Warning To His Enemies" and Mt. 12:31-37.

1. What do you learn from Mt. 12:30 and 12:33?
2. What do you understand by Mt. 12:31-32?
3. What does Jesus teach about our speech?
4. What do you understand by Mt. 12:37?

SIXTH DAY: Read "Without Repentance" and from Mt. 12:38-50.

1. Why does Jesus refuse the request of the Pharisees?
2. What is meant by the Sign of Jonah?
3. What do you learn from Mt. 43-45?
4. What is Jesus' teaching in the incident described in Mt. 12:46-50?

CHAPTER 14

JESUS TEACHES IN PARABLES

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned earlier, we have come to the turning point in Jesus' ministry, mission and life. As long as there remains doubt and uncertainty, Jesus continues to pursue the hearts of people. But when the hearts become hardened and the wills are confirmed against Him, energy is exerted to turn people from Him. Jesus leaves them to their end – freely willed. Their disbelief culminates into hatred and contempt of Jesus and finds expression in their malicious desire to destroy Him.

From this moment on, it is a real war. Jesus changes His tactics. He had taught, *“Declare a tree good and its fruit good or declare a tree rotten and its fruit rotten, one or the other, for you can tell a tree by its fruit.”* (Mt. 12:33) He judges Israel to be a rotten tree; he promulgates His findings – it is an *“evil and unfaithful age”* (Mt. 12:39) – *“a perverse age”* (Mt. 11:16). On that day of final judgement, it will stand condemned, *“At the judgement, the citizens of Nineveh will rise with the present generation and be the ones to condemn it.”* (Mt. 12:41)

As the old Israel is rejected, the New Israel is now acknowledged, *“Then, extending his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘There are my mother and my brothers.’”* (Mt. 12:49-50) By so doing, Jesus confirms who has entered into the Kingdom of God, *“Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me.”* (Mt. 12:50) Jesus implies the Will of the Father has been fulfilled when people become His disciples. Such disciples constitute God's Kingdom on earth. They have become, on earth, the House of God, which will be filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

Jesus now turns away from those who refuse “to see” and “to hear.” He now concentrates His attention upon His disciples – those whose eyes have been opened to see Him and whose ears have been unstopped to hear Him. He will direct His time and energy towards strengthening them and completing their instruction, for they constitute the New Israel of God and

will continue the spreading of the Lords' Kingdom on earth.

PARABLES

At this point in Matthew's narration of the Gospel, Jesus begins to speak in parables to the crowds. In the discourse to follow, Jesus will teach using seven different parables. This is a definite change in His teaching methods; now he adverts to an art form called the "parable." The simplest explanation of a parable is to see it as a simile or metaphor extended. The added details become a story in verbal pictures. The parable – as does the simile and the metaphor – expresses a singular idea. The added details are not intended to have an independent meaning on their own, as is the case with an allegory. In such an art form as an allegory, all the details in the story are metaphors with special significance.

The parable is intended to be heard and not read. It is intended to affect the listener the moment he hears it. It is leading the hearer to grasp a particular point and come to a judgment. Once the judgment has been made, it has a surprising application on a different level. By seeing a truth on one level (often impersonal) through a parable, one is brought to a conscious awareness of the same truth with a higher and more personal application. We have an excellent example of this in the Old Testament when the prophet Nathan, by a parable, brought David around to unconsciously condemn himself and to pass sentence of condemnation upon himself.

The parable has often been used as a verbal weapon in time of controversy. It has been used to correct, reprove and attack. Nathan used it to reprove King David. We also see Jotham, in Judges, confronting the citizens of Shechem with their crime through a parable. In such circumstances, the parable is not used without danger. It is a means to force a truth upon people's conscious awareness – a truth which they may be unwilling to admit. This could result in a violent reaction within the hearer, with dangerous consequences for the speaker.

The setting for the first parable finds Jesus addressing the "great crowds" from His seat in the boat. For some time now, Jesus has spent much time and energy proclaiming the Kingdom of God to the people; inviting them to enter it now. Despite all the labor, the great crowds remain unmoved, uncommitted to Jesus. They will not enter the Kingdom of God. However,

despite all these obvious losses, a harvest of souls will be gathered. This is the point made by the first parable. To interpret a parable properly, one needs to listen to its closing line – there lies its “punch line” – the message of the tale.

At times, it will seem to the disciples that the labor is much and the harvest is scarce. Jesus desires to encourage those laborers sent out to gather the harvest. If the Lord of the harvest has sent them into the fields, their labor will bear fruit.

The Gospel truth must be proclaimed to the entire world, and the Lord commissioned His disciples to this task. It will fall anew upon each new generation of disciples to proclaim it in the entire world - in “their world.” Truth is power and must be proclaimed in order to bear fruit. Many disciples of Jesus sin through imprudent silence. Truth is like good seed when it falls upon fertile ground – it may take time but it will germinate. One never knows what will be the effect of truth prudently spoken. One certainly knows what the effect will be if not spoken – Nothing!

THE ALLEGORY OF THE SOWER

Matthew leaves his readers in little doubt as to why Jesus spoke to the people in parables. He writes, “*When the disciples got near him, they asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’*” He answered, “*I use parables when I speak to them because they look but do not see, they listen but do not hear or understand . . . Sluggish indeed is this people’s heart.*” (Mt. 10:13,15) Jesus’ words imply that the problem is not with the eyes and the ears, but with the heart. People have hardened their hearts against the Grace of God which demands a repentance they are unwilling to embrace.

Matthew goes on to relate that when the disciples returned to the house and separated from the great crowd, Jesus explained to them the mystery of the acceptance and rejection of Jesus Christ. He then gave a psychological explanation for the effects of His ministry.

The parable of the sower presently appears in the Gospel as an inspired allegory, which explains, on the psychological level, people’s reaction to Jesus Christ. One would have expected the disciples to have requested such a teaching from Jesus and to have received it from Him. This allegory expresses not only the ministry of Jesus, but the ministry of the Church.

The seed is identified in Mark as simply *"the word"*; as *"the word of God"* in Luke; and as *"the message about God's reign"* in Matthew. In summary, we can say that the seed symbolizes the Person of Jesus or – if one desires – the Gospel. Primarily, the Sower is Jesus Himself and, secondarily, the apostles and disciples of Jesus who act in His name. We are told that three categories of people receive Jesus in vain. It is implied that their encounter with Him does not lead to salvation. The first category of people reject and never accept Jesus. There is no preparation in their lives for their acceptance of Christ. The message is rejected out of ignorance. These people are left to the mercy of Satan and of his agent, to the world with its darkness. Jesus is dismissed from the life of such persons before they have the opportunity to realize who He is. The evangelist must note the need for a prudent presentation of Jesus to others. In such cases, ignorance is the natural enemy – the evil one uses ignorance to his advantage. Here, education, knowledge and understanding are the weapons needed to root Christ into the minds and hearts of such people.

In the next two cases, Jesus is accepted into the lives of both categories of people. In the second case, we have temporary conversion to Christ. All the evangelists agree that this begins with joy in Jesus and ends on a flat, disappointing note. Religious experience remains primarily in *"the flesh."* Its foundation remains mainly within religious feelings and emotions. We are told that when such people suffer any persecutions because of Jesus or the Gospel, they lose heart. Their hearts are not grounded within the Spirit, which could sustain their commitment when good religious feelings and emotions abandon them. Here we see the importance of spiritual growth and development in the three spiritual powers of the soul: faith, hope and charity, which grow amidst the trials and temptations that test them.

In the third category of people, there is no falling away from Christ. They remain but their religious spirit dies. The religious life of such people dies through neglect and indifference – or else it remains permanently in a dwarfed condition. Matthew speaks of their life being choked-off by worldly anxiety, lure of money. To which list Mark adds *"cravings of other sorts."* Of such people it could be said that they served the wrong master. Their treasure was misplaced and so was their heart. Death came to their spirits for they failed to grow in love of Christ. They failed to develop a spirit of detachment from this world.

These things, which the first three categories of people lack, are possessed by the fourth group in one degree or another. Matthew says of them that they hear *"the message and take it in"* (Mt. 13:23), and Luke adds that they hear it *"in a spirit of openness, retain it and bear fruit"* (Lk. 8:15). Mark simply states that they *"are the ones who listen to the word, take it to heart."* (Mk. 4:20) In a word, Jesus becomes their personal Treasure.

WEEDS IN THE KINGDOM

Matthew now records six parables which Jesus related. With these parables, Jesus instructs His disciples concerning the Kingdom of God on earth. Since the Kingdom of God on earth is equated with the Christian Community and the Church, these parables instruct the disciples about the Church on earth.

In the first of the six parables, Jesus relates the story of a farmer sowing good seed in his field, but during the night an enemy comes and sows a poisonous weed called the "darnel" or the "zizania." In the beginning of their growth, it is difficult to tell the two apart – their surface appearance is much the same. However, when the grain begins to appear, the difference is obvious. The two seeds grow side-by-side until one day the darnel is discovered. The farmer recognizes the work of an enemy. His servants want to root out the weeds, but the prudent farmer realizes that the wheat will be uprooted with the weeds. He prudently decides to let both come to maturity and to separate them at harvest time. The parable implies that good and evil will exist side-by-side in the Kingdom of God. Like the wheat and the weeds, they will grow together, but their end will not be the same.

The parable teaches that the reign of God on earth will not consist solely of good people, but it will contain unholy people also. This visible Church of Christ on earth will not be – as some Christians insist it must be – a holy community composed only of the saved. Until the Second Coming, it will be composed of wheat and weeds and the Church must not play God and seek to purge out the evil – tear out the weeds. In this world, it possesses the ministry to call all men to repentance – those in the Church and those outside of it. It is called to demonstrate patience with sinners, which reveals Christ's love and His desire that all men be saved.

Jesus now relates two parables which describe the future growth of the

Church. Both parables carry the same message – the Kingdom of God, which has a humble and almost imperceptible beginning, will become a great Kingdom on earth. The Old Testament had revealed so many glorious things about the messianic kingdom, that the beginning of this kingdom in Jesus was certainly a scandal to many. God's Kingdom does not come upon this earth by the power of the sword and the wealth of this world – it comes in God's Son, who appears meek and humble of heart and filled with the Spirit of Love. It begins in meekness – but it will end in glory. The reference to "*the birds of the air building their nests in its branches*" alludes to a vision of Daniel, which implies it will become the Universal Kingdom which gives shelter to all the nations.

In the second of these parables, Jesus uses the symbol of yeast permeating an enormous amount of flour. In normal usage, yeast or leaven would have been a symbol of evil. Jesus' use of yeast in this parable may be in reference to the Pharisees' opinion of His disciples as being sinners. Jesus implies that from this despised group of "sinners" who are His disciples, a glorious Kingdom would arise.

THE ALLEGORY OF THE WEEDS

At this point, Matthew stresses the separation between the crowd, which represents Israel in general, and the disciples of Jesus. From now on, the separation becomes more finalized – Israel will grow more hostile towards Jesus, and He will turn more to His disciples and their instruction. Matthew speaks of Jesus dismissing the crowd and going home. His disciples came to Him with the request, "*Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.*" (Mt. 13:36) At this request, another parable becomes an inspired allegory in which Jesus Christ is presented as Lord of the World. In this allegory, Jesus confirms the presence of evil people within His Kingdom on earth who will lead people away from Him and do other evil. However, this is the way things must be until the end. Then will come the hour in which the good and the evil will be separated. Jesus makes it clear that it will not be the work of the Church to decide who is weed and who is wheat – the angels will know.

Within the allegorical presentation of the parable, the emphasis shifts away from the patient toleration of evil within the Christian Community, to the final end, when all members of God's Kingdom must come to judgment before the Lord who said to His People, "*You shall be to me a kingdom of*

priests, a holy nation.” (Ex. 19:6) As Ananias and Sapphira were once removed from the Christian Community, so will all evildoers be removed from the Kingdom of God. Then the Scriptures will be fulfilled, “You, however, are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he claims for his own to proclaim the glorious works’ of the One who called you from darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pt. 2:9) to “shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom.”

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

Our Lord speaks now, in two parables, to the individuals who must decide, personally, for the Kingdom of God. In these two little parables, he stresses the worthy cost of entering the Kingdom of God. In the first case, we have the individuals who discover Christ within the ordinary environment of their every day life. Our Lord was always there – like the treasure in the field – but they could not see Him. He was hidden from their eyes. They had failed to recognize that under the gentle and humble appearance of Christ, lay their Lord and Savior. Once the awareness comes, the person prudently places the possession of Jesus above everything in life. Everything is sacrificed in order to enter the Kingdom of God.

In the second case, we have the individuals who, all their life, have sought for the best things in life, here symbolized by a search for fine pearls. Among the people of that time, a fine pearl was valued more highly than precious gold. In the Scriptures, the pearl symbolized wisdom. In this case, the searcher discovers Christ, whom he recognizes immediately as the “pearl of great price” – life’s greatest possession. All other possessions are immediately sacrificed in order to gain Christ, a possession beyond price. In both cases, the worth of the possession directed the price. Entrance into the Kingdom of God is worth more than anything in this world and it demands a willingness to sacrifice everything in order to possess it.

Jesus closes His discourse in parables with yet another parable stressing the worldwide embrace of the Kingdom of God. It is compared to a dragnet thrown into a sea which encompasses every kind of creature in the sea. This last parable reveals the catholicity of the Kingdom of God on earth. Here, no one is excluded by God – salvation is offered to all. The parable describes the earthly existence of the Kingdom of God before it reaches its final stage of perfection. The Church will be commissioned to save all.

After our Lord completes His teaching, He asks His disciples if they have understood what He has taught concerning the reign of God. They reply in the affirmative. This knowledge of those mysteries "hidden since the creation of the world" will make them the enlightened and inspired scribes within the Kingdom of God on earth. They will be like householders "*who can bring from his storeroom both the new and the old.*" (Mt. 13:52) The "new" is placed before the "old." The words of Jesus imply that it will be the knowledge of the New Testament which will be the light for the proper understanding of the Old Testament; for in the "new," Jesus Christ, the "old" finds its glorious and surprising fulfillment.

JESUS TEACHES IN PARABLES

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

"I WILL OPEN MY MOUTH IN PARABLES, I WILL ANNOUNCE WHAT HAS LAIN HIDDEN SINCE THE CREATION OF THE WORLD." (MT. 13:35)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction through Parables, Mt. 13:1-9, 2 Sam. 12:1-7 and Judges 9:8-15.

1. How would you describe a parable?
2. How did the prophet Nathan use the parable?
3. Why can the parable be a dangerous method to use?
4. What was the main point of the parable of the Sower?

SECOND DAY: Read "The Allegory of the Sower," and from Mt. 13:10-23.

1. Why does Jesus now teach the people in parables?
2. What is the root cause of these people failing to understand Jesus?
3. What do you see to be the three main reasons people do not come to salvation through Jesus?
4. What do you learn from the Allegory of the Sower?

THIRD DAY: Read "Weed in the Kingdom," from Mt. 13:24-33 and Daniel 4:7-9.

1. What do you see to be the main point of the parable of the weeds and the wheat?
2. What does this teach you about the Church on earth?
2. What do the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast teach us about the Kingdom of God on earth?

3. Why do you think the messianic kingdom has just a small beginning on earth?

FOURTH DAY: Read “The Allegory of the Weeds” and from Mt. 13:34-43.

1. What does Mt. 13:35 imply about the teachings of Jesus?
2. What do you see being implied by the words, “dismissing the crowd, he went home”?
3. What do you see to be the emphasis in the allegory?
4. What do you learn from this allegory?

FIFTH DAY: Read “Pearl of Great Price” and Mt. 13:44-53.

1. What is the lesson taught in the parable of the buried treasure and the fine pearl?
2. What does it teach you about Christian Discipleship?
3. What is the significance of the parable of the dragnet?
4. What does Mt. 13:51-52 teach you about discipleship?

SIXTH DAY: Read Mt. 13:54-58 and Lk. 4:16-30.

1. What does Nazareth symbolize in this incident?
2. What is their reason for rejecting Jesus?
2. How would you explain the brothers and sisters of Jesus in the light of the Church’s teaching on the perpetual virginity of Mary?
4. How would you explain Matthew 13:58?

CHAPTER 15

AS THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE

INTRODUCTION

When Jesus was a little boy, His parents – for His own safety – took Him to live in a small insignificant village, nestled in the Galilean hills, called “Nazareth.” Nazareth became, to Him, “His native place.” It became so identified with Him that people called Him “the Nazorean” and referred to Him as “Jesus of Nazareth.” Nazareth was Mary’s home. The presence of relatives in that village probably encouraged Joseph to settle there with Jesus and Mary.

Jesus was known among the villagers as the son of the “tekton.” His mother was Mary and His “brothers” were named James, Joseph, Simon and Judas and His “sisters” were known “neighbors.” Jesus was a recognized member of a family, a clan. Early and solid Christian Tradition confirms that all these “brothers” and “sisters” were cousins of Jesus, rather than His blood brothers and sisters.

Within the Semitic culture, family relationships were extremely close and clannish. The Aramaic and the Hebrew had no word to express “cousins” other than “ah” which could express any close family relationship. Close relatives were referred to as brothers and sisters. In Genesis, Lot is referred to as the “brother” of his Uncle Abraham, and Jacob is referred to as the “brother” of his Uncle Laban. (*See Gen. 14:14; 29:15.*) In the First Chronicles, the sons of Kish are described as the “brothers” of their cousins, the daughters of Eleazar. (*See I Ch. 23:22.*) We find a reference in Second Kings to the “forty-two” brothers of King Ahaziah. The “forty-two” were, no doubt, relatives of varying degree.

The perpetual virginity of Mary was commonly held in the early Church, and the first formal attack against it was made by Helvidius, who wrote in 380 that the “brethren of the Lord” were sons of Mary and Joseph, born after the virginal conception of Jesus. St. Jerome responded to this attack with his treatise *“The Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary,”* in which he

demonstrated the falsity of Helvidius' teachings and used authorities such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Justin the Martyr. St. Jerome concluded that the whole "turba" called "brethren of the Lord" deserves the name only in its broadest sense of cousins.

Matthew now describes the return of Jesus to Nazareth and the reception given to Him by the villagers. They recognized with amazement His "wisdom and miraculous powers" – nevertheless, they could not accept Him as the Messiah. He was too familiar to them. There was nothing extraordinary about His person and His family. Jesus did not live up to people's dreams and fantasies about a Messiah. His image among them only provoked their contempt. Jesus sadly commented, "*No prophet is without honor except in his native place, indeed in his own house.*" (Mt. 13:57) The episode in Nazareth forms the climax of the Galilean ministry with its rejection of Jesus. Nazareth symbolizes Israel, and its rejection of Jesus was the harbinger of things to come.

Matthew presently mentions that Jesus had come to the attention of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. As a native of Galilee, Jesus was under the political jurisdiction of this man. Matthew writes that when Herod Antipas heard about Jesus' reputation, he exclaimed, "*This man is John the Baptizer – it is he in person, raised from the dead; that is why such miraculous powers are at work in him!*" (Mt. 14:2) It was dangerous for a person of Jesus' position to be brought to the attention of a political ruler of such "suspicious temper" as Herod. Jesus' influence with the great crowds made Him just as much of a political threat to Herod as John had been. Luke records the incident in which certain Pharisees warned Jesus, "*Go on your way!*" they said. *Leave this place! Herod is trying to kill you.*" (Lk. 13:31)

Jesus once instructed His disciples, "*You must be clever as snakes and innocent as doves.*" (Mt. 10:16) In the months ahead, Jesus will appear not as a man on the run, but as a man wisely on the move – He will move as wisely as a serpent.

THE LOAVES AND FISHES

Jesus retired "to a deserted place by himself" after hearing of the death of John the Baptist – we are told that the whereabouts of His location were spread about and that "*The crowds heard of it and followed him on foot from*

the towns.” (Mt. 14:13) Once again, Matthew mentions Jesus’ reaction to the “vast throng” which He beheld before His eyes, “his heart was moved with pity.” (Mt. 14:14) Jesus experienced and identified with the sufferings of the people. It was not merely a feeling of their pain, but a desire to be with them in their sufferings. In Jesus’ case, it was a desire and power to mitigate suffering and, wherever possible, to free them from it. This, Matthew simply expressed by saying, “He cured their sick.”

On this occasion, the Gospel records one of the greatest deeds performed by Jesus – the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes. This miracle is recorded six times in the gospel accounts. Interestingly, this is the first miracle in which Jesus involves His disciples in an intimate fashion. The time has come to make them assume some responsibility. He puts upon them the burden to do something about the people’s problem. From the Gospel report, it appears that the disciples grew anxious about the potential problem the people may later become. They prudently sought to avoid an unnecessary crisis by suggesting that Jesus dismiss the crowd before dark. As they put it, *“This is a deserted place and it is already late. Dismiss the crowds so that they may go to the villages and buy some food for themselves.” (Mt. 14:15) Jesus understood the concern of His disciples and their lack of a sense of personal responsibility for the people’s needs. So He made it their concern and their responsibility, “There is no need for them to disperse. Give them something to eat yourselves.’ ‘We have nothing here,’ they replied, ‘but five loaves and a couple of fish.’” (Mt. 14:16-17) The disciples’ response to Jesus indicated the unreasonableness of His demand upon them, and their own personal powerlessness before such a need. Jesus insisted that they put what little they had into His hands and put faith in the power of His word.*

The main action in this drama remains the action of Jesus. His words and power effect the multiplication of food. The cause of the miracle is the need of the people and Jesus’ response to that need. Matthew records no crowd reaction to such a marvelous miracle. The deed itself was a messianic sign to the people.

It is in John’s gospel account that we see the proper reaction on the part of the people and the proper interpretation of the miracle. John states that the people desired to make Jesus king, by force if necessary. John records, *“At that, Jesus realized that they would come and carry him off to make him king, so he fled back to the mountain alone.” (Jn. 6:15)*

The Gospel of John makes it very clear that the “bread from the heavens” is both the Word of God and the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Without a doubt, this miracle is strongly symbolic and suggests the Eucharistic celebration within the Christian Community. The gestures of Christ, the blessing, the breaking of the bread, the omission of the fish, the distribution by the disciples would certainly recall to the mind of the readers the Eucharistic celebration. It would be seen as a prophetic sign prefiguring the Lord’s Supper, and the final messianic banquet in which the blessed will be “satisfied.”

JESUS WALKS ON WATER

Jesus now immediately commands His disciples to depart by boat for the other side without Him. He remains and dismisses the crowds, after which *“he went up on the mountain by himself to pray, remaining there alone as evening drew on.”* (Mt. 14:23-24) While Jesus is in serene prayer, His disciples struggle out at sea. They are a contrast to one another – Jesus in prayerful peace and the disciples troubled by their hostile environment. Their boat is impeded by heavy waves which toss them about and by a strong head wind which slows their progress. Sometime around three in the morning, the disciples look up to see Jesus approaching their boat – walking upon the water. The sight of this “vision” has a terrifying effect upon them, *“‘It is a ghost!’ they said, and in their fear they began to cry out.”* (Mt. 14:26) The disciples *“went to pieces.”* Matthew notes that *“Jesus hastened to reassure them, ‘Get hold of yourselves! It is I. Do not be afraid!’”* (Mt. 14:27)

This incident answers any questions which might have been stirred within their hearts by the miracle of the loaves and fishes. It is a “theophany” – a Divine manifestation. Jesus identifies Himself with the Divine Name *“Ego eimi.”* (We studied this concept at some length in the Fourth Gospel.) We read in Exodus that Yahweh identified himself to Moses as *“I AM.”* He said to Moses, *“This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you.”* (Ex. 3:14) When Jewish scholars translated this text into the Greek language, they translated *“I am”* as *“Ego eimi.”*

Both the actions and the words of Jesus proclaim His Divinity. Jesus tells the disciples that they must not be afraid because God is with them. In Jesus, God is with them. The disciples are not to be afraid of God.

Within this episode, the personality and character of Peter emerge for the first time. Peter appeared as the representative and spokesman for those in the boat. Peter asked to share in the miraculous power of Jesus Christ – to come on his own to where Jesus was. To Peter’s request, Jesus replied, *“Come!” . . . So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water, moving towards Jesus. But when he perceived how strong the wind was, becoming frightened, he began to sink and cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”* (Mt. 14:29-30) Peter lost faith in the power of Christ to sustain him in such a threatening environment. Jesus chastised Peter, *“How little faith you have!”* *“Why did you falter?”* (Mt. 14:31) Peter’s faltering certainly revealed the quality of his faith. Did he falter because all the time he really had more faith in himself than in Christ? When he was called upon to depend completely upon Christ – when his own resources were of no avail – he became frightened. His fear demonstrated, both to himself and Christ, the measure of his faith in Christ.

The incident at sea certainly symbolizes the Church – represented by the disciples in the boat – surrounded by a world of evil. It must not falter on its way to God or in its mission within the world. Regardless of the conditions in which it finds itself, it must not lose faith in the presence and power of Christ within the Church. Even though Jesus is now removed from sight, the Church is always present to Christ and Christ is always present within the Church to restore it to peace and bring it safely to shore.

Peter wanted to come to Jesus outside the boat. He discovered he did not have the faith to do it alone. Jesus had to put Peter back in the boat – and it was as good for those in the boat as it was for Peter. We are told that when Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the winds died down and there was peace, and the disciples within the boat came to perfect faith – they all arrived safely at their destination.

THE TASSEL OF HIS CLOAK

We are told that when Jesus and His disciples reached the shore at Gennesaret – along the northeast shore of the sea – the people recognized Jesus at once. Matthew tells us, *“People brought him all the afflicted, with the plea that he let them do no more than touch the tassel of his cloak. As many as touched it were fully restored to health.”* (Mt. 14:35-36) It is not without reason that Matthew emphasizes that the healing occurred when

the people touched the tassel of His cloak.

Connecting the healing – which is a Divine activity – with the touching of the tassel on Jesus' garment, indicates the intrinsic holiness of Jesus. It is a Divine affirmation that Jesus completely fulfills the Will of God – Jesus is totally in tune with the Will of God. Secondly, it demonstrates God's Will to heal and save his people through the Person of Jesus. Salvation flows from Jesus to those who come to Him in faith.

In the Gennesaret area, Jesus confronts an official fact-finding committee composed of Jerusalem's Pharisees and scribes. They catch up with Jesus in the Gennesaret district, and a confrontation ensues, which reveals who truly possesses the proper and authentic religious spirit in Israel.

The Pharisees maintained that the observance of their religious traditions demonstrated the religious spirit of a true Israelite. They condemned all as sinners who did not abide by their religious criteria. From Jesus' point of view, these people went around noting the "speck" in the eyes of others, but failed to see the "beam" in their own eyes. The confrontation began with the Pharisees' attack upon the disciples – which, in truth, represented an attack upon the Christian Community. Again, the disciples were accused of being sinners and of violating the prescriptions of ritual purity, which were based upon disputed interpretation of Levitical legislation.

Jesus does not directly defend His disciples' behavior. His defense is a counter-attack upon the accusers. They become the accused. In a sense, Jesus says to them, *"You see the speck in someone else and call it sin. Let me point out the beam in you which you call virtue. You say they violate the traditions of the ancients by their habits, and I say you violate the law of God by your traditions."* Jesus centers in, for example, upon the fourth commandment of honoring one's parents, which Jesus maintains the Pharisees violated by a practice of dedicating their property or possession to the temple – which removed it thereby from any secular use, such as supporting one's parents with it. The Pharisees made their judgment based upon the "speck" – Jesus now renders His judgment based upon the "beam," *" . . . for the sake of your tradition you have nullified God's word. You hypocrites!" (Mt. 15:6-7)*

Jesus moves from this point to abrogate the very Divine Law upon which these traditions rested. Jesus decrees that a person is not contaminated

nor corrupted by such external things as food, utensils, and walking over the graves of the dead. External things cannot morally corrupt a human being. Jesus proclaims, *"It is not what goes into a man's mouth that makes him impure; it is what comes out of his mouth."* (Mt. 15:11)

Matthew mentions that Peter came to Jesus and requested a fuller explanation of this teaching. This incident probably reflects on the problem in the early Church over this matter of unclean food and people. Apparently, it took some time before Jewish Christians accepted this teaching of Jesus and before it became an accepted practice in the Church. It was this legislation established by Jesus that made possible a unified Christian Community – a Eucharist in which Jews and Gentiles could sit down together at the same table with God.

JESUS' MISSION

This episode with the Pharisees leads naturally into recounting an incident which occurred between Jesus and a Canaanite woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon. In this area, a pagan woman came to Jesus seeking a cure for her possessed daughter. A strange scene is depicted in which a battle of wits ensues between Jesus and the pagan woman. To us, it seems a bit rough, but such an encounter would have been appreciated in the Semitic culture. One person seeks a concession from another person which that person does not wish to grant. A contest of wits follows, in which one emerges the winner. In this particular case – even though Jesus really plays the game – you have the feeling He wanted the woman to win.

It is a tale full of symbolism. The woman represents the pagan world, her daughter its frightful spiritual condition. It is a world open and desirous of Jesus Christ. Readily it will come to Him in faith and acknowledge what the Jews refuse to admit – *"Lord, Son of David."* Jesus could have personally conducted a successful ministry among the pagans, but He is directed, not by His own Will, but by the Will of God. He expresses it in these words, *"My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* (Mt. 15:24)

Even God's Son is limited in what He may do in human flesh on this earth. Too often those Christians with a messianic complex overlook the fact that the real Messiah was limited in His mission, and limited by obedience to the Will of God. The ultimate curing of the girl symbolizes that Jesus will not

refuse to save anyone who comes to Him in faith. As for the Gentiles' desire for salvation, *"Your wish will come to pass."* (Mt. 15:28)

Jesus leaves this pagan district and returns to the "house of Israel" still seeking its "lost sheep" as directed by the Will of God. He continues to move along the shores of Galilee as the Good Shepherd – and the crowds come bringing to Him their afflictions of body and soul. Matthew records, *"They glorified the God of Israel."* (Mt. 15:31) Matthew would not want his readers to miss the vision – the God of Israel truly walks along the shores of Galilee leaving footprints in its sand.

Matthew concludes his report of Jesus' ministry to the vast crowds by recounting another episode in which Jesus miraculously feeds thousands. This deed certainly symbolizes the things to flow from the mission and life of Jesus. The words of Jesus, recorded on this occasion, explain so well all that God has Willed to be done through Jesus Christ, *"My heart is moved with pity for the crowd . . . I do not wish to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way."* (Mt. 15:32)

AS THE SERPENT AND THE DOVE

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

"I MYSELF AM THE LIVING BREAD COME DOWN FROM HEAVEN. IF ANYONE EATS THIS BREAD HE SHALL LIVE FOREVER . . ." (JN. 6:51)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, Mt 14:1-2 and Lk. 13:31-33.

1. What do you learn from the death of John by Herod?
2. How was Herod a danger to Jesus?
3. What do you understand by Jesus' response in Luke?
4. In what way does Jesus demonstrate the cleverness of the serpent?

SECOND DAY: Read "The Loaves and Fishes," Mt. 14:13-21 and 2 Kings 4:42-44.

1. What motivated Jesus to perform this miracle?
2. Why do you think he involved the disciples in the miracle?
3. In what way does this incident serve as a symbol and prefiguring of the Eucharist?
4. What does the gathering of the fragments symbolize to you?

THIRD DAY: Read from John 6:26-59.

1. According to John, why did the people continue to seek after Jesus?
2. In what way is Jesus the bread from heaven?
3. What does this reading teach about the Eucharist?

4. What do you understand by Jn. 6:57?

FOURTH DAY: Read “Jesus Walks on Water” and Mt. 14:22-33.

1. Why is this miracle called a Theophany?
2. How is the Church symbolized in this incident?
3. What did Peter desire to do and why did he falter?
4. What do you see to be the lesson for the Church in this episode?

FIFTH DAY: Read “The Tassel of His Cloak,” Mt. 14:35-36, Mt. 15:1-20 and re-read Numbers 15:37-41.

1. What was the significance of the tassels?
2. What was being symbolized by people being healed by touching the tassel of His cloak?
3. How does Jesus refute the charges of the Pharisees?
4. What do you see to be the real issue in Jesus’ dispute with the Pharisees in this narration?

SIXTH DAY: Read “Jesus’ Mission” and Mt. 15:21-39.

1. What do you understand by Mt. 15:24?
2. What does Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman teach you?
3. What do you understand by Mt. 15:31?
4. What do Jesus’ words in Mt. 15:32 reveal to you?

CHAPTER 16

PRIMACY OF PETER

INTRODUCTION

The circle of suspicion and rejection widens its circumference in Israel to now encompass the party of the Sadducees in Jerusalem. The wave of popular approval of Jesus in Galilee crests, but it fails to break into a popular acclamation of His messianic role. The persistent opposition of the Pharisees serves as a strong breaker against any wave of approval sweeping the nation to the support of Jesus' cause. Due to their efforts, it subsides into confusion and doubt. *"You do not see any of the Sanhedrin believing in him, do you? Or the Pharisees?" (Jn. 7:48)*

The Person of Jesus and His teachings became a total threat to the Pharisees. They had encased their very souls in a particular religious form which gave them identity, worth and power. They perceived, and rightly so, that the success of Jesus would be their demise. They had resisted the spirit of repentance for the same reason – it demanded the death of their self-image. Pride hardened them into a religious philosophy which their lives incarnated. Accepting the grace of repentance would have destroyed their false self-image and reduced them to the humiliating awareness of being sinners. Their delusive spirit of self-righteousness would have been dissipated. The ground of their souls would have been prepared to receive the Word of God. As impenitence hardened their hearts, it deafened their ears to the Word of God and blinded their eyes to the revelation of Truth.

When a person, such as Jesus, appears in a society governed by such people, as were the Pharisees, He is Light revealing darkness. Judgment has come! His presence becomes unbearable and the subject of contempt and hatred – a Person to be destroyed. Jesus revealed the true moral condition of such people when He said, *"You hypocrites!" (Mt. 15:7)* Their hypocrisy runs so deep that it lies beyond conscious awareness.

The Pharisees consciously perceived themselves as righteous. Consciously, they did not project a false image. Their condemnation by Jesus signifies

that they deliberately did so from an unconscious level. A condition of self-blindness resulted from a refusal to repent and, therefore, their hypocrisy was morally blameworthy. They became, in Jesus' opinion, blind guides leading the blind into the pit. (*See Mt. 15:14.*)

The Pharisees possessed a deep-seated hatred for Jesus. It is doubtful that the Herodians and the Sadducees did also. The Herodians (a party which supported the rule of the Herods) and the Sadducees were both essentially political parties. They were interested primarily in their political and economic survival. The Pharisees probably brought Jesus to the attention of both the Herodians and the Sadducees, and stimulated their fears by suggesting that Jesus was a political threat. We will note, at Jesus' secular trial, that He will be accused of inciting political rebellion.

Matthew relates, "*The Pharisees and Sadducees came along, and as a test asked him to show them some sign in the sky.*" (*Mt. 16:1*) They reject the godly evidence which confirms that Jesus is a prophet through whom the Word of God is proclaimed. His words, His miracles, His compassion for the poor and afflicted are all visible Divine proofs and credentials which support Jesus' messianic claims. What the Jews now request from Jesus is some "end of times" sign. A common belief among the Jews held that the messianic days would be heralded by frightful heavenly portents. They desired Jesus to perform such things as these as proof positive that He was the Messiah. They tempt Jesus to step out from God's Will and to perform a deed that would compel belief. The words of Jesus imply that these men can read signs. Signs have been given, and still they deny what is evidently being signified. The depths of their spiritual blindness will be verified by the only sign Jesus will give them – His Resurrection from the dead. The evangelist Mark simply records, "*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!'*" (*Mk. 8:12*) According to Mark, Jesus sailed from this district towards Bethsaida.

LEAVEN OF HYPOCRISY

After the crossing of the sea, Matthew relates an incident which reveals the spiritual condition of the disciples. It makes known that they have some faith, but that the strength and the quality of their faith are poor. They are slow in understanding Jesus. As they cross the sea, Jesus reflects upon their recent encounter and the terrible spiritual condition of these Jews.

They appear to Him like an evil leaven in Israel – like rotten fruit in a basket corrupting everything it touches. He must caution His disciples against this danger. However, the disciples are on an entirely different plane. Mark writes, *“They had forgotten to bring any bread along; except for one loaf they had none with them in the boat.”* (Mk. 8:14) We read in Matthew, *“When Jesus said to them, ‘Be on the lookout against ‘the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees,’ they could think only, ‘This is because we have brought no bread.’ Jesus knew their thoughts and said, ‘Why is it you do not see that I was not speaking about bread at all but warning you against the yeast of the Pharisees?’”* (Mt. 16:6-8,11) Luke records Jesus as saying, *“Be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”* (Lk. 12:1) The evangelist Mark emphasizes the obtuseness of the disciples’ spirit and Jesus’ exasperation with their spiritual condition, *“Do you still not see or comprehend? Are your minds completely blinded? Have you eyes but no sight? Ears but no hearing?”* (Mk. 8:17-18)

PRIMACY OF PETER

After disembarking, Jesus and His disciples head north into the district of Perea, governed by the tetrarch Philip, the brother of Herod Antipas. They come to the district around Caesarea Philippi, which rests at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Here, Matthew records one of the most discussed incidents in the New Testament – the commissioning of Simon Peter by Jesus Christ to take His place as Chief Shepherd on earth.

We see that Jesus first questions His disciples concerning men’s opinion about Himself. They share with Him all the positive rumors heard. All are erroneous. Their report essentially implies that Jesus’ ministry has created an expectancy. All the prophets named are associated, in the Jewish mind, with the advent of the Messiah. Jesus now makes a distinction between the faith of the crowds and that of the disciples. Obviously, he hopes for a better answer when he says but *“Who do you say that I am?”* Only Peter responds to this question. Simon Peter, under Divine inspiration, has the correct concept of Jesus, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!”* (Mt. 16:15-16) In this confession, Peter expresses the foundation faith of the Christian Community. Jesus recognizes Peter’s faith in Him to be Divinely inspired. He recognizes that this Divine gift indicates a Divine choice of Peter. Jesus confirms it.

From the moment Simon has appeared in the Gospel accounts, he has been

referred to as "Peter"; in Aramaic it would be "Cephas" which means "rock." Kepha was a form of substratum rock needed for a solid foundation. We now come to understand why Simon is called "Peter." *"You are 'Kepha' and upon this 'kepha' I will build my church."* Jesus implies that Simon will, in some way, become the firm foundation for supporting His church. The idea of a man being a rock foundation upon which to build is not foreign to Semitic thought. It has been written of Abraham, *"When God looked upon Abraham, who was to appear, he said, 'Behold I have found a rock upon which I can build and base the world.' Therefore he called Abraham a rock."* (See Is. 51:1-2)

Simon's expression of faith in Jesus initiates Jesus' declaration to Simon. The faith professed by Simon expresses the essential element of Christian belief; but Christian Faith is not only a faith to live, it is a living faith. This faith cannot be separated from Peter. In Semitic culture, a man's name ought to express the man. Jesus recognized that Simon's faith was so much a part of his being that it truly constituted his person. Peter's faith was the ground for his being appointed by Christ as the support and foundation of His Church. The "Rock" is Christ, but Simon's faith was so Divine, so strong, so enduring that it identified him with Jesus, the Rock. Jesus recognized the Divine solidifying of Simon's personality by faith and renamed him "Rock."

Jesus had begun His question with *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* (Mt. 16:13) The very reference to "Son of Man" recalls the vision of Daniel. Jesus' reference to "the jaws of death" not prevailing against His Church, reinforces the reference to Daniel. (See Daniel 7:13-14) This reference implies that the Church established by Jesus on earth will not see death – as the kingdom of the Messiah, it is indestructible. Within this Church, Simon Peter receives a position of primacy. Jesus infers this when He says to Peter,

"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." (Mt. 16:19) For any Jew familiar with the Old Testament, this saying would immediately evoke a remembrance of a text from Isaiah. (See Isaiah 22:20-24) This text tells of the dismissal of Shebna as master of the palace of King Hezekiah and the appointment of Eliakim. This is presented as the Work and the Will of God. There is no doubt that, in the mind of Matthew, Shebna represented the Pharisees – or their position – and that Eliakim represented Peter.

The “master of the palace” was equivalent to the prime minister of the kingdom or to the concept of the “vizier” in Egypt. In Egypt the vizier was the highest official in the state. In the absence of the Pharaoh, the vizier acted as regent. We see the same concept expressed in Second Kings, where Jotham “*was vizier and regent for the people of the land*” in the absence of the king. (*2 Kings 15:5.*)

Matthew opened his gospel account with the presentation of Jesus as the King of Israel – the true descendant of King David. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, he confessed Jesus to be King, the Son of David. Jesus responded to Peter using words which a King of Judah would have spoken to a new “master of the palace” – a new vizier. For Matthew, Peter is the vicar of Christ the King of the Jews.

These words of Jesus to Peter certainly give him authority within the Church. Matthew sees Jesus making Peter the “supreme rabbi” of the Christian Community. Among the Jews, the power of “binding” and “loosing” generally referred to the power to impose or remove an obligation by one who has authority to make decisions in legal and doctrinal matters. This power of binding and loosing also implies the power of a person to impose or lift an excommunication from the synagogue.

PETER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When we view the New Testament as a whole, Simon Peter appears as a major personality. In certain letters written by Paul in the fifties, Peter appears as the most famous of the Twelve Apostles. Paul speaks of him as one of the pillars of the Church at Jerusalem, along with James and John. When Paul looks to someone by which to measure his own apostolic commission, he chooses Peter. (*See Galatians 2:6-8.*)

When Paul writes to the Corinthians, we note that he makes reference to the popularity of “Cephas” in the community. He has no need to explain to the Galatians or to the Corinthians who Cephas is. Paul testifies that the Risen Savior appeared first to Peter, “*that he was buried and, in accordance with the Scriptures, rose on the third day; that he was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve.*” (*I Cor. 15:4-5*)

It is Luke who makes Peter the sole recipient of those words, "*Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men.'*" (Lk. 5:10) He records that a special relationship existed between Peter's faith and the faith of the Christian Community. Luke writes that Jesus had prayed primarily for the faith of Peter and that it would become the source of strength to confirm the faith of the Church. (See Lk. 22:31-34.) Luke also confirms that Jesus appeared first to Simon Peter, "*The Lord has been raised! It is true! He has appeared to Simon.*" (Lk. 24:34) The community believes in the Resurrection of Jesus on the authority of Peter's testimony.

The Gospel of John records a vision of the risen Christ along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Within this episode, Simon Peter appears as "the fisherman." It is he who recognizes the Lord and hauls all the fish upon the shore. In the scene which follows, it is not the fisherman who emerges, but the shepherd. By a threefold affirmation, Jesus proclaims Peter to be the shepherd who will lead the people of God in the name of the Risen Savior. The entire scene recalls the prayer of Moses at the end of his own life and ministry upon earth. (See Numbers 27:15-17.) In Jeremiah, the Lord says, "*I will appoint over you shepherds after my own heart, who will shepherd you wisely and prudently.*" (Jer. 3:15)

Looking back upon the origins of the Christian Community, the New Testament sees it as rising upon the foundation of the apostles. We read: "*You form a building which rises on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone.*" (Eph. 2:20)

One of the last written works to be included within the New Testament is Second Peter. Scholars generally agree that it was not written by Simon Peter. It was indeed written by one who appears to have been writing with his authority. The interesting thing in this letter – relating to the present study – is the fact that Peter is being used to interpret Paul. Apparently, Paul's letters were being used by certain members of the Church as a supreme authority for Christian guidance. Within this epistle, Peter emerges as the proper interpreter of these Scriptures. At this stage, Peter appears in the Scriptures as the interpreter and guardian of Christian Truth.

THE PASSION AND PETER

Once the primacy of Peter is accepted, there still remains the question of whether this was a personal privilege granted to Peter or a continuous ministry to be exercised within the Christian Community. The Scriptures seem to imply that the privileges and powers granted to Peter and to the other Apostles was intended to be imparted to their successors. They received a mandate to make disciples among the whole world – a mandate not to be fulfilled within their lifetime. Likewise, Jesus promised to be with his Apostles *“till the end of time.”* Such a promise would be meaningless if it did not extend to the successors of the apostles. The history of the Church of the second century implies that it did so. We see such men as Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna accepted as authoritative leaders – as bishops – within the Christian Community and recognized as successors of the Apostles.

As the clouds of darkness and hatred gather around Jesus, He discerns the signs of the time. The feast of the Passover approaches and Jesus must be permitted to arrive freely and unhindered into the city of Jerusalem. The leaders of the people have totally rejected Him and His claims to be the Messiah. Any public proclamation of it, at this point, would but initiate an abortive attempt upon His life and make impossible His entrance into Jerusalem. This must be avoided.

Jesus seeks to prepare His disciples for His departure from this life. Peter's selection to replace Jesus as the leader of the Church on earth has been part of this preparation. Jesus now seeks to prepare them both for the worst and the best. (*See Mt. 16:21.*) Apparently, He failed in both cases.

Peter has received the grace of Divine inspiration enabling him to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The moment of inspiration is one thing. The moment which follows it is another. The moment of inspiration is God's moment. The moment which follows it is man's moment.

We have a case in point in the Scriptures. Peter knew Jesus to be the Messiah. He truly knew little about the nature and the ministry of the Messiah. He thinks he does. His ignorance has probably been reinforced by

his inspiration and Divine appointment. He has formed a very earthly, secular concept of the Messiah – a concept in which he not only could glory in, but because of his close association, the Messiah could be expected to bring him much personal glory. As a mirror reflects the sun, so the vicar of the Messiah could expect to reflect His glory. When Jesus reveals the Messiah's true destiny, the very heart and spirit of Peter rebel. Intuitively, he perceives what it implies for him, but he does not consciously verbalize it – not even to himself. He will be involved intimately in that destiny. He will have to suffer because of his close association with Jesus and because of personal ministry. Peter's feelings and emotions run strong – such a concept of the Messiah is unacceptable. The student discerns the Teacher to be mistaken. God would never allow such a thing to happen to His Messiah – and to those who follow Him, The Teacher must be put back on the right track. We are told that Peter then steps “out of line,” and he who should have been following the Master, seeks abortively to take over the leadership of the Community.

Jesus totally reacts to Peter's temptation – for this is as Jesus sees it. The man He confirmed to be “Rock,” becomes a stumbling stone on His path – precisely because he is “out of line.” He is not supposed to be in a position of leadership yet. He is too immature; he has much more to learn, not only about the Messiah, but about “the Rock.”

When Satan stood before Jesus, the Lord commanded, “*Away with you, Satan!*” (Mt. 4:10) When Peter – playing Satan's role – stood before Jesus, the Lord commanded, “*Get out of my sight, you satan!*” (Mt. 16:23) In other words: Get behind Me and not in front of Me! Get back in line! You are to follow in My footsteps and not lead Me! The Lord does not drive Peter away as He did Satan. He makes him cease being a satan by putting him back in his proper place. He will be able to lead soon enough; but before that day, he has much to learn – and learn quickly.

DOCTRINE OF THE CROSS

Peter – and all the disciples – must learn the doctrine of the Cross. They must come to see earthly life from the standpoint of heavenly Wisdom and its vision is paradoxical. From the human point of view, it appears to be “foolishness” – nonsensical. It is revealed that true life, with all its fullness and glory, can only be achieved by turning from the worldly and illusive desires of the human will, and embracing the Divine Will. We have to cling

to that Will in this life, regardless of the consequences to our personal life in the world.

Jesus now teaches His disciples the philosophy of Divine Wisdom, *“If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps. Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Mt. 16:24-25)*

In the days which lie ahead, Jesus will live out this philosophy before their very eyes. If they have misunderstood what He has said, they will not misunderstand what He becomes! *“What I am will cry so loud you must hear what I am saying!”*

PRIMACY OF PETER

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“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.” (MT. 16:19)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, Mt. 16:1-4; Mk. 8:11-13; Lk. 12:54-59 and Jn. 11:46-54.

1. Why do you think Jesus was such a total threat to the Pharisees?
2. How do you see the Pharisees as hypocrites?
3. As enemies of Jesus, how do the Herodians and the Sadducees differ from the Pharisees?
4. What does Mark 8:12 tell about Jesus' reaction to the request for a sign?

SECOND DAY: Read “Leaven of Hypocrisy,” Mt. 16:5-12 and Mk. 8:14-25.

1. What does this incident reveal about the disciples?
2. What do you learn from Jesus' reaction to them?
3. What do you understand to be the leaven of the Pharisees?
4. In what way does the curing of the blind man symbolize the faith of the Apostles?

THIRD DAY: Read “Primacy of Peter,” Mt. 16:13-19; Is. 51:1-2; 22:15-22 and Daniel 7:13-15.

1. What do you understand by Peter being the “Rock”?

2. How would you interpret the promise that the “jaws will not prevail,” in the light of Dn. 1:13-15.?
3. In the light of Isaiah 22:20-24, how would you interpret the gift of the keys to Peter?
4. What is meant by the “power to bind and loose”?

FOURTH DAY: Read “Peter in the New Testament,” Gal. 2:6-14; Lk. 22:31-37; Jn. 21:1-9 and Num. 27:15-17.

1. From the writings of Paul what image do you get of Peter?
2. What connection does Luke make between Peter and the Christian Faith?
3. How does Peter appear in the last Chapter of John?
4. How would you describe the development of Peter’s image within the New Testament?

FIFTH DAY: Read “The Passion and Peter” Mt. 16:20-22 and Mk. 8:27-33.

1. How would you explain Mt. 16:20?
2. How do you see it relating to what follows in verse twenty-one?
3. What does Peter’s reaction to the prophecy reveal?
4. What does Jesus’ reaction to Peter teach you?

SIXTH DAY: Read “Doctrine of the Cross,” Mt. 16:24-28 and Mk. 8:34-38.

1. What is the relationship between Jesus’ prophecy and the doctrine of the Cross?
2. What do you understand by the doctrine of the Cross?
3. What does Matthew 16:26 mean to you?
4. What does Matthew 16:27 teach you?

CHAPTER 17

SON OF THE LIVING GOD

INTRODUCTION

The prediction by Jesus of His sufferings and death, and Peter's violent reaction to this prediction, evokes the Intimate relationship existing between the life of Jesus and that of the disciples. A very unusual unification exists between Jesus and those who follow Him; a veritable oneness of personality is created. The life of the disciple becomes, in a unique way, an extension of the life of Christ on earth. Jesus says, "*Live on in me, as I do in you.*" (Jn. 15:4) "*Live on in my love.*" (Jn. 15:9)

This intimate identification of the disciples with Jesus implies that the disciples must share, in some degree, the life experienced by Jesus on earth. Jesus taught that no member of the household can expect to be treated better than the Lord of the house, "*If you find that the world hates you, know it has hated me before you . . . Remember what I told you: no slave is greater than his master. They will harry you as they harried me. They will respect your words as much as they respected mine.*" (Jn. 15:18,20) "*I solemnly assure you, unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.*" (Jn. 12:24)

Jesus teaches the disciples the law of Christian existence. It involves temporal losses for eternal gains. "*He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me.*" (Mt. 10:38) Only those who are willing to sacrifice their own desires, dreams, and ambitions in order to become part of God's desire and plan for the world and enter into Jesus' dream will share in its Divine reality and glorious fulfillment.

The teaching of Jesus implies that men and women who live their lives only in selfish pursuits are truly foolish people. They have invested the precious time and energy of life into vanities. One cannot gain a world without loss of self. One must decide which world is worth the price. Jesus considers it wise to lose one's life for the Kingdom of God, but foolish to lose one's life for the gain of the entire earth. In the end, where is the gain? Where will

all this piled up wealth go, which moth and rust can consume? *“And the world with its seductions is passing away but the man who does God’s will endures forever.” (I Jn. 2:17)* The disciple who truly builds his house solidly and sets it on rock, is the one who honestly says, “The world must know I love Jesus and do as Jesus has commanded me!”

We are well acquainted with the idea of the redemption of the world flowing from the death of Jesus, but we often fail to reflect sufficiently upon the personal reward received by Jesus for His “obedience unto death.” *“God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every other name.” (Phil. 2:9)* Because the Son of Man became that “grain of wheat” which fell unto the earth and died, God lifted Him up and exalted him above every other person. Before this Jesus *“every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth and every tongue proclaim...JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!” (Phil. 2:10-11)*

THE TRANSFIGURATION

The three previous events (Peter’s profession of faith, Jesus’ prophecy of His passion, and His teaching on the doctrine of the cross) are essentially related to an event Matthew now relates.

The Scriptures relate that about six days following the incident in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus leads Peter, James and John up onto *“a high mountain by themselves.” (Mt. 17:1)* Apparently, the disciples are tired from the long journey. They fall asleep while Jesus prays. While at prayer, an extraordinary supernatural occurrence transpires. The disciples awaken to a startling vision. We read, *“He was transfigured before their eyes. His face became as dazzling as the sun, his clothes as radiant as light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them conversing with him.” (Mt. 17:2-3)* The word Matthew used for “transfigured” implies a metamorphosis occurred. The word used suggests that the very nature of Jesus changed. Within the Greek concept of being, the “morphe” (translated “form”) would express the essential nature of a being; we could say – the very soul of a being. The “morphe” of a being makes a thing what it is. Each being also has its own “schema” which is distinct from its form. The “schema” inheres in the “morphe” but is not essential to it. For practical purposes, we may say that the “schema” is the external appearance of a being. The schema of a being can change, and does change, while the form remains essentially the same.

The Christian Church teaches that Jesus Christ possesses two natures – that of man and that of God. Jesus possesses both the morphe of man and the morphe of God. It seems, from Matthew’s wording, that the Divine Nature of Christ briefly flooded His human nature to such a degree that, momentarily, His human nature was transformed by the Divine Presence. Jesus, consciously, empirically experienced Himself as a Divine Being – as “Son of the living God.” Of course, such an experience greatly altered the human “schema” of Jesus: *“His face became as dazzling as the sun, his clothes as radiant as light.”* When Jesus was “transfigured before their eyes,” Peter sensibly and empirically experienced the Divinity of Jesus. The three became eyewitnesses to the Divine Sonship of Jesus. The fact that Peter received such a vision during his lifetime lives on in the tradition of the Church. (See II Pt. 1:15-18.)

Most commentators agree that Moses and Elijah represented the Law and the Prophets, and that their appearance with Jesus symbolized the entire Old Testament being fulfilled within the life of Jesus. In fact, the evangelist Luke implied that it would be in the coming Passion and death of Jesus that the Scriptures would find fulfillment.

Peter, of course, in keeping with his spontaneous nature, reacted immediately to the marvelous vision. Matthew relates, *“Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Lord, how good that we are here! With your permission’ (it must be noted – Peter is learning) ‘I will erect three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’”* (Mt. 17:4) *“He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them. Out of the cloud came a voice which said, ‘This is my beloved Son on whom my favor rests. Listen to him.’”* (Mt. 17:5)

Only by Divine Revelation can the true nature of Jesus be known. Human reason cannot reveal this. As Jesus said earlier to Peter, *“Blest are you, Simon son of Jonah! No mere man has revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father.”* (Mt. 16:17) Within the Old Testament, the appearance of a bright cloud symbolized the Presence of the living God. This bright cloud was referred to as the “Shekinah.”

The Voice of God reveals that Jesus – His beloved son – is the Divine Revealer, and mankind can have but one response to Him – “Listen to him!” To the words of Jesus there should be only one reaction – Obey them! God reveals His Will to the apostles when He commands them to “Listen to him!” In the Old Testament, to listen and to hear meant to

obey.

This vision clarifies the relationship between the Son of Man and the Son of God. The Son of Man is the Son of God become Man. The vision leaves the apostles overcome with fear. As suddenly as clouds come and go, the vision passes. As the blazing sun suddenly sinks into the horizon, leaving the world wrapped in twilight beauty, so the dazzling beauty of the Son of God sinks beneath the humanity of the Son of Man, leaving Jesus standing there in the "after-glow." Jesus touches the disciples and brings them back into a reality which He encourages them not to fear.

COMING DOWN THE MOUNT

While enjoying the vision upon the mountain, Peter commented, "*Lord, how good that we are here!*" (Mt. 17:4) Indeed, it was "nice" being there, experiencing Divine consolation and being enlightened about the nature of Jesus was "good," but it was better for themselves and for the world that all four came out of the vision and down from the mountain. Moses, too, had to be ordered back down the mountain. There was a crisis of faith at the foot of the mountain and he was needed below. Such things are but an oasis along the Way, in which the Lord refreshes and strengthens the spirit for the desert journey. Mt. Sinai was but a brief encounter – a stop on the Way to the Promised Land – a refreshing pause. The Scriptures reveal how needed was the purifying journey across the desert before entering into the Promised Land.

As they came down the mountain, the disciples asked a question of Jesus which probably echoes a question the Jews often put to the members of the early Church: If Jesus is the Messiah, what happened to the coming of Elijah which the prophet Malachi foretold would precede his coming? (See *Mal. 3:23.*) The disciples wondered about this prophecy.

The words of Jesus imply that Elijah had come. Jesus teaches that this prophecy was figuratively fulfilled and not literally so. John the Baptist represented Elijah – and in spirit the prophecy had been fulfilled. However, John had not been recognized as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. The Jews did "not know him." And so it will follow that the Jews will not recognize that Jesus fulfills the messianic prophecies. In neither case could the Jews recognize the fulfillment of the prophecies, for they transcended the letter of the prophets – "they did not recognize him." Matthew, again,

emphasizes the importance of understanding in faith. As John had been destroyed by an “evil and faithless age,” so Jesus, the Messiah, would suffer a similar fate.

A LITTLE FAITH

Apparently, the rest of the disciples waited at the foot of the mountain for the return of Jesus and His companions. Matthew relates, *“As they approached the crowd, a man came up to him and knelt before him. ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘take pity on my son, who is demented and in serious condition . . . I have brought him to your disciples but they could not cure him.’ In reply Jesus said, ‘What an unbelieving and perverse lot you are! How long must I remain with you? How long can I endure you?’”* (Mt. 17:14-17)

From the description of the boy given in the gospel accounts, we know that he was an epileptic. The apostles had received power from Jesus to act in such cases. (See Mt. 10:1.) Nevertheless, the father of the boy reported to Jesus, *“I have brought him to your disciples but they could not cure him.”* This emphasizes the ingrained obstacles within the souls of men to the redemptive power of Christ. The redeeming Love of God is present, but the infidelity of man renders it ineffectual. When the disciples ask Jesus why they could not cure the epileptic boy, He plainly tells them, *“Because you have so little trust...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. Nothing would be impossible for you.”* (Mt. 17:20)

When you consider Jesus’ commission and authorization to the Apostles in the light of their inability to perform the cure, you can only come to one of two conclusions – either the failure was due to the power received, or to the men who exercised the power. Jesus makes it crystal clear that the deficiency lay not in the power received from Him. With the exact same authority and power, He healed the boy. If those who had been authorized to do so could not heal the boy with that same power, then obviously it was a personal failure upon the part of the Apostles. Jesus’ explanation to the disciples removes any idea that the power communicated had any particular limitations. Failure was due neither to the quality nor the quantity of the power given to the Apostles, but rather to the quality and the quantity of their faith in Jesus. In this case, only the Apostles could have been expected to work the cure. Matthew plainly states who received the authority, *“Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority to*

expel unclean spirits and to cure sickness and disease of every kind.” (Mt. 10:1)
The Apostles limited the power bestowed upon them by the quality of their trust and confidence in the Word of Jesus. It was “too little.”

THE TEMPLE TAX

Matthew now sees the disciples gathering together in preparation for the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. Mark emphasizes that Jesus now moves secretly through Galilee, heading towards Jerusalem. Both emphasize that Jesus does not want His disciples to misread the intention of His journey to Jerusalem. It will not be in keeping with their hopes. To place the journey in its proper perspective, Jesus gives a second prophecy concerning His passion to come – it is shorter and with less detail. This prophecy, in the words “*to be delivered*” (Mt. 17:22), appears to suggest that Jesus will be betrayed. However, others see an indication of God’s hand – God will deliver Him and God will raise Him up again.

Before leaving Galilee Jesus returns, for the last time, to His home in Capernaum. Matthew relates an incident which occurred at this time, in which Peter appears as spokesman for Christ. The episode reflects His later role as the authoritative Teacher within the Church. However, on this occasion we see that Peter still needs to be instructed by Christ. As yet, he has not been authorized to teach in Jesus’ name. His education in the School of Christ has not been completed. We are told that “*the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter and said, ‘Does your master not pay the temple tax?’*” (Mt. 17:24) Now to the mind of Peter, this was equivalent to asking: Does your master fulfill the law? He replied to the collectors, “*Of course he does.*” We are told that when Peter arrived in the house, Jesus already knew what had transpired and he immediately put this question to him, “*What is your opinion, Simon? Do the kings of the world take tax or toll from their sons, or from foreigners?’* When he replied, ‘*From foreigners,*’ Jesus observed, ‘*Then their sons are exempt.*’” (Mt. 17:25-26)

Jesus implies that the temple is the House of God and that, as the Son of the living God, He is greater than the temple. As Son, He is exempted from such a tax. Because the disciples of Jesus are identified with Him, they too are sons of the King and are exempted from the temple tax. However, in the eyes of the people, such an act would appear as an act of irreligion. To avoid this, Jesus tells Peter, “*But for fear of disedifying them go to the lake, throw in a line, and take out the first fish you catch. Open its mouth and you*

will discover there a coin worth twice the temple tax. Take it and give it to them for you and me.” (Mt. 17:27) Peter’s former decision was correct, but his reason was faulty.

Through this incident Matthew, once again, emphasizes Peter’s special relationship to Jesus. Jesus pays the tax only for Himself and Peter – Jesus stresses, “give it to them for you and me.” The Lord also emphasizes that the Church must not give needless scandal to the Jews.

THE LITTLE ONES

A question presently arises among the disciples over position and personal importance in the Kingdom of God. *“Who is of greatest importance in the kingdom of God?” (Mt. 18:1)* Jesus does not give them a discourse, but an example. He takes a child and places him within their midst, and He tells them, *“I assure you, unless you change and become like little children you will not enter the kingdom of God. Whoever makes himself lowly, becoming like this child, is of greatest importance in the heavenly reign.” (Mt. 18:3-4)*

Jesus uses this occasion to stress, not only the condition for greatness, but the fundamental condition for membership in the Kingdom of God. He insinuates that, if they are not careful, they might not even have a place in the kingdom, much less a position. The bottom line comes down to “meekness” – to being “poor in spirit.” Jesus puts a child in their midst and calls upon them to contemplate its position within human society. At that time in history, a child’s position in society differed little from that of a slave. The child was the property of the father and possessed no recognized will of his own. The father could sell the child as a slave or execute him for a crime. He possessed nothing in his own right and depended completely upon the goodwill of his father. The child was in a position of total dependence.

Jesus teaches His disciples that, as members of God’s household, each must perceive themselves spiritually as a “*slave-child.*” They possess nothing of themselves, and have a total and complete dependence upon God, their heavenly Father. The greatest disciple is that one who realizes he or she is the least. Those who perfectly come to this awareness will be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Why? Because of the Lord of the household who gives good things to His children. As the disciple empties himself of self, God fills that emptiness with Himself. Such are God’s children, and they

are most precious to Him.

As Jesus is probably speaking to the future leaders of the Church, He moves on to shape their minds and attitudes towards the members of the Christian Community. He refers to all disciples – whether they be in authority or not, whether they be young or old – as “*the little ones.*” Jesus identifies them with Himself, “*Whoever welcomes one such child for my sake welcomes me.*” (Mt. 18:5) He especially desires for those in a position of authority to realize the seriousness of that position. The apostles, as teachers, are warned to guard carefully the faith of the disciples. (See Mt. 18:6-7.)

Jesus knew and experienced the world’s attitude towards “the little ones” of this world. He knew whom men admired and respected and whom they despised. He cautioned His disciples about the worldly values placed upon human beings, which could creep into their own hearts and control their external behavior toward “the little ones.” He warned, “*See that you never despise one of these little ones.*” (Mt. 18:10) To guard against such terrible worldly values directing Christians’ attitudes towards one another, Jesus re-emphasized the unique dignity and importance of each disciple in the eyes of His Father, “*I assure you, their angels in heaven constantly behold my heavenly Father’s face.*” (Mt. 18:10)

Jesus makes a startling revelation – each of these “little ones” possesses a guardian angel. The providential love of God hovers over each individual disciple. The highest form of angels watch over “the little ones” and plead their cause before God. To the Apostles, His leaders, Jesus reveals the heart of the heavenly Father, “*It is no part of your heavenly Father’s plan that a single one of these little ones shall ever come to grief.*” (Mt. 18:14) He is like the good shepherd who leaves “*the ninety-nine out on the hills and go in search of the stray.*” (Mt. 18:12)

A true disciple, who understands and loves Jesus, becomes a good shepherd who goes in search of the “little ones” who have been neglected, strayed or are lost.

SON OF THE LIVING GOD

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“BUT THE WORLD MUST KNOW THAT I LOVE THE FATHER AND DO AS THE FATHER HAS COMMANDED ME.” (JN. 14:31)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction and from John 12:24-30 and 17:20-26.

1. What do you understand by John 14:31?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Jesus and His disciples?
3. What reward did Jesus receive for His obedience unto death?
4. What do you understand by John 12:24?

SECOND DAY: Read “The Transfiguration,” Exodus 24:15-18; Matthew 17:1-8 and 2 Peter 1:15-18.

1. What do you understand by Jesus being transfigured?
2. What was Jesus’ experience at this time?
3. What did the Apostles experience?
4. What did Moses and Elijah symbolize in this vision?

THIRD DAY: Read “Coming Down the Mount,” Matthew 17:9-13; Mark 9:9-13 and John 12:35-46.

1. What does it mean for a person to be “on Mt. Tabor”?
2. Why is it good to come down the mountain?
3. How does Jesus explain the question about Elijah?

4. How does it affect Jesus that the Jews failed to recognize Elijah in John the Baptist?

FOURTH DAY: Read “A Little Faith,” Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-29 and John 12:35-46.

1. Why should the Apostles have been able to heal the boy?
2. What about the other disciples?
3. What do you understand in John by “keep faith in the light”?
4. What do you see to be the relationship between Divine Power and faith?

FIFTH DAY: Read “The Temple Tax” and from Matthew 17:22-27.

1. What does this second prophecy of the passion reveal?
2. In what role does Peter appear in the tax incident?
3. What does Jesus teach Peter on this occasion?
4. What do you learn from this incident?

SIXTH DAY: Read “The Little Ones” and from Matthew 18:1-14.

1. What do you understand by Matthew 18:4?
2. How would you define “these little ones”?
3. What do you understand by Matthew 18:10?
4. What does Matthew 18:14 teach you?

CHAPTER 18

HIS CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

As the time approaches for Jesus to go to Jerusalem, the formation of His apostles becomes of utmost importance. When He is gone, they – as His Church – must continue His mission upon the earth.

Jesus knew He was founding a new Church which would come into being after His death – and that it would come into being as a result of His death. Its consequence would be a people *“delivered from the futile way of life,”* that their fathers had handed on to them, *“by Christ’s blood beyond all price.”* (*1 Pt. 1:18-19.*) Through such a Church God lives, loves and walks among the inhabitants of the earth. Wonderful things would be expected to come upon the earth through the Church that is faithful to the Will of God. Jesus saw the heart of His Church as the love of God, and the action of His Church as the work of God.

Within Jesus, the Church possesses all it needs in order to become what it was created to be and in order to accomplish all it was commissioned to do. When the teaching of the Church becomes rooted in the Mind of Christ, when its will becomes rooted in obedience to His word, when its spirit becomes empowered through His Holy Spirit – the world will know His Church loves the Father and does exactly what the Father commands. Whenever the Church separates itself in mind, will, and spirit from Jesus Christ, it fails in its purpose. It then needs to be recalled to repentance and renewal, for its sake and the world’s. *“You are the salt of the earth. But what if the salt goes flat? Then it is good for nothing . . .”* (*Mt. 5:13*)

Jesus needed the Church to be holy, enlightened, and apostolic. Jesus never underestimated the relationship between being “enlightened” and being “holy and apostolic.” He devoted much time and energy to the enlightenment of His apostles. He knew only too well how both holiness and the apostolic ministry could be perverted – on the one hand through human wisdom and earthly prudence and on the other hand through

erroneous teachings and false prophets. It is not always easy to distinguish the truth from the error; to do so we need established criteria.

Jesus confirms that He is *"the Light of the world."* He reveals the complete and total expression of God's Will for mankind. This He manifested to the Twelve Apostles; they became the receptors and reservoirs of Divine Revelation. For this reason, the Scriptures teach that this *"city of God"* on earth – the Christian Church – rises upon the foundation of the Twelve Apostles. (See *Rev. 21:14.*) No teaching can ever be accepted within the Christian Church – as a matter of faith – which negates or contradicts the revelation the Church received from the Twelve Apostles. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, *"For even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel not in accord with the one we delivered to you, let a curse be upon him!"* (*Gal. 1:8*)

No evangelist emphasized more than Matthew that Jesus taught the Twelve Apostles with exceptional patience and diligence. The Divine Truth, revealed by Jesus, must be the foundation for true Christian holiness and for right apostolic action. Jesus strove to firmly lay the foundation of Divine Truth within the minds and hearts of the apostles. They must become the living foundations of truth upon which the Church would arise and bring salvation and sanctification to the world through the apostolic ministry.

We noted in chapter eighteen of Matthew how Jesus instructed His Apostles on the nature of Christian Discipleship, and what constituted true greatness within the kingdom of heaven. The Apostles had already properly discerned that the kingdom of heaven would come upon this earth in the form of a visible, organized society possessing authority and leadership. Already they had begun to interpret this Church in the light of human knowledge and worldly understanding. They already formed in their minds a concept of Christ's Church. What Jesus had said to Peter, He could have said to all of them, *"You are not judging by God's standards but by man's."* (*Mt. 16:23*)

One must first understand what it means to be a subject in the Kingdom of God before one can begin to reckon who is the greatest within the society. The criterion must first be established. Jesus made firm both the norm for greatness and the one for admission into the kingdom – become like little children. The children of the kingdom are those "little ones" who accept the Person and the Will of God in their lives, as a child accepts the person

and the will of his father in his life. In the kingdom of God, God's Son, Jesus, sets the standard for greatness. Jesus Himself is the greatest in the kingdom of God, not because He is the Son of the Living God, but because He is the Beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. The entire tapestry of His life – from conception to consummation – was woven by the golden thread of human obedience to the Divine Will. Jesus attributed what He said and what He did in this life to *"the Father who lives in me accomplishing his works."* (Jn. 14:10.) I *"do as the Father has commanded me."* (Jn. 14:31) *"The Father loves me for this: that I lay down my life to take it up again."* (Jn. 10:17) Both in life and death, Jesus taught His disciples how to be a "little one" and thereby how to come to true greatness within the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus teaches the Apostles that the authority and dominion must be viewed in the light of service. In other words, it is a ministry within the Church which calls for that emptying out – that dying to self – that others may live a true Christian life. Such offices must not be viewed selfishly as opportunities for self-exaltation and personal glory. There is to be no "lording" it over others. That would be the secularization and perversion of the authority and the power of the Church. Such will occur if the disciples in such positions surrender to the lust for power.

Those in authority have been placed in positions in which they may easily become a scandal to the members of the Church. Those "little ones" – like children within a natural household – have an openness and dependency upon those in authority, which leaves them vulnerable to scandal. The Lord's words seem to imply that Christian leaders have two choices – they can be a source of scandal, or they can go seeking the little ones who have gone astray and are lost. They must act against human reason – leave the ninety-nine and go seek the lost. One must not be neglected because it is only "one." Jesus emphasizes that accomplishing the Divine Will is the essence of Christian Discipleship. Therefore, since it is the Will of the Father that not one little one be lost, preservation of the faith and reclamation of the lost must become an urgent priority among Christians.

Christians are warned that those who cause the little ones to fall away from the faith, through their scandal, will be punished. It would really be better that they were removed from view. Jesus speaks of *"endless fire"* and about being thrown into a *"fiery Gehenna."* This image comes from the Jewish literature and referred, in ancient days, to the "garbage dump" located in

the ravine south of Jerusalem. Here, rubbish was burned and bodies of the enemies of Israel were thrown. Isaiah spoke of it as a place of unending punishment for the enemies of Israel. This reference to Isaiah probably implies that those "who lead astray one of these little ones who believe in" Christ are truly the enemies of the New Israel.

Presently, the Apostles of Jesus are inclined to see the glory and the prestige of their position in the Church. This leads to arguments about who is the greatest among them. Jesus seeks to counteract this attitude by emphasizing the grave moral responsibility which leadership places upon them. The concept which Jesus expresses reflects more that of the "Watchman" of which Ezekiel wrote in Chapter thirty-three.

FRATERNAL CORRECTION

Scriptures reveal that the Apostles had difficulty, not only with Jesus, but with each other. They had their arguments and quarrels in all parts of life where there were interpersonal relationships. In the dispute between the Apostles over their "greatness," Jesus intervened and ended, for the time being, the disagreement.

However, Jesus would not always be present in Person, but arguments, disagreements and scandals would be there. Jesus prudently provides for such future things when He would not be present to settle interpersonal problems within the community. He gives His Apostles and disciples a teaching on both offense and forgiveness.

First, Jesus turns His attention to personal offense. The Lord encourages a certain simplicity, humility and sensitivity in approaching the problem. Jesus said, "*If your brother should commit some wrong against you, go and point out his fault, but keep it between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*" (Mt. 18:15) Where there is general good will and a degree of maturity, this should be all that is necessary.

If the private method fails, Jesus says, "*If he does not listen, summon another, so that every case may stand on the word of two or three witnesses.*" (Mt. 18:16) Here we are seeking an independent opinion – presumably an unbiased third party whose task is to discern the reality of the offense or injustice and convince the offending party of fault. This would certainly be good advice, generally speaking, in marital disputes and in disputes between

parents and difficult adolescent youths.

If the second step fails, then a third and final step is taken. In this case, the witnesses in the second step would serve as witnesses to a refusal at reconciliation. The problem is now referred to the Christian Community. *"If he ignores them, refer it to the church."* (Mt. 18:17) Now the case goes public. If the offending party refuses reconciliation, then excommunication is advised. We read, *"If he ignores even the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector."* (Mt. 18:17)

This text implies that if the offending party refuses to listen to the Church – fails to repent – he or she is presumed to have rejected the very authority of Jesus Christ, *"He who hears you, hears me."* (Lk. 10:16) Such have spiritually alienated themselves from the Community – truly from Christ. Jesus advises – until they do repent – that they are to be considered as a *"Gentile"* – a pagan who is not a member of God's people and as a *"tax collector"* who would be a member of God's people who turned traitor – one now affiliated with pagans.

POWER TO BIND AND LOOSE

From the text which follows the above text encouraging excommunication, we learn that the purpose of excommunication is not intended to be punitive but to be medicinal. We have an example of such a Church practice in Corinth. There was a case of incest within the Community. Paul demanded that the community excommunicate the man. He wrote the Church at Corinth, *"Expel the wicked man from your midst."* (I Cor. 5:13)

We have a most important Scripture text in Matthew 18:18: Here, Jesus grants the Church, as a whole, the same power which He grants to Peter in Matthew 16:19. Now Jesus says to the Church – and apparently to the Twelve Apostles, *"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."* (Mt. 18:18)

We often miss an important point in this matter of Church authority. The power within the Christian community is the power of Christ – it finds its limits within the "limits" of Christ's power. Christ totally identifies Himself with the Church – the Christian Community. It is the Body of Christ; it is the corporate symbol of Christ on earth. In the case of the

Church, it is a symbol of spiritual reality. The Church possesses the Power of Christ – the degree of power Christ imparts to the Church.

If Jesus Christ chose one man to represent the Church and govern it in His name, it would be expected that the community as a whole possessed the same power which is individually possessed by its leader. It has been widely accepted among scholars that Matthew 18:18 implies that distinct Christian Communities possess the power granted in this text, and that this power resided personally in the leader of the local community – the bishop who rules and governs in the name of the community. This is another way of saying that he acts in the name of Christ. The authority held in the Church by the Holy Father – the successor of Peter and the Bishops of the Church - cannot be separated either from Christ nor from the Church.

In the following text, Jesus emphasizes His personal presence within the Christian Community. Matthew records, *“Again I tell you, if two of you join your voices on earth to pray for anything whatever, it shall be granted you by my Father in Heaven. Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.”* (Mt. 18:19-20) There was a saying among the rabbis, *“Two that sit together occupied in the Law have the Presence among them.”* In a word, the Shekinah is in their midst. However, the Christian Community gathers together, not around the words of the Torah, but around the Person and Words of Jesus and He is in their midst. This text certainly confirms the presence and power of Jesus within the Christian Community. It adds a great dimension to community prayer not merely to prayers said in common, but to prayers said with a union of hearts and minds. Such prayers possess the power of Christ’s own prayer.

This beautiful and powerful teaching on prayer has been inserted between the themes of offense and forgiveness. Does it not indeed imply the importance and power of prayer as a means for dealing with both offense and forgiveness? Does it not suggest the power of prayer to win for another the grace of repentance and forgiveness?

FRATERNAL FORGIVENESS

The focus of attention now shifts from fraternal correction to fraternal forgiveness. Peter introduces the subject with the question, *“Lord, when my brother wrongs me, how often must I forgive him? Seven times?”* (Mt. 18:21) Peter is speaking about a personal offense suffered from a member of the

Christian Community. This is not the case of a person who offends and refuses reconciliation, but the case of a person who offends, repents, offends again and repents again – that person who tries the patience of a saint and stretches the charity of an angel. What is the limit of forgiveness? When can you “write off” such a person and treat him as a “Gentile” or “a tax collector”? Peter’s suggestion of seven times was generous in light of the teachings of many rabbis. They deduced from Amos that God forgave sinful nations three times and punished them on the fourth offense. Man could not be more forgiving than God. To the mind of Christ, Peter’s answer was not generous – not generous enough to be Christian. Jesus responded to Peter, “‘No,’ Jesus replied, ‘not seven times; I say, seventy times seven times.’” (Mt. 18:22) The number seven represented perfection, and the number ten and its multiples represented unlimitedness. Jesus told Peter – and the Church – to be forever perfectly forgiving. One must have a spirit such that unforgiveness has no essential home within the heart. There must be a willingness to forgive – and to forgive forever.

Jesus relates a parable to His disciples to impress upon them the tremendous importance that Christians place no limits upon their forgiveness of each other. This parable teaches one of Jesus’ most stern teachings within the Gospel. It relates such a frightful truth that most people imprudently choose not to think about it. Jesus relates a drama which depicts mercy, cruelty and justice; God’s mercy, man’s cruelty, God’s justice. This parable tells us about the way things are in the Kingdom of God. In other words, it tells us about how things are in the Church and how they will be at the final judgment. (See Mt. 18:23-35.)

Let us recall what we learned in our study of the parable. It basically has one main point and it usually delivers its punch in the last line. Let us carefully listen to it, “*My heavenly Father will treat you in exactly the same way unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.*” (Mt. 18:35) Now remember that when Our Lord says, “will treat you,” He is speaking to you and me. We can hear that last sentence without ever hearing that vital phrase, “*from his heart.*”

The Lord’s teaching is clear. As members of the Christian Community, our offenses against God have been forgiven – wiped away by the atoning Blood of Christ, applied to our souls through the holy sacraments received. However, if we refuse to extend forgiveness to others within the Christian

Community, we will be lost. At the final Judgment, God will set aside mercy and deal justly with us. He will use our own measure. As we have measured to others, He will measure to us. Make no mistake, Jesus teaches that all the infinite forgiveness of sins will be revoked and that the burden of our sinful lives will weigh our souls to Hell. As one man expressed it, *"My need for divine forgiveness being infinitely greater than my need for human justice and vindication, I will not withhold personal forgiveness from my enemies."*

It has been wisely said that "I forgive but I cannot forget" is not a Christian saying. An unforgettable offense is, more than likely, an unforgiven one. That forgiveness needs to be taken to prayer and kept there! When one truly forgives "from the heart," it is as if the offense never occurred.

THE QUESTION OF DIVORCE

Jesus ended His work in Galilee and planned to be in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Jesus would have followed the pilgrim route along the Eastside of the Jordan River, passing through the districts of Decapolis and Perea, avoiding entrance into Samaria, as the Samaritans were especially hostile to pilgrims heading to Jerusalem for the feast. Jesus is now leading His disciples to Jerusalem and to the Cross.

During this time, Jesus continues the instruction of the Apostles. At this point, the question of divorce was introduced by certain Pharisees who asked Jesus – as a test. We are told, *"May a man divorce his wife for any reason whatever?" (Mt. 19:3)* This question reflected the argument existing at the time between two important schools of theological thought: the school of Rabbi Hillel, which permitted a man to divorce his wife "for any cause," and the school of Rabbi Shammai, which insisted that a man could only divorce his wife in case of adultery. The decision of both rested upon the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1.

The status of women among the Semitic people was most precarious. They essentially had been reduced to property – belonging first to their fathers, and secondly, to their husbands. They had few privileges and even fewer rights under the Law. Divorce often placed them in a terrible economic situation, which only lessened their human dignity.

In this question about divorce, Jesus returns to a text in Genesis and declares that marriage is of the natural order decreed by God. Marriage lies beyond the jurisdiction of man. Interpreting the Divine Will of the Creator, Jesus forbids divorce. He teaches that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery. Since this decision was based upon the original Will of God, the Church has interpreted that this decree binds all mankind and not only Christians.

There has been much discussion over the statement in Matthew that "*lewd conduct is a separate case.*" This has been interpreted in the Greek Orthodox Church and in many Protestant communities to mean that divorce and remarriage is permitted in cases of adultery. Within the Roman Catholic Church, it has been interpreted to mean that divorce is permitted, but not remarriage. However, more and more scholars today insist that it is not an exception to the rule of no-divorce. They insist that the Greek word "porneia" translated "adultery," refers, not to adultery, but to incestuous relationships. Matthew did not wish the teachings of Jesus concerning no-divorce to be applied to incestuous marriages. Such marriages – even though legal – would naturally be invalid.

We do know that there was a shock-reaction on the part of the Apostles to this teaching of Jesus, "*If that is the case between man and wife, it is better not to marry.*" (Mt. 19:10) It would have been no surprise to them if Jesus had agreed with the stricter interpretation of the School of Shammai, which permitted divorce in case of adultery. The surprise came because Jesus rejected both schools of thought. Jesus taught – no divorce and no remarriage.

HIS CHURCH

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“IT IS NO PART OF YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER’S PLAN THAT A SINGLE ONE OF THESE LITTLE ONES SHALL EVER COME TO GRIEF.” (MT. 18:14)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction, Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 22:24-27.

- 1. What surfaces now in our Scripture readings as an essential characteristic of Christian Discipleship?**
- 2. How would you define a “little one” and how does Christ fit the description?**
- 3. What ought to be the attitude of the Christian Community towards the “little ones” who are lost? How does your parish deal with the problem?**
- 4. As a member of the Church, how do you fulfill your obligation towards the lost and strayed Christian?**

SECOND DAY: Read from John 13:12-17 and Ezekial 33:1-20.

- 1. According to the Scriptures, how should authority be expressed in the Christian community?**
- 2. What does Jesus teach you in the washing of the feet?**
- 3. How do the words to the watchman, In Ezekiel, apply to Church leaders? How do they apply to you?**
- 4. What do you learn from this reading in Ezekiel about God’s forgiveness?**

THIRD DAY: Read “Fraternal Correction,” Matthew 18:15-18; Leviticus 19:15-18 and Deuteronomy 19:15-21.

- 1. What do these readings teach you about fraternal correction in the Church Community?**

2. What does the Matthew reading teach about the role of the Church?
3. What does Leviticus teach you about correction?
4. What do you learn from the reading in Deuteronomy?

FOURTH DAY: Read "Power to Bind and Loose," I Cor. 5:1-5; 6:1-6 and Matthew 18:19-20.

1. Who received the power from Christ to excommunicate Christians from the Church?
2. What do you learn about excommunication from I Cor. 5:1-5?
3. What do you learn about Christian behavior from I Cor. 6:1-6?
4. What is the importance of Christians praying together?

FIFTH DAY: Read "Fraternal Forgiveness" and Matthew 18:21-35.

1. In what way does the spirit of forgiveness express the spirit of the Gospel?
2. What is the relationship between divine and human forgiveness?
3. What do you understand by forgiveness "from the heart"?
4. What do you think of the expression, "I will forgive but I won't forget"?

SIXTH DAY: Read "The Question of Divorce," Deuteronomy 24:1-4; I Cor. 7:8-16 and Matthew 19:1-15.

1. What is Paul's teaching upon Christian marriage?
2. What do you understand by I Cor. 7:15?
3. What does the Apostles' reaction to Jesus' teaching about divorce teach you?
4. What do you understand by Matthew 19:12?

CHAPTER 19

FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

When Jesus proclaimed the indissolubility of marriage, He confirmed the natural foundation for human society, a foundation which rested upon the Will of the Creator. When Jesus added His personal affirmation, "I now say to you" – ending the dispensation granted by Moses – He made marriage a Sacrament for the Christian Community and recognized the Christian Family as a vital dimension of the Kingdom of God on earth. Christian couples are joined in marriage in the name of Jesus Christ, and their married lives are sanctified through the Presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul calls the children of such unions "*holy.*"

The author of Ephesians compares the consecrated marital union of Christians to Jesus Christ's union with His Church. Christian Marriage becomes a visible sign symbolizing Christ's eternal union with the Church. The members of the Church – as a married couple – have become one with Christ and they cannot be divided, "*for we are members of his body.*" (Eph. 5:30)

It is not by chance that Matthew immediately follows the teaching on divorce with an incident which involves Jesus and His apostles with children. Children are the natural fruit of marriage and their complete nourishment and maturity depends upon the stability of the marriage. Within the recorded incident, the Church is taught the relationship between children and Jesus and therefore, the relationship between children and the Church. (See Mt. 19:13-15.) From this incident, we are taught that the adults – in this case the Apostles – must not impede the little children coming to Jesus. They must not impede their becoming part of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Children born to Christian parents are "*holy,*" which implies they are able to be consecrated to God. They, according to Jesus, are in the perfect condition to receive into their hearts the Kingdom of God. Their little souls, like soft wax, readily receive the imprint of their Savior.

No true Jew would ever think of not circumcising his children. They believe that by obeying the commandment to Abraham, and observing this ritual, they incorporate their children into the people of God. Any Christian who properly understands the nature of original sin – as taught by Paul in Romans – and understands the teaching of Jesus to Nicodemus, and knows what John meant when he said, *“We know that we belong to God, while the whole world is under the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19)* – will take his child in great haste to the baptismal fount, to receive new birth in water and the Holy Spirit and to cover his person with the protective Blood of the Lamb. Jesus’ words to Peter apply to many within the Christian Community, *“You are not judging by God’s standards but by men’s.” (Mt. 16:23)*

Before we leave this place in Matthew’s narration, we need to note that Jesus is dealing with membership in the Church, requirements for membership and the internal and external lives of those members of the Church. After entrance into the Church, members have certain moral obligations and responsibilities. These things are not optional, for they are the means to confirm one’s eternal life; their neglect and rejection are the means to forfeit one’s eternal life. As members of the Christian Community, there is a Christian Morality which guides our lives, and conforming our lives to it is not optional – that is, if we truly desire to be living members, now and forever, of the kingdom of God.

Christians today must be very conscious and alert to the fact that they do not live in a Christian world. Presently, society maintains only a slight veneer of Christianity. Beneath this veneer covering lies sheer paganism in full worship of its idols. Most Christians are daily being exposed to the poisonous doctrines of paganism through the mass media and through daily contact with its disciples. One needs to be inoculated in order to be insured against an infectious environment. The best inoculation is to be grounded in Christian Truth and rooted in Christian holiness. If Christian children are not immunized, they will become helpless victims of their surroundings. Soon many will be no more than nominally Christian.

Membership in the Church calls us to a Christian ideal established by Jesus; this ideal must not be eclipsed by worldliness or the “smoke of Satan,” nor lessened because of human weakness. The love of God, poured into the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit, urges them daily to strive for this ideal. Each day may have to end in repentance, but each new dawn brings another day in which to begin anew the love of Christ and the

love of neighbor.

Jesus calls the married couples to a pure monogamous relationship; in this frame they valiantly strive to die to self in order to live in the love and respect which Jesus urges them to incorporate in their marital relationship. Children of such marriages are called to the obedience of Christ in the name of Jesus. Scripture urges them, "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for that is what is expected of you.*" (Eph. 6:1) As for the young people in the Church, Paul wrote to Titus, "*Tell the young men to keep themselves completely under control.*" (Ti. 2:6) The Scriptures make it clear that each Christian is required to live chastely according to his state in life. Young Christians – and all those not married – are expected, as Christian people, to live a life of chaste celibacy until they are married. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "*What we are aiming at . . . is the love that springs from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.*" (1 Tim. 1:5)

Jesus indicates that some would be called to live a chaste celibate life. As we know, the Catholic Church requires celibacy as a condition to ordination to the priesthood in the Roman rite. It became an established discipline in the Western Church towards the end of the 6th century when Pope Gregory the Great imposed it on all clerics in major orders. Among Catholics of most Eastern Rites, many of the clergy are married in accordance with the common tradition in the East. A traditional teaching of the Church has been that God gives the necessary grace to live the vocation to which each is called.

THE IMPORTANT QUESTION

Matthew now records an episode in which a man comes to Jesus and asks Him a most important question concerning what a person must do to possess eternal life. The question deals with salvation – the very heart of the Gospel message. This man could be seen as a symbol for those who rejected Jesus for different reasons than did the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees.

As Matthew related the incident, the man addressed Jesus simply as "Teacher." The term itself signified a lack of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The man looked upon Jesus as a Jewish rabbi. Jesus reacted negatively to the man's question. He took exception to the careless use of the concept "good." Jesus centered in upon the word "good." "*Why do you question me*

about what is good?" (Mt. 19:17) The means to salvation is not a "what." It is not a matter of a "good thing." "There is One who is good." The means to salvation is a Who – God who is good. It is a matter of the Good God. Jesus teaches that "goodness" is a prerogative and a characteristic of God. He ties together good with God, and both with commandments and salvation.

The man's questions implied the spirit of legalism. He asked in the first question, *"What good must I do to possess everlasting life?" (Mt. 19:16)* The emphasis was upon the "I do." The question implied that everlasting life could be earned by a man's good works, which makes him his own personal savior. What was necessary was to accomplish the proper works. This was at the heart of Pharisaic spirituality.

In response to Jesus' *"Keep the Commandments,"* the man replied, *"Which ones?"* If he had truly possessed the spirit behind the law, there would have been no question concerning "which ones." In His reply, Jesus enumerated four commandments which dealt primarily with human relationships. To these, Jesus added the commandment which summed up the four, and expressed the very spirit of the commandments as well, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* Jesus was re-enforcing the personal aspect of salvation. The answer implied that salvation involved a loving interpersonal energy – into the flow of God's heart. The man's response, *"What do I need to do further?"* indicated a lack of any in-depth understanding of God's commandment. His conscious awareness of *"I have kept all of these"* flowed from his legal observance of the law. He still desired to know if there was something more he could do to insure his salvation. Jesus' response implied that there was nothing more he could do to gain eternal life. Jesus demonstrated this by asking of him what he lacked the power and grace to accomplish. He demanded a radical fulfillment in the spirit of the commandment of love of neighbor, *"If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor. You will then have treasure in heaven."* (Mt. 19:21)

The man giving his wealth to the poor does not seem to be the essential point, but rather the stripping of himself down to nothing – reducing himself to zero – becoming one of the "anawim" who depend daily upon the heavenly Father. His wealth was not the problem, but his attachment to it was a symptom of his spiritual problem. He could not put radical trust and confidence in God.

Jesus told him, *"If you seek perfection, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor."* Now the Greek word translated "perfection" is "telelos." The word can mean "maturity" when used in relationship to childhood. It can signify "completeness," which the man signified he lacked. Often in the past we have looked upon this passage as distinguishing between a state of salvation and a state of Christian perfection, which implied that there were two categories of Christians: those merely "saved" and those "saved and perfected." However, many scholars maintain that this text does not imply a distinction between what must be to gain eternal life, and what must be done to seek perfection. "Telelos," as used by Matthew, implies being "true to God" – "true to the Covenant." It is more an expression of the concept of justice, and signifies that person who wholeheartedly accomplishes the Will of God. It is the same requirement that Jesus demands of any person in order to come to salvation.

The man had asked, *"Teacher, what good must I do to possess everlasting life?"* When it was all said and done, Jesus told him *"Repent,"* which, in his case, would have been demonstrated by his heroic charity; but that was not all – the ultimate demand of God's Will, which truly produces "perfection," is that sacrificial following of Christ on the way to the Cross. Jesus' ultimate answer to the question was, *"Come back and follow me."* The answers were rejected and the invitation refused.

THE DANGER OF WEALTH

As the sad man departed with his burden of wealth, Jesus turned to His disciples and said, *"I assure you, only with difficulty will a rich man enter into the kingdom of God. I repeat what I said: it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."* (Mt. 19:23-24) Only shortly before, the Lord had said to the Apostles, *"I assure you, unless you change and become like little children you will not enter the kingdom of God."* (Mt. 18:3) It is a safe presumption to say that there exists a relationship between the two statements. Apparently, something about being a rich person militates strongly against becoming like a little child.

Wealth itself is not an intrinsic obstacle to becoming a disciple of Jesus. Men such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were wealthy disciples. However, wealth has the tendency of making a man trust in his silver and

gold rather than in his God. Wealth brings prestige and power which trust in God often does not. We saw what happened when Jesus asked a wealthy man to give up his possessions and put his trust in God and in Jesus. Having a great deal of wealth, social prestige and power are obstacles to developing those characteristics which make one a "little one." When a man places his trust in his "silver and gold," his insecurity can lead to greed, selfishness and injustice. There is not enough gold to make a person absolutely secure. Also, one does not possess things – one is possessed by things – possessed with them. Wherever your treasure is, there is your heart. Great wealth often leaves little time for anything else but caring for ones wealth. All the energy and time of life can be spent upon those treasures which rust and moths destroy. Because one is rich here upon earth, one could enter eternity soul-poor – neither a merit nor a grace to one' name.

REWARDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Apparently, the Apostles panicked when they heard the news about the near impossibility of the rich to be saved. If this was the case with those so generously blessed by Yahweh, where did they stand in relationship to salvation? However, Jesus' look reassured them in regard to their safety. With this fear out of the way, they were able to reflect upon Jesus' words to the rich man, "*You will then have treasure in heaven.*" The treasure in heaven would result from his distribution of his earthly treasure among the poor. This is not speaking about salvation, but about the rewards the saved will receive in heaven. Men's good works do not merit salvation, but they do merit eternal rewards. Things will neither be the same nor equal in heaven – star will differ from star, and some will shine in eternity more gloriously because of their good works upon earth.

It was at this time that Peter asked – in the name of the Apostles – what they could expect for giving up everything and following Jesus. Jesus tells these twelve Apostles that when the kingdom of God comes in its fullness, these men will sit upon thrones with Christ Himself. They will be the judges over Israel. "*I give you my solemn word.*" (Mt. 19:28) It is an awesome thing to reflect upon, that one of those Twelve was Judas, and that this solemn promise would be rescinded in his case. As we read in Acts, "*He was one of our number and he had been given a share in this ministry of ours . . . May another take his office.*" (Acts 1:17,20) Judas followed Jesus for a long time and came a long way with Him, but he would not follow Him

to the Cross.

After Jesus' solemn promise to the Twelve, He turns His attention to all His disciples and He promises they will receive a hundred-fold return from the Lord. The return is not to be taken literally; it will not be in kind, but it will be something better – joy. The joy and happiness that the things sacrificed would have brought to the disciples will return to them a hundred-fold.

LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

Following this discussion upon the rewards to be received, Jesus relates a parable in which He compares things in the Kingdom of God to the owner of a vineyard. Matthew records, *"The reign of God is like the case of the owner of an estate who went out at dawn to hire workmen for his vineyard. After reaching an agreement with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them out to his vineyard."* (Mt. 20:1-2) The owner again went to the market place and hired people to go into his vineyard at 9 A.M., 12 noon, and 3 P.M. To these latter he merely said, *"I will pay you whatever is fair."* (Mt. 20:4) Finally, he went back at five o'clock and said to some others. *"Why have you been standing here idle all day?"* *"No one has hired us,"* they told him. He said, *"You go to the vineyard too."* (Mt. 20:6-7)

Now the workday began at 6 A.M. and ended at 6 P.M., which began the new day. When time came to pay the workers, the owner instructed the foreman to pay the last first and to give each and every worker a denarius. Of course, this delighted the latecomers, but angered the earlier workers. The owner questioned the anger of the earlier workers; was its source an "evil eye" which looked with malice and envy upon the good fortune of others? They were disturbed, not over what they received, but over what others received. The parable concludes, *"Thus the last shall be first and the first shall be last."* (Mt. 20:16)

The most obvious application of this parable would be to Israel and the Gentiles. Israel – the covenant people, the workers in the vineyard from dawn – are contrasted with the eleventh hour crowd – the Gentiles. They are admitted into the People of God on an equal status, and with full standing, with the Israelites. In Acts, Paul speaks of the jealousy and malice of the Jews because the Gentiles were being received into the

kingdom of heaven.

It has been said that a parable may have several levels of meaning and may look in more than one direction. It may look back to Israel and it may look forward to the New Israel – that apostolic community so concerned over its position and reward. To these, the parable proclaims that early members in the Church have no privileged standing within the Christian Community. The reign of God – the Church – does not belong any more to the original members – even to the Apostles – than it does to its newest members. In the eyes of God, all who are in Christ are one. (*See Gal. 3:26-28*)

Man has no appeal against the free exercise of God's Will. God is compassionate and merciful and His love cannot be defined by the narrow limits of human justice. Those who seek to calculate the actions of God will indeed be surprised. The overflowing gratitude and the exceeding joy of the lost who find themselves saved may place them in a prestigious place in the Kingdom of God, whereas the "sour grapes" of those who bore the heat of the day may place them last.

FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“ANYONE AMONG YOU WHO ASPIRES TO GREATNESS MUST SERVE THE REST, AND WHOEVER WANTS TO RANK FIRST AMONG YOU MUST SERVE THE NEEDS OF ALL.” (Mt. 20:26-27)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction and I Cor. 7:1-9; 25-28; 32-35 and 39-40.

1. Why does membership in the Christian Church affect the entire life of a Christian?
2. By what standard should the life of a Christian be directed?
3. What do you see as the difficulty of being a Christian in our society?
4. What do you see to be the value of a life of celibacy within the Christian Community?

SECOND DAY: Read “The Important Question,” Mt. 19:16-22 and Mk. 9:17-22.

1. How would you answer the question asked in Matthew 19:16?
2. In what way do the man’s questions show a spirit of legalism?
3. How did Jesus teach the man there was nothing he could do to gain eternal life?
4. Why do you think the man refused to follow Jesus’ words to him?

THIRD DAY: Read “The Danger of Wealth,” Mt. 19:23-26; Lk. 19:1-10; Lk. 12:16-21 and I Tim. 6:6-11 and 17-19.

1. In what way could having wealth militate against becoming a “little child”?

2. How do you understand the metaphors in Matthew 19:24?
3. What are some of the dangers wealth poses to the Christian Life?
4. What does Paul teach the wealthy in I Timothy 6:17-19?

FOURTH DAY: Read "Rewards of Discipleship" and Mt. 19:27-30.

1. What do you learn from the fact that Jesus distinguishes between eternal life and rewards in heaven?
2. What can Christians merit by their good works on earth?
3. What do you learn from our Lord's solemn promise to the Twelve Apostles and Judas' ultimate end?
4. What does Matthew 19-29 mean to you?

FIFTH DAY: Read "Laborers in the Vineyard," Mt. 20:1-16; Isaiah 5:1-7 and Romans 9:14-18.

1. What is your reaction to this parable?
2. How does it apply to Israel and the Gentiles?
3. How does it apply to the Christian Community?
4. What do you learn from Romans 9:14-16?

SIXTH DAY: Read "The Lord's Cup" and Matthew 20:17-34.

1. What new details does the third prophecy of the Passion reveal?
2. What do you understand by Matthew 20:22?
3. What does Matthew 20:28 teach you about the meaning of verse 26?
4. What do you see to be the symbolic meaning behind the healing of the two blind men in Jericho?

CHAPTER 20

YOUR KING COMES

INTRODUCTION

When Jesus confronted the Apostles with particular facts about His coming death, He faced them with a reality beyond their mental comprehension – beyond what their human hearts could bear. Peter expressed the human heart perfectly when he cried, *“May you be spared, Master! God forbid that any such thing ever happen to you!”* (Mt. 16:22) It remains incomprehensible to the human heart how a good God can permit the innocent to suffer. It was unthinkable to the Jewish mind that God could permit evil to touch and violate the sacred humanity of the Messiah. The fact of suffering innocence has been a scandal to many people, impeding their relationship with God. Seemingly, some things in life can only be accepted, not understood.

The presence of evil and its frequent triumph over good give faith a test which it ought to withstand. When the senses, the emotions, and the understanding withdraw support and abandon the soul, trust in God arises from naked faith to reckon with evil. The Word of God, solely, supports faith. Naked faith sustains the soul amidst its trials and within its agony. It hears, *“Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body and then can do no more.”* It believes and becomes strong. Somehow, when evil is confronted head-on by goodness, in some mysterious fashion, goodness does not waver in the face of it, but remains as solid as Gibraltar amidst a sea of evil – it dissipates and destroys the powers of evil. Goodness destroys it by accepting and absorbing it. Whatever object a wave cannot carry with its force, dissipates the wave. The immovable rock destroys the power of the wave which pounds upon it. The man, who sets his face “like flint” before the waves of evil, is not “put to shame,” but conquers evil.

Even as evil destroyed the physical body of Christ, it lost the victory. The body was but the battlefield, and battlefields are destroyed in war. The physical life of Christ was not the prize; His soul was the prize. After His death, evil never again gained the power it once possessed over humanity.

The Scriptures tell us that by His death Jesus robbed "*the devil, the prince of death, of his power.*" (Hb. 2:14)

Perhaps, as we follow Christ on His way to the Cross, we will understand, to a certain degree, our God who is good and loving yet permits even evil to befall His children. Maybe in sharing what the good and innocent Jesus endured, our faith will be strengthened, so as not to doubt the love and goodness of God if perchance evil befalls us or bad days come upon us. Nevertheless, when we follow Christ, it is like following Light into sheer darkness. Amidst such darkness, only the Lamp of Faith guides the footsteps.

Jesus, the New Joshua, leads His disciples on to Jerusalem. Truly, Jerusalem becomes His Jericho – the obstacle and the gateway into the Promised Land. Symbolically, the disciples are still off to the side of the road. They cannot "see" His Way in order to follow Him. At this point, Matthew relates the episode of the healing of two blind men in Jericho, which symbolized the spiritual blindness of James and John, and of course, the other ten. The two blind men wanted to see and they prayed, "*Lord, Son of David, have pity on us!*" "*Lord, open our eyes!*" (Mt. 20:31,33) If the death of Jesus left the disciples completely in the darkness of faith, such a prayer certainly expressed the feelings of the disciples. Their hearts asked, "*Why?*" Their lips prayed, "*Lord, help us to understand.*"

JESUS ENTERS JERUSALEM

Jesus intended to enter Jerusalem as the Messiah. He deliberately chose symbols which expressed His Messianic Role. As the Messiah, Jesus was the King of the Jews, and Jerusalem His capital city; its temple symbolized the place where God and man came together. A ruler could enter a city on a war-horse – which symbolized that he came as a conqueror, or he could enter it upon an ass – which signified he came in peace. A rabbinical tradition existed which held that, if Israel became unworthy to receive its Messiah in triumphant glory, He would approach them in humility riding upon an ass.

In the mind of the author, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem symbolizes that He comes to the city as the King of Peace. His entrance into the city recalls the words of the Prophet Zechariah. (See Zec. 9:9-10.) Matthew relates, "*So the Disciples went off and did what Jesus had ordered; they brought the ass*

and the colt and laid their cloaks on them and he mounted.” (Mt. 21:6-7)

As Jesus proceeded towards Jerusalem, the people gave Him a royal reception. *“The groups preceding him as well as those following kept crying out, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!’” (Mt. 21:8-9)* The conduct of the crowd was reminiscent of the feast of Tabernacles, at which the people carried branches which they waved in the air while they sang and shouted, *“Hosanna Yahweh.”* The branch itself was called “the hosanna”; the word “hosanna” literally means “oh save!” The feast of Tabernacles had a historic reference to the Exodus from Egypt and celebrated the Israelites’ redemption from slavery. *“Hosanna to the Son of David!”* was a prayer that God would save the Messiah. The words of the crowd deliberately recalled to mind the words of Psalm 118. *(See Ps. 118:22-29.)*

LORD OF THE TEMPLE

The unexpected arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem with such a tumultuous reception shocked the city into the awareness that something extraordinary had occurred. *“The whole city was stirred to its depths, demanding, ‘Who is this?’” (Mt. 21:10)* The word “stirred,” weakly translates “eseisthe,” which can mean “earthquake.” In a word, this event left nothing unmoved. Jesus’ coming to Jerusalem was a powerful, spiritual visitation and the vibrations it caused troubled the soul of the city. Perhaps the more sensitive people sensed the moment of Jerusalem’s judgment. To the question, *“Who is this?”* the unenlightened crowd, with its undeveloped faith, responded, *“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” (Mt. 21:11)* However, to the discerning eye, His behavior implied much more. Could this be the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy? *(See Mal. 3:1-4.)*

After His entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus proceeded immediately to the temple – the very heart of Jerusalem – and He entered it as Lord. What followed signified that this temple would no longer be the place where God and man would meet. This temple would be replaced. Jesus would build a New Temple, which would be filled with God’s Holy Spirit. *(See Mt. 21:12-13.)* Zechariah foretells that on the day the Lord comes from the Mount of Olives to be made king over the nations, *“There shall no longer be any merchant in the house of the Lord of Hosts.” (Zech. 14:21)* Jesus’ demand that the animals of sacrifice be removed from the temple area symbolically signifies the end of such sacrifices has come. It was a prophetic gesture

that came to be in 70 A.D. with the destruction of the temple.

The words uttered by Jesus in the temple echoed the voice of Isaiah, *"For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel: Others will I gather to him besides those already gathered."* (Is. 56:7-8) These words of Isaiah were now symbolically being fulfilled that day in the temple. Matthew records, *"The blind and the lame came to him inside the temple area and he cured them."* (Mt. 21:14) We may miss the significance here of the blind and the lame coming to Him "inside the temple area" if we do not realize that such people were kept out of the temple. This resulted from an interpretation of 2 Samuel 5:8, and Leviticus 21:18. Such things were considered to be punishments for unremitted sins and so such people were considered "unclean." The fact that Jesus encouraged them to enter the temple and come to Him signified His redemptive love. It recalls His words to the Pharisees, *"If you understood the meaning of the text, 'It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned these innocent men."* (Mt. 12:7)

At about this time, "the chief priests and scribes" arrive like dark, ominous clouds upon the scene. Jesus' behavior in the temple area is an affront and a threat to their authority. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees, He faced prideful, spiritual people; but when he confronted the chief priests and their lawyers, He faced crass materialism and merciless greed. He came up against big business, Old Jerusalem style, in the House of Annas; He became a threat to its profit and power. Matthew relates, *"The chief priests and the scribes became indignant when they observed the wonders he worked, and how the children were shouting out in the temple precincts, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!'"* (Mt. 21:15) Although Jerusalem is shaken and disturbed by His coming, it will not accept Him in faith. We are told, *"He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night."* (Mt. 21:17) "He left them" is an intimation of abandonment by God which is soon to come and which will leave their house desolate. In Bethany, Jesus was the guest of His friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary.

THE STERILE TREE

At dawn, Jesus returned to Jerusalem and began to teach in the temple. On the way to the temple, Matthew relates that Jesus was hungry and He went over to a fig tree in full foliage, seeking some figs to eat. In actual fact, it was a good month too soon for the spring figs. When Jesus found no

fruit upon the tree, "he said to it, 'Never again shall you produce fruit!'; and it withered up instantly." (Mt. 21:19) This beautiful tree, bearing no fruit, reminded Jesus of Israel.

Jesus sees Israel in this tree. It has an external appearance of true religion – without the reality of religion. Its unfaithfulness to God's grace has resulted in its unfruitfulness. Jesus curses its sterility and prophesies its Divine rejection. This incident would serve as a warning to the members of the New Israel. Within the Gospel, there has been an emphasis upon trees which produce evil fruit. Here it is not a matter of evil fruit, but of no fruit. What Jesus truly curses is spiritual sterility. The People of God have constantly been nourished by grace through the Christian Community – through Church. However, many make no return, being unwilling to deny their selfish pursuits. They become like the fig tree; they possess the full foliage of religion but not the substance – they are spiritually sterile. Our Lord said to the Apostles, "It was I who chose you to go forth and bear fruit. Your fruit must endure." (Jn. 15:16)

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

"After Jesus had entered the temple precincts, and while he was teaching, the chief priests and elders came up to him and said, 'On what authority are you doing these things? Who has given you this power?'" (Mt. 21:23) This amounted to an official inquiry into Jesus' right to exercise such authority within the temple. Every rabbi received his authority from the rabbi who instructed him and laid hands upon him. However, a prophet received authority directly from God. As religious leaders in Israel, it was the duty of these men to distinguish between the false and the true prophets in Israel. Jesus responded to their question, in rabbinical fashion, with a counter-question, which was a means to seek information which could not be directly asked. Jesus asked them whether John's baptism came from God or from man. He cleverly placed them "in the horns of a dilemma." Whichever way they went, He had them. "They thought to themselves, 'If we say "divine" he will ask us, "Then why did you not put faith in it" while if we say, "merely human," we shall have reason to fear the people, who all regard John as a prophet.' So their answer to Jesus was, 'We do not know.' He said in turn, 'Then neither will I tell you on what authority I do the things I do.'" (Mt. 21:25-27)

Essentially, their reply implied that they refused to accept the fact that

John acted with Divine authority. However, publicly they revealed themselves as inept leaders who could not make a decision concerning the most electrifying religious figure to appear within Israel in centuries. Jesus had forced them to admit their incompetence publicly thereby releasing Him of any obligation to submit His case for their judgment. In truth, He demonstrated His superiority to their authority by refusing to answer their question. Jesus had forced them, publicly, to reveal their hypocrisy. The final showdown between Jesus and the Jewish authorities had been inaugurated.

Picking up on the theme of John's baptism, Jesus publicly expressed His belief in that baptism. He insisted that the chief priests and their lawyers had rejected the Will of God in this regard. He demonstrated this by putting a case before them. (*See Mt. 21:28-32.*)

In this parable, Jesus makes a point which both Matthew and Luke emphasize in their gospel accounts: the necessity not only to hear the Word of God, but to accomplish it. The first son remained verbally obedient to his father's will, but inwardly there was no spirit of obedience. We may say, he offered "passive resistance" to his father's will. The second son was defiant and openly refused obedience. Later, he repented and gave complete obedience to his father. The second son proved to be the true son of his father.

God personally encountered both groups in the preaching of John the Baptist – the keepers of the Law rejected the way of righteousness which He revealed to them and, in the face of the same preaching, the public sinners repented and came to righteousness. Their repentance was literally a "miracle of grace" before which the Jewish leaders remained unmoved and unrepentant. Jesus makes it clear that such repentance is no optional matter – the unrepentant are not entering into the Kingdom of God.

THE VINEYARD AND THE BANQUET

Jesus now addresses a parable to the chief priests and to the elders which expresses the extent to which their unrepentant spirits would lead them. The parable readily lends itself to allegorical interpretations. Jesus speaks of a vineyard which a man planted and attended well. He released this vineyard, under contract, to certain tenant farmers. The listeners would immediately associate the vineyard with Israel. (*See Is. 5:1-2,7.*) Jesus says

that the owner went away to a foreign land, and yearly sent his servants to gather his share of the harvest. However, the tenants rejected the owner's servants, beating some and killing others. Finally, the owner sent his only son, believing that they would respect the heir. But the tenants recognized the son and reasoned that if he were dead, the vineyard would be theirs. *"With that they seized him, dragged him outside the vineyard, and killed him."* (Mt. 21:39)

Jesus now asks this question of the hearers, *"What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do to those tenants when he comes?"* (Mt. 21:40) They give a logical reply, *"He will bring that wicked crowd to a bad end and lease his vineyard out to others who will see to it that he has grapes at vintage time."* (Mt. 21:41) The prophetic judgment of the chief priests and elders is placed within their own mouths: Rome came and did indeed "evilly destroy the evil men," and the vineyard of the Lord was given over to the Gentiles.

This parable essentially expresses the unfaithfulness of Israel to its Covenant with Yahweh. This unfaithfulness reaches the ultimate crisis in the rejection of Jesus. The chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees knew that Jesus directed these parables against them. They ardently desired to arrest Him but *"they had reason to fear the crowds who regarded him as a prophet."* (Mt. 21:46)

Following upon the thought of Israel's rejection and the Gentiles' election, Jesus relates the parable in which He describes this situation in terms of the guests being invited by a king to a wedding banquet for his son. This parable repeats many of the same allegorical details found in the parable of the wicked tenants. Once again, we see a reaction which symbolizes the Roman destruction of the Jews, *"At this the king grew furious and sent his army to destroy those murderers and burn their city."* (Mt. 22:7) Judgment is given upon the invited guests; they *"were unfit to come."* (Mt. 22:8) However, the king stresses the point that the banquet hall must be filled. It results in the call of the Gentiles.

At this point in the narration, the servants would be the disciples and apostles of Jesus. We are told they filled the banquet hall with *"everyone they met, bad as well as good."* (Mt. 22:10) This certainly expresses the universal call to salvation. However, once again, it reveals that there will be weeds and wheat in the Kingdom of God on earth.

When one reflects that the parable implies, in an allegorical fashion, that God invites people to the wedding banquet of His Son, it destroys the entire concept of the spirit of legalism in true religion. Mankind is invited to a union and a communion with God through the intermediary of His Divine Son. It clearly establishes the intimate interpersonal union to which God calls each person. It gives the best reason for such personal encouragement to personal holiness and purity of life. Salvation is not so much a matter of "saving one's soul" as it is of loving the Person who has forever loved you with an everlasting love.

This parable concludes with the story in which a man is excluded from the banquet hall – cast out into the darkness – because he is found to be "*not properly dressed.*" Certainly, this is a symbol of that final judgment when the weeds and the wheat are separated, and the weeds are removed from the Church. Was it repentance that the man lacked? Was it faith? Or was it love? Did he perhaps live a fruitless life within the Church? The story ends upon a sober note for all to reflect upon, "*The invited are many, the elect are few.*" (Mt.22: 14)

THE TEST QUESTIONS

Now the time comes for the enemies of Jesus to begin their counter-attack. They attempt to discredit Jesus in public. He is now subjected to a series of test questions from His enemies with the hope that "*they might trap Jesus in speech.*" (Mt. 22:15) The Pharisees, His first and oldest enemies come first, having allied themselves with the Herodians who presently are sympathetic to the Pharisees' cause. "*Teacher . . . Give us your opinion, then, in this case. Is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor or not?*" (Mt. 22:16-17) When they ask Jesus, "*Give us your opinion,*" they hope to place Him between the horns of the dilemma. If He says, "Pay the tax," He will alienate a great deal of the people who, with their sympathy, support the Zealots who advocate rebellion and death before paying tribute to Rome. If He says, "It is not lawful to pay the tax," He commits treason against the state. "*Jesus recognized their bad faith,*" and cleverly sidesteps the trap and turns it into an implied accusation against His interrogators. He asks them for a denarius – the coin with which the tax is paid. When they give it to Him, the point is publicly made that He does not possess such a coin, but that they do. Those who carry and use Caesar's coins must support Caesar and his system. Coins belong to the government or to the king that issues them. So Jesus says, "*Whose head is this, and whose inscription?*"

'Caesar's,' they replied. At that, he said to them, 'Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's'" (Mt. 22:20-21)

Once again, Jesus makes His implied charge that these men have failed to give or to render to God what is due God – obedience to His Will. They are vitally concerned about a political issue of obedience to Caesar – yet they neglect the one supreme and essential obedience, *"to hear the Word of God and keep it."* We are told that, *"Taken aback by this reply, they went off and left him."* (Mt. 22:22)

The second test comes from the Sadducees who are the materialists in this religious society. The chief priests and the elders belong to this party. As we know, they did not believe in the after-life, the existence of angels or spirits, or in the Divine intervention into human affairs. They proposed a question to Jesus with the intention of making Him look foolish and His teachings ridiculous. They began by quoting from the Law, Deuteronomy 25:5, which were the only Scriptures they accepted; they rejected everything else in the Old Testament. They went on to give the case of the woman who eventually had to marry seven brothers, and then they asked, *"At the resurrection, whose wife will she be, since all seven of them married her?"* (Mt. 22:28) Jesus replied to them, *"You are badly misled because you fail to understand the Scriptures and the power of God."* (Mt. 22:29) First, Jesus proceeded to correct their concept of the resurrection. It is not a matter of rising to earthly life all over again; it is the going forward into a new and higher dimension of existence, in which the physical sexual relationships of this world are transcended. The resurrected will *"live like angels in heaven."* (Mt. 22:30)

Next, Jesus corrects their belief concerning the immortality of human beings. He meets them where they stand – in the Pentateuch. Jesus refers to Exodus 3:6, *"As to the fact that the dead are raised, have you not read what God said to you, '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."* (Mt. 22:31-32)

Jesus teaches that God did not define His relationship with these men as something in the past, but as a relationship of the present – one which continues today. Death does not destroy this relationship – it has been established in time between God and His saints; it continues after death because of the power of a God who is Love.

We are now told that all the enemies of Jesus *“assembled in a body”* and came to Jesus with a question, *“Teacher, which commandment of the law is the greatest?”* (Mt. 22:36) It is not certain what the nature of this test was –unless it was expected that Jesus would repudiate the Law in some fashion. Jesus’ answer would have been impeccable to the Jewish ear. He began by quoting the beloved Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, *“You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind.”* This is the greatest and first commandment.” (Mt. 22:37-38)

With this, Jesus confirms His belief in the whole heart and essence of the Law and Prophets. One must love God with one’s entire personality, which includes one’s feelings and emotions, but such love reaches down into the heart of every being to capture the mind and the will. Perfect love of God expresses itself in perfect obedience to the Will of God. However, Jesus goes on to say that the love of one’s neighbor is like the love of God. *“The second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”* (Mt. 22:39) It has been said that this statement puts love of God and love of neighbor, practically speaking, on the same plane.

Jesus truly teaches here the way to resurrection and eternal life. It prepares for the scene of the final judgment when all will be judged in the light of only the commandment of Love, *“I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.”* (Mt. 25:40)

YOUR KING COMES

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“THE LORD GOD IS MY HELP, THEREFORE I AM NOT DISGRACED; I HAVE SET MY FACE LIKE FLINT, KNOWING THAT I SHALL NOT BE PUT TO SHAME.” (IS. 50:7)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction through “Jesus Enters Jerusalem,”
Mt. 21:1-10, Zech. 9:9-10 and Ps. 118:22-29.

1. How would you explain the fact of God being a loving God in the face of the innocents suffering unjustly in the world?
2. What did Jesus’ riding the ass into Jerusalem signify?
3. What does the prophecy of Zechariah imply about Jesus?
4. What does the reference to Psalm 118 seem to intimate to you?

SECOND DAY: Read “Lord of the Temple,” Mt. 21:12-17 and Mal. 3:1-4.

1. In what way do you see Jesus fulfilling Malachi 3:1-4?
2. How does Jesus express His Lordship in the temple?
3. What is being signified by the healing of the lame and the blind in the temple?
4. In what way was Jesus’ behavior a threat to the chief priests?

THIRD DAY: Read “The Sterile Tree,” Mt. 21:18-22 and Jer. 8:8-14.

1. How does the fig tree symbolize Israel?
2. In what way does the prophecy of Jeremiah apply to the Israel of Jesus’ time?

3. In what way can Christians become like the fig tree cursed by Jesus?
4. How does Jesus teach us to avoid such spiritual sterility?

FOURTH DAY: Read “The Question of Authority” and Mt. 21:23-32.

1. What does the reply of the chief priests to Jesus’ question reveal about them?
2. Why do you think Jesus refused to answer them?
3. In what way is the first son a symbol of the chief priests?
4. In what way could you become like the first son?

FIFTH DAY: Read “The Vineyard and the Banquet,” Mt. 21:33-46 and Mt. 22:1-14.

1. How does the parable of the vineyard apply to Israel?
2. What do you see as the main point of the parable?
3. What do you understand by Matthew 22:10?
4. What do you think it means not to be “properly dressed” for the banquet?

SIXTH DAY: Read “The Test Question” and Mt. 22:15-45.

1. What do you learn from Matthew 22:21?
2. What does Matthew 22:32 teach you on eternal life?
3. What does Matthew 22:38-40 teach you about Christian love?
4. How would you answer the question in Matthew 22:45?

CHAPTER 21

THE DIVINE PROPHET

INTRODUCTION

The enemies of Jesus in Jerusalem consolidated their strength to oppose Jesus' claim of being the Messiah of Israel. They confronted Him separately and unitedly, publicly seeking to discredit Him in the eyes of the people. However, Jesus proved to be wiser than a serpent. He stood like an immovable rock before the wave of their deadly questioning. His wise and clever answers dissipated their hopes of entrapping Him in His speech. All their efforts succeeded only in their self-humiliation. Jesus ended the test questions by putting His opponents to the test. In turn, He *"put a question to the assembled Pharisees, 'What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?' 'David's,' they answered. He said to them, 'Then how is it that David under the Spirit's influence calls him "lord," as he does, "The Lord said to my lord, Sit at my right hand, until I humble your enemies beneath your feet"? If David calls him "lord," how can he be his son?' No one could give him an answer . . ."* (Mt. 22:41-46)

Jesus received exactly the answer He desired. They did not know. They were unable to answer the question; they demonstrated their inability to explain an essential reference in the Scriptures to the Messiah, which dealt with the identity of the Messiah. The conclusion from such ignorance was obvious: they were not qualified to make any judgment concerning Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. Their incompetence had been demonstrated. This ended the interrogation of Jesus. *"No one dared, from that day on, to ask him any questions."* (Mt. 22:46) Apparently, in this case, the examiners failed their own tests.

JESUS THE PROPHET

In the discourses now to follow, Matthew presents Jesus in the role of prophet. Jesus appears as the final and greatest prophet sent by God to Israel. He implies His prophetic mission when He says, *"you have a greater than Jonah here."* (Mt. 12:41)

We are told that Jesus now addresses both the crowds and His disciples. He will criticize, in the Pharisaic community, that religious perversion, which can occur in any religious society, when the nature of man fails to be docile to the grace of God and follows its own prideful and dark inclinations.

Jesus makes very clear that He does not criticize authority in Israel, but the misuse of authority and the lives of those in authority. He makes a distinction between the position of authority and the man who holds the position and exercises the authority, *“Then Jesus told the crowds and his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teachers; therefore, do everything and observe everything they tell you.’”* (Mt. 23:1-3) Here, Jesus expresses His own respect for the Mosaic Law – this law remained in full force until the coming of the Messiah. The teachings of Jesus had already reconfirmed and sanctified the whole heart and essence of the Mosaic Law, when He declared that proper love of God and neighbor fulfilled the entire law and the prophets. Jesus did not lay the Mosaic Law aside, but distilled its essence – “Agape-love.” This He made the Foundation Law of the New Covenant. The Mosaic Law and its authority remained in force until the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our Greek text speaks of the *“cathedras”* – translated “chair” or “seat” of Moses. The *“cathedras”* referred to the seat facing the people in the synagogue. It was from this seat that the authentic teachings on the Scriptures were delivered to the congregation. Jesus taught that since the scribes and the Pharisees were the official teachers in Israel – they sat upon the seat of Moses – they had to be obeyed. However, He went on in His prophetic role, to criticize the administration of this office and the private lives of those in authority.

Jesus attacks not only the exercise of authority, but the personal lives of those in authority. This is prophetic judgment, Divinely inspired. In a word, Jesus tells the people, *“Do as they say but not as they do.”* *“But do not follow their example. Their words are bold but their deeds are few. They bind up heavy loads, hard to carry, to lay on other men’s shoulders, while they themselves will not lift a finger to budge them.”* (Mt. 23:3-4) This is the heart of Jesus’ criticism against the Pharisees’ administration of the Mosaic Law; they have rendered it merciless. In the meantime, they have made their own religious lives into an ostentatious show of piety and are devoid of any true religious piety. They have made the esteem of others the motivation

for their “pious” religious lives. Jesus says, *“All their works are performed to be seen.”* (Mt. 23:5)

We need to look a bit closer at Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees’ administration of authority – in order to keep His condemnation in proper perspective, and to realize the lesson this condemnation has for the Christian Community. Even though Jesus calls them hypocrites, this accusation is directed more at what they have done to the Law of God than at what they have become personally. In the Pharisees condemned by Jesus, we see the product of a loveless spirit, which scrupulously interprets the Law of God. It is a religion without love; it obeys God for selfish motives or out of fear of punishment. Such a religion easily deteriorates into merciless legalism.

One cannot love laws which appear only as limitations and deprivations of freedom – tests and trials for the soul to prove its worth. When such laws express the very heart of the lawgiver, then it follows that one cannot truly love the lawgiver. Although one may suppress the conscious awareness of the soul’s opposition to God, such an opposition certainly leads to a depressive and joyless service. When the Love of God remains invisible within the Divine Law, this law does not stimulate love of the law or love of God. Religion becomes joyless.

When one looks at the Old Testament, one sees ten basic Divine Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and over six hundred laws implementing and clarifying the Ten Commandments. Needless to say, it would not be surprising if one lost sight of the Ten and the Spirit behind them in the midst of this forest of legislation. One could get so involved in the implementation and clarification that one could lose the primary purpose of it all – Love of God and neighbor.

Jesus tried to put the law back into its proper perspective when He reduced the 631 laws to two, *“You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind.”* This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well.” (Mt. 22:37-39) In a practical sense, Jesus reduced the two to one: Agape-love. Truly, the mature religious person loves the Law of God – finds delight and nourishment in the Law of God. Its fulfillment becomes joy. It becomes the concrete expression of love of God and the union of

one's heart with God, that cannot but result in peace and joy. A wise man once said that service rendered to another "*when it is done for show or for fear of public opinion, it stunts the person and crushes the spirit. Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy.*" (Gandhi, *Autobiography*, Ch. XXVI)

Jesus discouraged titles of honor being used in the Christian Community which appear to exalt certain members above others in the community. The Pharisees loved such titles as, "Master, Father, Teacher." These three titles in Aramaic – "Rabbi, Abba, Moreh" – were all honored titles and were used to attribute personal greatness to their bearers. In the mind of Jesus, it attributed to man what belonged to God and to the Messiah. Some think that the Church should rethink about its own use of titles. The use of "Father" is often questioned; for some reason there does not seem to be the same problem with "teacher." Others have pointed out that it was not the use of the words themselves to which Jesus objected, but to what the use of these words implied in His day. These titles, seen in a concept of roles of service to the Community, would not be objectionable to the Lord. Paul did not hesitate to say to the Corinthians, "*Granted you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you have only one father. It was I who begot you in Christ Jesus through my preaching of the gospel.*" (I Cor. 4:15)

THE SEVEN WOES

Matthew now records one of the severest passages within the New Testament. It probably is a compilation of Jesus' criticisms and warnings to His disciples about the "*yeast of the Pharisees.*" Many feel that this section reflects also much of the early Christian Church's attitude towards the Pharisees who instigated persecutions against the early Christians. This presentation consists primarily of seven woes, which some see to be the negative counterpart of the Beatitudes. When Jesus warned His disciples to be aware of the "*yeast of the Pharisees,*" he intimated that this spirit could corrupt the disciples as well. It is suggested that this section would better serve as a warning to the Christian Church if these woes were not looked upon so much as a moral judgment upon the Pharisees, but as a judgment or condemnation upon a religious system which the Pharisees symbolized.

The word translated "woe" is "ouai." It is an expression which conveys grief as well as a warning. Here, it would perhaps best be seen as a lament.

The heart of Jesus grieves and laments over the effects and fate of such a religious system. In the first woe, Jesus accuses the teaching authorities of hindering instead of directing people into the Kingdom of God.

In the second woe, Jesus speaks of the great zeal of the Pharisees to make converts; they traverse the seas to make a single convert. Jesus speaks of their converts becoming devils twice as wicked as the Pharisees. The implication of Jesus' words is that their conversion to Judaism made it twice as hard for them to come to salvation now and doubly subjected them to condemnation.

Within the next woe, Jesus gives an example of their spiritual blindness – He refers to their teaching on the obligation of oaths. The illustration used by Jesus implies that the Pharisees determined the validity of the oath by the words used. With proper knowledge, one could pretend to take an oath which would not be religiously binding. Jesus' words imply that if a man intended to take an oath, he took one regardless of the words used.

The fourth woe deals with the Pharisees' scrupulous attention to paying tithes. Jesus insisted that while they gave scrupulous attention to these little things, they neglected *“the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and good faith.”* (Mt. 23:23) This custom stimulated Jesus to compare their religious behavior to a person who strains out a gnat and *“swallows the camel.”* (Mt. 23:24)

In the fifth and sixth woes, Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy. He compares them to bowls clean on the outside but dirty on the inside. They give the external appearances of being a religious people, but in their hearts they are alienated from God. At Passover time, it was customary to whitewash all tombs. In these whitewashed tombs, Jesus saw a perfect reflection of the Pharisees' hypocrisy, *“You are like whitewashed tombs . . . you present to view a holy exterior while hypocrisy and evil fill you within.”* (Mt. 23:27-28)

Speaking of tombs leads Jesus to the seventh and final woe, which is the culmination of all their evils. He observes that the Pharisees piously build and decorate the tombs of martyred prophets as if to say, *“We would not have been like our ancestors and murdered the prophets.”* Jesus' words imply that they are sons of those who murdered the prophets and, as sons, share the characteristics of their fathers. He insinuates that these physical heirs will become true spiritual heirs of their fathers.

The personal sorrow of Jesus over His people's rejection of their salvation and of God's plan for them culminates in His lament over Jerusalem. Jerusalem symbolized Israel. Jesus' words signify that, despite all these crimes and a history of divine rejection, God is open to forgiving them and to receiving them once more into His protective and providential care, expressed so picturesquely and tenderly as "a mother hen gathering her little chickens under her wing." The Prophet Jesus now reveals the terrible consequence of such impenitence. He proclaims, "*You will find your temple deserted.*" (Mt. 23:38)

THE LITTLE APOCALYPSE

As Jesus leaves the temple area, His disciples comment upon the beautiful temple complex. Jesus responds to their observations with the prophecy of its coming destruction, "*Do you see all these buildings? I assure you, not one stone will be left on another – it will all be torn down.*" (Mt. 24:2) His disciples gather around Him with His terrible prediction still ringing in their ears. They desire to know when the temple will be destroyed and what will be the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus and the end of the world.

Jesus addresses Himself first to the last question concerning the Second Coming. He teaches that the world will continue on its evil, natural course. Nature will go on expressing its rebellion against a rebellious mankind. Such things are not to be considered the signs of the Second Coming, any more than the first pangs of birth mean that the baby is about to be born.

The Church in the world will be persecuted. Many Christians will not rise above such an environment, and will surrender to hatred, and will abandon faith and love as a way of life. However, in the midst of all this evil, the Church will proceed on its course as a ship in a mighty storm. The waves of evil will not destroy it, "*This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world as a witness to all the nations.*" (Mt. 24:14)

Jesus reveals that then, and only then, will the curtain fall on the act called "*mankind.*" "*Only after that will the end come.*" (Mt. 24:14) The end of the world does not bring life to an end, but brings each life to personal judgment. Jesus confirms who in the end will be saved, "*The man who holds out to the end, however, is the one who will see salvation.*" (Mt. 24:13)

As we read this discourse given upon the Mount of Olives, it seems that verse fourteen (which ended with "*Only after that will the end come*") flows quite naturally into verse thirty-six, which reads, "*As for the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father only.*" (Mt. 24:36) However, between the logical flow of these verses is inserted a veritable kaleidoscope of apocalyptic symbols and expressions. This section has rightly been called one of the most difficult passages within the New Testament. Scholars generally agree that this section is a composite of sayings and material gathered from various sources. They have been grouped together to form an apocalyptic picture.

As we recently studied in the Apocalypse, such writing, called "apocalyptic," is a unique literary form with its own peculiar use of language. It has been compared to the dream world of the unconscious, where truth is spoken to us in strange symbols and, usually speaking, the message of dreams is a present and not a future one. Apocalyptic literature borrows heavily from Old Testament imagery. The general purpose of the literature is to comfort the People of God in times of stress. It presents the history of salvation in its own unique form of symbolism; it often introduces the present in the form of past or future prophecies. The strong imagery of the apocalyptic literature is intended to express God's power and control of the world – it is not intended to terrorize the faithful, but the faithless and the godless.

Nevertheless, the passage does answer the first question asked by the apostles, "*Tell us, when will this occur?*" Jesus' words seem generally to imply that the invasion of the Holy Land, by the Roman Army, would signal the time of the destruction of Jerusalem – most particularly, it would refer to the Roman legions entering the temple with their Roman insignia.

It has been pointed out that one expression used in this section has been the source of much misinterpretation, the phrase, "*the son of man coming*" (Dn. 7:13). This phrase is often interpreted as applying to the Second Coming of Jesus. However, it has been observed that the expression comes from Daniel and, from its reference within Daniel, we are directed towards its proper interpretation. The expression, "the son of man coming," does not refer, in the light of Daniel, to the Second Coming. Rather, it reflects to Christ's passing victoriously through suffering to come to the Father from whom he receives "*dominion, glory and kingship.*" (Dn. 7:14) The sign in the sky pointing to the Son of Man's coming to the Father is the Cross.

When the disciples see this sign, they would know that the hour has arrived, “the son of man coming” to the Father. His hour of glory has come. When they see the Cross in the sky, they can lift up their heads and know that the hour of their deliverance has arrived. Again, it has been observed that the title “son of man” in Daniel is a collective title, which refers to Israel. Since it has been identified with Christ, it is likewise identifiable with the disciples of Christ. Within this context, the Second Coming of Christ may be seen as *“the coming to the Father of redeemed mankind, which is the realization of the Kingdom of God.”* (Mt. 25:34) Of course, this does not deny the historical coming of Jesus at the end of the world. It corrects certain misinterpretations of this phrase and it enlarges the concept of the Second Coming.

THE FORESIGHTED SERVANT

As they await the coming of the Lord, the disciples are encouraged to be *“faithful, foresighted servants.”* They are to keep, before their eyes, the overall picture of their lives. While they deal with the circumstances of each day, they must keep in mind their final end when they must give an accounting to the Lord of their stewardship – for the gift of life in their possession. Keeping their ultimate end in view will put all the everyday events of life in their proper perspective.

The disciples have been well instructed by Jesus that they are to view their ministry as offices of service. It is not a position in which they can “lord” it over others, but it is a position of service, as Jesus has set the example by His life. As there will always be wheat among the weeds in the Church, there will also always be good and bad shepherds within the Church. Jesus gives an example and tells us what the final judgment will be. (See Mt. 24:48-51.) He says that they would be dealt with as with the hypocrites, and to the hypocrites He said, *“How can you escape condemnation to Gehenna?”* (Mt. 23:33)

Jesus relates a parable in which He compares the reign of God to *“ten virgins who took their torches (lamps) and went out to welcome the groom.”* (Mt. 25:1) This parable has been treated as an allegory. It recalls to mind the invitation to the wedding feast of the king’s son. These ten virgins represent the Church – or the Christian Community – which is the Bride of Christ. The wedding between the bride and the groom – between Christ and His Church – will be solemnized at the Second Coming. Presently, the

Bride awaits the coming of the Bridegroom. However, the Bridegroom tarries until midnight. During the long vigil, the Church grows tired of waiting and becomes less vigilant. Suddenly, with no warning, Jesus Christ will come, *“As the lightning from the east flashes to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.”* (Mt. 24:27) Then, *“He will dispatch his angels ‘with a mighty trumpet blast, and they will assemble his chosen from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.’”* (Mt. 24:31)

Some members of the Church have not been vigilant, but they are prepared to meet Christ. Others have been neither vigilant nor prepared. They lack the necessary foresight to always be prepared for the coming of Christ. The oil in their lamps is depleted. It is at the darkest hour that the light of the lamp is most needed. The imprudent virgins represent those Christians who grow tired – over the long haul – of doing good. The oil of the lamp represents faith, which works in charity. The parable relates that it will be the *“coming”* which will separate the wise from the foolish.

THE LAZY SERVANT

This parable is immediately followed by another, in which Jesus says, *“The case of a man who was going on a journey is similar. He called in his servants and handed his funds over to them according to each man’s abilities.”* (Mt. 25:14) In the Greek text, we are told that they received talents; one received five, another two, and another, one. One talent would have been equivalent to the daily wages paid to 6,000 men. So we can see that even the man who received only one talent received considerable wealth. The parable goes on to relate that they invested their money and doubled it – all but the man who received the one talent. This man dug a hole and hid it in the ground. When the Lord returned *“after a long absence,”* he blessed and rewarded the industrious and prudent servants. However, he severely judged and punished the servant who failed to wisely invest his talent. The man tried to excuse his behavior with these words, *“‘My Lord,’ he said, ‘I knew you were a hard man . . . out of fear I went off and buried your thousand silver pieces in the ground. Here is your money back.’”* (Mt. 25:24-25) The lord brushed aside the excuse and got to the reality of the situation. Indeed the man had fears – he was fearful of work! *“His master exclaimed, ‘You worthless, lazy lout!’”* (Mt. 25:26) An excuse never changes the results. An excuse never makes a person less incompetent, less lazy, less slothful.

All members of the Church have received the grace of God. All have

All members of the Church have received the grace of God. All have received this grace in keeping with their ability to respond to it. Every Christian must eventually answer for his days of life on earth. It will not be easy with "*a tree of life*" that produces either evil fruit or no fruit at all. The Lord ends His discourses with a description of the final judgment, "*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, he will sit upon his royal throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him.*" (Mt. 25:31-32) We are told that the wheat and the weeds become the sheep and the goats, "*Then he will separate them into two groups, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.*" (Mt. 25:32) It will be the moment of universal judgment. There will be one criteria for universal judgment – Love. "*I assure you, as often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me.*" (Mt. 25:40)

THE DIVINE PROPHET

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“I ASSURE YOU, AS OFTEN AS YOU DID IT FOR ONE OF MY LEAST BROTHERS, YOU DID IT FOR ME.” (MT. 25:40)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction through “Jesus the Prophet” and Mt. 23:1-11.

1. What do you understand by Matthew 23:2-3?
2. What motive did Jesus impute to the Pharisees for their good works?
3. What does this teach you about your own good works?
4. How did Jesus seek to put the Law back into proper perspective?

SECOND DAY: Read “The Seven Woes” and Mt. 23:13-39.

1. What would you say was the major criticism by Jesus of the Pharisees?
2. Which of these woes do you think would have applied in the Christian Community today? Why?
3. Which one could perhaps apply in some degree to your life?
4. What do you understand by Matthew 23:37?

THIRD DAY: Read “The Little Apocalypse” and Mt. 24:1-35.

1. How does Jesus answer the first question of the Apostles?
2. How does He answer the second question?
3. What makes this section so difficult to interpret?

4. How should we understand “Coming of the Son of Man” in the light of Daniel?

FOURTH DAY: Read “The Foresighted Servant,” Mt. 24:36-51 and 25:1-13.

1. How would you define a “foresighted” Christian?
2. What do Jesus words suggest about the Second Coming?
3. How would you define a “worthless servant” of the Lord?
4. What do you learn from the parable of the ten virgins?

FIFTH DAY: Read “The Lazy Servant” and Mt. 25:14-30.

1. What do you see to be the main point of this parable?
2. What do you think about the excuse given in Matthew 25:24-25?
3. What does the reaction of his master imply?
4. What do you learn from this parable?

SIXTH DAY: Read Matthew 25:31-46.

1. What do you understand by Matthew 25:40?
2. What do you understand by Matthew 25:45?
3. What is the standard for universal judgment?
4. What do you learn from this account of the Last Judgment?

CHAPTER 22

THE LAMB OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

There is a time of life and there is a purpose to life. The time of life can run out and the purpose of life be unfulfilled. There is so much time allotted to each person and it can be imprudently wasted. What could measure the tragedy of losing one's soul through the misuse of the time of one's life?

As we follow the Gospel narrative recorded by Matthew, we have reached the point in the life of Jesus when the time of His life upon earth is fast running out. He is now only a few days away from physical death. He moves prudently, in the time remaining to Him, to fulfill His purpose of life on earth. His death consummates the essential purpose of His life. His Resurrection from the dead will be the crowning success of His earthly life. Both His death and resurrection profoundly affect the destiny of mankind.

While on earth, Jesus beheld His life as the Light of the world – a life which illuminated for mankind the Way to eternal life. Jesus advised His own disciples to aim to enter the Kingdom of God *“through the narrow gate.”* He did not leave His disciples in the dark concerning the narrow and rough road to Paradise. He offered them His own earthly life as an example for them to follow. He highlighted for them a life of selfless service to the Community as the hallmark of Christ's Way. He pointed out that those who *“serve the rest”* will be His greatest disciples.

Jesus identifies the way of service as the way of true love. We need to keep His definition of love before our eyes and instill it in our hearts, in order to keep Christian love in its proper perspective; we need to guard it against love's illusions and distinguish it from the false coin or the coin of an alien kingdom. Jesus establishes not only the quality, but the measure of love, *“Love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn. 15:12)* He encourages, *“Live on in my love.” (Jn. 15:9)* In truth, it is the only means by which a disciple could *“live on.”* Jesus clarifies the meaning of living on in His love, *“You*

will live in my love if you keep my commandments, even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and live in his love." (Jn. 15:10) As we have already pointed out, Jesus distills His Father's commandments down to two, in which He expresses the whole heart and essence of God's Will. (See Mt. 22:37-39.)

Jesus defines love as primarily a matter of the will – a will that readily and joyfully gives obedience to God's commandments. He speaks of the extent of His service as to *"give his own life as a ransom for the many."* (Mt. 20:28) With this expression, He identifies His service and His love with suffering. As an example to His disciples, He proposes His Image as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Jesus teaches, *"There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you . . . The command I give you is this, that you love one another."* (Jn. 15:13-14,17) These two commandments have mysteriously been reduced to one. It is the yoke He asks His disciples to take upon themselves – the burden He wants them to bear as a sign of true discipleship.

As we study the Gospel, it becomes crystal clear that, although faith opens the door to salvation, Christian Love alone assures final salvation. Faith in Christ brings us to life, but Charity in Christ is that personal, willful commitment to live. Faith chooses Christ, whereas love chooses life in Christ. Faith that stimulates a daily walk in the Charity of Christ is the Way which leads to Paradise.

Before Jesus terminates His teaching ministry, He clearly reveals to the disciples what the criterion will be by which all men will be judged. In His teaching on the Final Judgment, Jesus makes clear that love of others will be this criterion. This teaching reaffirms what has been the Gospel's standard for true discipleship. It consists not so much in what has been heard and said about Christ, but about what one does in response to Christ's commands. People will be declared "righteous" and inheritors of the kingdom of God at the Final Judgment by Christ because they carried out, in a practical and concrete fashion, Christ's commandment of love. Righteousness is not a matter of words, greetings and blessings, but of concrete deeds of charity. (See Jas. 2:14-17.)

Jesus will declare at the Last Judgment that people are "*righteous*" and "*saved*" because they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed

the homeless, clothed the naked, comforted the sick and visited the imprisoned. Likewise, people will be condemned as evil and declared fit to dwell with devils and demons in Hell because they neglected to do these corporal works of mercy. They will be declared guilty through neglect of mercy, which appears in the eyes of the Just Judge as morally evil – as positive wrongdoing. Not doing the Will of God, whether it be through positive action or neglectful action, renders one a fit companion for the Evil One.

Some have critically observed that the universal judgment of mankind by Christ omits any reference to man's duties towards God. However, others see the criticism as invalid, precisely because of the unique and mysterious identification of Jesus, the Son of God, with mankind. It is clear, from the Scripture teachings, that Jesus identified with the members of the Christian Church, but apparently – and surprisingly – this identification does not end there. He also has identified himself with every human being, and, in a most particular way, with those most in need – the “little ones,” the poor and the humble of the earth. In a word, the lowest common denominator of mankind equals Jesus Christ. Because people fail to see this truth, they fail to recognize Jesus in every person. They fail to respond to Him in love and mercy.

We may say that the bottom line is that one's behavior towards other human beings is one's behavior towards God. To be a watchful and foresighted servant, means to recognize the Son of Man in all human beings in need. To be a disciple who is ready, means to be ready to meet those needs prudently. The faithful disciple of Jesus Christ translates love into active service – into concrete deeds of mercy upon which salvation depends.

As individual Christians, we not only have a moral responsibility for those needs at our own door, but as members of the Christian society – as the Church – we have a moral responsibility to society as a whole. It is our obligation to be a Church which is involved with, and works for, social justice in our world. Speaking in Haiti, Pope John Paul II said, “*The church has a prophetic mission in this field inseparable from its religious mission, and it demands the liberty to carry it out.*” He went on to teach, “*It is the church, the entire church, the church in Haiti that must commit itself to the hilt for the good of the brothers and sisters of all, but especially the poorest . . . The poor of every kind must be able to hope once again.*” In Honduras, Pope John Paul II said, “*We must promote all that is according to the Will of the Father who is*

in heaven: charity, mutual aid, education in the faith, culture, the betterment of the poorest, respect for all, especially the most needy, those that suffer the most – the alienated.”

Pope John Paul II made it crystal clear that Christians must reject every means that is essentially unchristian in its struggle and fight for social justice for the poor. He firmly stated, “We must reject all that is opposed to the Gospel: hate, violence, injustice, lack of work, the imposition of ideologies that debase the dignity of man and woman You will do this without violence, without murder, without internal struggles, which only create new oppressions. You do it in the respect and love of liberty.”

Professedly, Christian People cannot go the way of violence without betraying the cause of Christ. To seek social justice through violent means betrays the Gospel of Jesus Christ – it is following a false messiah. The Noon-Day Devil has deluded many Christians into believing that they have a conscious responsibility to support violence as the only means available to bring about social justice. Their very deeds proclaim the impotency of the Christian doctrine to produce justice and peace upon earth. They reduce Christ to a dreamer. To espouse violence as a means to achieve social justice betrays the cause of Christ – the Spirit of Christ. At the judgment, Mahatma Gandhi will rise with the present generation and be the one to condemn it, for he demonstrated, by his life and by his victories, the effectiveness of Christ’s doctrine of love and non-violence.

THE FEAST OF PASSOVER

We read in Matthew’s Gospel account, *“Now when Jesus had finished all these discourses, he declared to his disciples, ‘You know that in two days’ time it will be Passover, and that the Son of Man is to be handed over to be crucified.’”* (Mt. 26:1-2)

The Scriptures picture Jesus as serenely looking towards Mount Calvary and His entrance into the Promised Land as the “Pioneer” of our salvation. Somehow – most mysteriously – with His crucifixion upon Mount Calvary, a new Exodus begins. Jesus moves bravely forward to embrace the final sequence of events which will terminate His life on earth. He taught others not to be afraid of those who could kill only the physical body. With His face set like flint, Jesus moves forward to completely embrace the Will of God in this regard. He faces the terrible trials ahead with faith in God’s

Word. He will suffer and die with hope in His resurrection from the dead, and because of what that death and resurrection will mean to others. He is moved by compassion to embrace death.

According to Matthew, Jesus goes to His death on the feast of Passover. The feast of Passover will be celebrated on Friday – it is now the Wednesday before – and Jesus goes to Bethany, a town 1-5/8 miles east of Jerusalem, to spend the evening in the home of friends. Matthew and Mark mention that Jesus was a guest in the house of Simon the Leper – apparently a man healed by Jesus. While in the house, Jesus was anointed with perfume by a woman. The woman poured a costly bottle of perfume over the head of Jesus. Mark places the cost at around 300 denarii (three hundred days' wage).

Jesus interpreted this spontaneous, extravagant act as a loving gesture with a deep symbolic meaning lost upon His audience. This symbolic meaning gave cause enough for the use of the perfume. Jesus already knew He was a man marked by members of the Jewish Sanhedrin to be murdered. What would be done to Jesus had clearly been decided upon. *“At that time the chief priests and elders of the people were assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas. They plotted to arrest Jesus by some trick and kill him; but they said, ‘Not during the festival, for fear of a riot among the people.’”* (Mt. 26:3-4) Only the details as to how and when remained to be worked out.

As the death sentence had already been passed informally upon Jesus, the Lord knew it would be quickly executed and He would be buried soon after, without formality. For the body of a Jew to be buried without being anointed was considered a disgrace. Regarding His anointment with perfume, Jesus said to His disciples, *“Why do you criticize the woman? It is a good deed she has done for me By pouring this perfume on my body, she has contributed toward my burial preparation. I assure you, wherever the good news is proclaimed throughout the world, what she did will be spoken of as her memorial.”* (Mt. 26:10,12-13) This is the only recorded incident, within the Gospel, which carries the promise of a perpetual and universal memory. Perhaps it does symbolize Jesus' estimation of those generous acts of love ministered to His Body – the Church.

THE BETRAYAL OF JESUS

Matthew speaks of the following day, the 14th of Nisan, as "*the first day of the feast of the Unleavened Bread.*" On the 14th of Nisan, the disciples of Jesus go in two different directions. One of the Twelve Apostles, Judas, goes to the chief priests and offers, to their great surprise and delight, to put Jesus into their hands at a convenient time and place – for a price. "*What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?*" *They paid him thirty pieces of silver, and from that time on he kept looking for an opportunity to hand him over.*" (Mt. 26:15-16) The thirty pieces of silver were the sum prescribed by law to be paid in restitution for the accidental death of a slave.

The other disciples – at Jesus' direction – go into Jerusalem to prepare for the feast. We see, in Mark, that only two disciples are sent into the city to make preparations. The place for celebrating the Passover is kept secret from the rest of the Apostles, obviously to guard against the treachery of Judas impeding the celebration.

Matthew relates, "*When it grew dark he reclined at table with the Twelve.*" (Mt. 26:20) The expression "*it grew dark*" may be an ominous reference to the presence of evil at the Last Supper. We are told, "*In the course of the meal he said, 'I assure you one of you is about to betray me.'*" (Mt. 26:21) All the disciples realize that Jesus has uttered a prophecy, and they fearfully question if they will be the one. All refer to Jesus as "*Lord,*" except Judas who calls Him "*Rabbi,*" thereby revealing his infidelity – his lack of faith in Jesus. John the Evangelist says that "*The devil had already induced Judas, Son of Simon Iscariot to betray Jesus*" (Jn. 13:2). At the Last Supper, John says that "*Satan entered his heart.*" (Jn. 13:27) Thus, Judas was fully empowered to carry out his evil design against Jesus. According to John, Judas immediately left the supper, and John writes, "*It was night.*" (Jn. 13:30)

THE LAST SUPPER

The words used by Matthew form such a self-contained unit, that they could have been easily lifted out of an early liturgical rite in use in Matthew's time. (See Mt. 26:26-28.) The institution of this sacred rite is also described in the Gospel accounts of Mark (14:22-25) and Luke (22:14-20) and in one of the earlier Scriptures, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-30).

The similarity of these four accounts indicates how well the memory of the Lord's Supper survived within the oral tradition of the Church. It likewise suggests the importance of this ritual within Christian worship. The major distinction among these accounts would be that we find in Luke and Paul the additional words, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" These words imply that Jesus commanded the perpetuation of this ritual within the Church.

All four accounts clearly indicate the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus. By the power of the Word, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of the Lord. The words of the Scriptures do not allow for a mere symbolic interpretation: Jesus does not say, "This bread is my Body." Rather, He says, "*Take this . . . this is my body . . . this is my blood.*" (Mt. 26:26,28) The use of the demonstrative pronoun "this" without the nouns "bread" and "wine," signifies that what Jesus held in His hand was no longer bread and wine. What Jesus held in His hand He identified as "my Body," "my Blood." Nothing in the narrative indicates figurative language is being used.

We find the earliest Scripture reference to the Eucharist is in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, written around 50 A.D. Paul warns about eating food sacrificed to idols. He argues that such food is offered to demons and that by eating the sacrificed food one communicates with demons. Paul implies such to be unthinkable for a Christian who communicates with Jesus Himself through the Eucharist. Paul writes, "*Is not the cup of blessing we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread we break a sharing in the Body of Christ?*" (I Cor. 10:16) "*I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, namely, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'* In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, '*This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.*' Every time, then, you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord (and the forgiveness of sins) until he comes! This means that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord." (I Cor. 11:23-27) Paul plainly states that the early Church believed in the Real Presence of Jesus in "*the Lord's Supper.*" Paul implies that unworthy participation results in a falling away from the Lord.

The last Gospel account to be written, that of John, clearly teaches the true nature and effects of the Holy Eucharist. The language of Jesus is

extremely clear and forceful. The words do not encourage a symbolic interpretation, but stress that the Body and Blood are real food and drink. The Greek word used for "feeds" is quite realistic, implying to "munch, gnaw, chew." In the language of the Bible, the figurative expression to eat a person's flesh and blood meant to persecute him in a bloody way, to destroy him. (*Ps. 27:2; Is. 9:18; Mt. 3:3.*) Jesus' hearers certainly understood His words in a realistic manner, "*This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously?*" (*Jn. 6:60*) When Nicodemus misunderstood Jesus, Our Lord corrected him. This time, Jesus does not. We are told that "*from this time on, many of his disciples broke away and would not remain in his company any longer.*" (*Jn. 6:66*)

The name "Holy Eucharist" comes from the fact that all four Scriptural accounts begin with "*the breaking of the bread*" and "*giving thanks.*" Both of these expressions became terms symbolizing the ritual of the Lord's Supper. The Greek word for "thanks" was "eucharistein." It is a very rich word, for it expresses the proper conduct of one who is the recipient of a gift. It expresses not only a thankful attitude, but one that gives an outward expression of gratitude. The Lord's Supper is usually referred to, in the Church, as the Holy Eucharist.

In Luke's account of the Last Supper, he ties together the return of Satan and the institution of the Holy Eucharist by Jesus. It is the return of the manna from heaven at Passover. However, this is the true manna, which has come down from heaven. The Eucharist appears to be instituted for the period of conflict now beginning for the disciples of Jesus. The Eucharist strengthens the Christian and allows him to come through all that lies ahead and still stand erect to meet the Son of Man. The Sacrament of the Eucharist replaces the Presence of the historical Jesus, for it truly contains Jesus, the Source of Grace, Himself. In this Sacrament, the disciple finds the strength and the protection of the Risen Savior. It is forever the sacrament of Faith, for belief in it, daily expresses a concrete belief in the Word of Christ and in His Divinity. A frequent and worthy reception of the Eucharist carries this promise, "*He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal, and I will raise him up on the last day.*" (*Jn. 6:54*)

Jesus' words to His disciples imply that even though death will end this communion they have enjoyed with Him, it cannot destroy their union with Him. It extends beyond death, and the Eucharist will remain a sign, in this life, that one day, they will be reunited with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven.

THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN

Long ago, John wrote of Jesus, "*He needed no one to give him testimony about human nature. He was well aware of what was in man's heart.*" (Jn. 2:25) Jesus knew the devastating effects His arrest and death would have upon the disciples. Their faith would not withstand the trial. He tried to warn and forearm them. Peter, speaking from his own feelings and emotions, consciously questioned Jesus' words and refused to admit that they applied to him. At this present time and condition, he experienced nothing but love and great confidence in Jesus.

It has been said that the great crises in life are the ones which raise the curtain revealing a person's true self. Cold reality always destroys illusions and fantasies. Peter responded to Jesus, "*Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be shaken!*" Jesus said to him, "*I give you my word, before the cock crows tonight you will deny me three times.*" (Mt. 26:33-34) Even in the face of Jesus' prophecy – even when Jesus said, "I give you my word" – Peter's self-confidence refused to be called into question. Apparently, he had more confidence in himself than in the word of Jesus. Some people can only learn through bitter experience.

That last evening, Jesus led His disciples through the Kidron Valley, up the slopes of the Mount of Olives to a garden called Gethsemani in order to pray. He separated Peter, James, John and Himself a bit from the rest of the disciples. From this moment on, Jesus began to experience, in His human nature, the full impact of being that Servant of Yahweh who shall "*justify many*" (Is. 53:11) and shall be "*counted among the wicked.*" (Is. 53:12) His spirit began to experience the guilt and the burden of this wickedness. He said, "*My heart is nearly broken with sorrow. Remain here and stay awake with me.*" (Mt. 26:38) Had He ever asked anything personally for Himself from His disciples? The disciples would not meet His need – they could not. They were not that free. Their own needs dominated them and revealed so much about those earlier protestations of love and fidelity. They slept in the face of Jesus' needs. Only in prayer could Jesus find strength and comfort (the precise thing the foolish disciples failed to do).

Luke relates, "*In his anguish he prayed with all the greater intensity, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.*" (Lk. 22:44) In this

experience of utter loneliness and abandonment, He, who gave all to others, could not find an ounce of human consolation in His agony. Three times He came to His disciples; they were asleep. He warns them that if they cannot stay awake for His sake, then they should for their own sakes. (See Mt. 26:41.) Finally, Jesus leaves them to their sleep. And so the hour comes upon them when "the Son of Man is to be handed over to the power of evil men" and they're unprepared. Jesus awakens them when the hour of trial arrives. (Mt. 26:46.)

THE ARREST OF JESUS

The storm of agony and terror has passed – dissipated by the power of prayer. Fortified and strengthened, Jesus goes forth to meet His betrayer and the soldiers who come to arrest Him as a criminal. Truly, night has come! At this point, Matthew relates, "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." (Mt. 26:56)

As the night proceeds, a sharp contrast is drawn between Jesus and Peter. Jesus is led off to face an emergency session of the Sanhedrin. He stands composed and silent before His accusers and their false witnesses. He speaks only when the high priest commands Him. Jesus' answers confirm that He is the Messiah, the Son of God. The high priest accuses Him of "blasphemy." The Sanhedrin hands down its verdict, "*He deserves death!*" (Mt. 26:66) The court of law deteriorates into a circus with Jesus as its clown and victim, "Then they began to spit in his face and hit him. Others slapped him, saying, "Play the prophet for us, Messiah! Who struck you?" (Mt. 26:67-68) Amidst it all, Jesus stands tall and serene, His face set like flint.

Matthew tells us, "*Peter kept following him at a distance.*" (Mt. 26:58) Fear was distancing Peter from Jesus. The situation was making a coward out of him. He could no longer publicly associate himself with Jesus. Jesus confirmed truth before the high court of Israel and Peter denied truth in the courtyard around the fire. Peter's words disowned his discipleship – he was not a disciple of Jesus.

On the night before Jesus died – the night in which He instituted the Holy Eucharist and inaugurated the New Covenant in His blood – Judas, the apostle, betrayed Jesus, all the disciples deserted Jesus, and Peter the first among the Apostles – denied and cursed Jesus. These infidelities

demonstrate how fragile a thing Christian discipleship can be. *“Be on guard, and pray . . . The Spirit is willing but nature is weak!” (Mt. 26:41)*

THE LAMB OF GOD

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“BE ON GUARD, AND PRAY THAT YOU MAY NOT UNDERGO THE TEST. THE SPIRIT IS WILLING BUT NATURE IS WEAK.” (MT. 26:41)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction and James 2:14-17.

1. How do you fulfill Jesus’ command that His disciples should serve others?
2. What does it mean to you to “live on” in Christ’s love?
3. What determines whether those “called” will be “chosen”?
4. What is our duty as an individual and as a church-community towards social justice in the world?

SECOND DAY: Read “The Feast of Passover” and Mt. 26:1-13.

1. What do you understand by the feast of Passover?
2. What do you see to be the relationship between this Jewish feast and the death of Jesus?
3. In what way was the anointing of Jesus at Bethany a prophetic sign?
4. What do you learn from Matthew 26:13?

THIRD DAY: Read “The Betrayal of Jesus,” Mt. 26:14-25 and Jn. 13:18-30.

1. In what way is Judas’ response different from that of the other Apostles?
2. What does his response imply?
3. Why do you think Judas betrayed Christ?
4. What lesson do you learn from this?

FOURTH DAY: Read “The Last Supper,” Mt. 26:26-30; I Cor. 10:14-22;
I Cor. 11:23-30 and Jn. 6:48-68.

1. How do we in the Catholic Church interpret the words in Matthew 26:26-28 and why do we do so?
2. What do you understand by I Cor. 10:14-22?
3. What do you learn from I Cor. 11:23-30 about the Last Supper?
3. What do you understand about the Eucharist from the reading in John?

FIFTH DAY: Read “The Agony in the Garden” and Mt. 26:31-56.

1. What do you learn about Christ from Matthew 26:38?
2. What does Matthew 26:39 teach you about Jesus and discipleship?
3. What do you understand by Matthew 26:41?
4. What does Matthew 26:52 teach you about violence?

SIXTH DAY: Read “The Arrest of Jesus” and Mt. 26:57-75.

1. How do you understand Jesus’ answer to the high priest?
2. What do the events in Matthew 26:64 imply about Jesus?
3. What effect did the end of the life of Jesus have upon His disciples?
4. What does this teach you about Christian discipleship?

CHAPTER 23

THE VICTORY OF JESUS CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

In the time of Jesus Christ, the highest religious authority in Judea was the Great Sanhedrin at Jerusalem. The word "sanhedrin," coming from the Greek word "sunedrion," meant "assembly" or "senate." Membership in the Sanhedrin consisted of the priests from the leading families from which the high priests came, and men from the leading secular families. These men composed the Sadducee Party. From the time of Queen Salome Alexandra, the Pharisee Party had gained a strong foothold in the Sanhedrin. By the time of Jesus, both parties were equally represented within the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin met formally two days a week, Mondays and Thursdays, but never on the Sabbath, nor on a feast day. When in session, its members sat in a semicircle in the order of their seniority. The "Nassi," the titular president of the assembly, sat in the middle with the "Abet Bethlin" at his side, who acted as chairman of the assembly when the Sanhedrin acted as a court of law. The law remained on the side of the accused. The Sanhedrin itself could not initiate proceedings against a person; the person first had to be publicly accused of a crime by at least two witnesses. Whenever the Sanhedrin voted for an acquittal, the decision could be declared on the day of the trial. When the decision was one of condemnation, the sentence had to be deferred until the next day. In any case, where there was a unanimous vote for condemnation, these sentences had to be deferred for twenty-four hours before they could be decreed and carried out. They also were not above suspicion of being prejudiced.

Josephus acknowledged that the reigning high priest would preside over the Sanhedrin. The Jewish high priest derived his authority from his sacred office – this office was held first by Aaron, the brother of Moses. The high priest was the acknowledged head of the priestly families and the Levites. As described by the Scriptures, he was dressed in such a manner as to be recognized, at first glance, as one set apart from the crowd. When installed

recognized, at first glance, as one set apart from the crowd. When installed as the high priest, he was anointed with oil, as were the kings of old. The common people saw him as the incarnation of the law of Moses, and they surrounded him with worshipful respect.

On the night Jesus was arrested, John relates that the soldiers first brought Him to the house of Annas for interrogation. (See *Jn. 18:12-14, 19-24.*) Matthew omits any reference to this interrogation and begins immediately with the night trial in the house of Caiaphas. The trial would have begun with the recitation of the Shema. The next step would have been to call forth witnesses against the defendant.

It was only when the trial failed to proceed as the high priest had anticipated, that he resorted to directly questioning Jesus in such a way as to force Him to convict Himself in their eyes. Such a procedure was completely contrary to Jewish practice. However, when the high priest – acting as the highest religious authority in Israel – put his question in such a form to Jesus, He was obliged to truthfully respond. The Scriptures make it clear that Jesus died because He admitted, under oath before the high court of Israel, to being both the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God.

John the Evangelist makes this clear: the Jews understood that Jesus' claim to be the Son of God implied more than the traditional use of that title. The kings of Israel were referred to as the "*sons of God.*" John writes, "*The reason why the Jews were even more determined to kill him was that he not only was breaking the sabbath but, worse still, was speaking of God as his own Father, thereby making himself God's equal.*" (*Jn. 5:18*) When the Jews accused Jesus before Pilate, they responded, "*We have our law and according to that law he must die because he made himself God's Son.*" (*Jn. 19:7*)

The Scriptures clearly reveal that the Jewish People – represented by their leaders – refused to accept God's witness of Jesus to be the Divinely appointed Messiah. They not only rejected Him, but, as Peter later pointed out to them, "*You even made use of pagans to crucify and kill him.*" (*See Acts 2:23*)

For the Sanhedrin to execute its sentence of death against Jesus, it needed the approbation of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. The chief priests probably intended to place the blame for the death of Jesus upon the

Romans. They connived this by accusing Jesus, before Pilate, of crimes against the Roman government: exciting rebellion against Rome, encouraging the non-payment of taxes, declaring Himself to be a king.

THE END OF JUDAS

However, before relating the trial of Jesus before Herod, Matthew desires to bring the affair of Judas to completion. Judas would become forever the symbol of the reprobate in the Christian Church – the disciple who fell from grace, lost faith in Jesus Christ and turned traitor. He becomes a symbol of those who have failed to be saved, despite the mission and love of Jesus, *“Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. Better for him if he had never been born.”* (Mt. 26:24)

The Evangelist John intimated that Judas loved money and had become a thief. Apparently, this led to his being alienated from Christ, *“No man can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other or be attentive to one and despise the other. You cannot give yourself to God and money.”* (Mt. 6:24) This weakness in Judas opened him to the temptation and the power of Satan. Once Satan possessed Judas, he used him to destroy Jesus. Then Satan used the deed of Judas to destroy Judas. It is Satan’s nature to murder and destroy. Satan fully empowered Judas to carry out his evil design, and then abandoned him to face the remorse of conscience and the despair of spirit, which led to his self-inflicted death. He embarked upon this deadly course the day he turned away – in his heart – from faith in Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Matthew now relates the end of Judas, *“Then Judas, who had handed him over, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, began to regret his action deeply. He took the thirty pieces of silver back to the chief priests and elders and said, ‘I did wrong to deliver up an innocent man!’ They retorted, ‘What is that to us? It is your affair!’ So Judas flung the money into the temple and left. He went off and hanged himself.”* (Mt. 21:3-5) Our personal sins are our own responsibility and we must bear the full effect of them upon our personal lives. Something we do cannot be undone. We must live with the effects of our mistakes. Judas could not go on living with his.

TRIAL BEFORE PILATE

Matthew does not recount so much a trial before Pilate, as he explains how

the Jews used the Romans to bring about the death of Jesus. The main point Matthew wants to make, in the narration of both the trials before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate, is not primarily the guilt of the Jews, nor the degree of Pilate's guilt or innocence, but to establish the innocence of Jesus, both before the Sanhedrin and before the Roman Law. Remember, the primary work of Judgment is to declare "righteousness." Only secondarily does it declare guilt and place blame. The point made by all four gospel accounts is that Jesus stands innocent before the law of God and man. He goes to His death as an innocent victim.

Jesus' acknowledgment before the Sanhedrin of being the Messiah was an implicit admission to being the King of the Jews. In the face of the Roman Law, such a claim would amount to treason and would carry the death penalty. The Jews accused Jesus of this before Pilate. Pilate immediately began his interrogation with, "*Are you the king of the Jews?*" Jesus responded, *'As you say.'*" (Mt. 27:11) Jesus' own answer neither affirms nor denies the accusation. Pilate, no doubt, was well informed about Jesus of Nazareth and did not seriously consider this charge. Matthew writes, "*He knew, of course, that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.*" (Mt. 27:18) He was determined to release Jesus, but he underestimated the determination of the Jewish leaders.

The Romans had a "notorious" character called "Barabbas" who was in prison "*for causing an uprising in the city, and for murder.*" (See Luke 23:19) Pilate proposed to give the Jews a choice between the two men. Certain older manuscripts refer to Barabbas as "*Jesus Barabbas.*" In Aramaic, the name "Barabbas" meant "son of the father." This Barabbas symbolized the political messiah who sought to establish the kingdom through violence and murder. He, no doubt, belonged to the party of the Zealots.

Matthew interrupts the flow of the trial narrative, and relates, "*While he was still presiding on the bench, his wife sent him a message, 'Do not interfere in the case of that holy man. I had a dream about him today which has greatly upset me.'*" (Mt. 27:19) For Matthew, the dream is the medium of Divine inspiration. As the Jews are being prepared for their decision, the pagan wife of the procurator declares to her husband that Jesus is "*the righteous one.*" Nevertheless, "*the chief priests and elders convinced the crowds that they should ask for Barabbas and have Jesus put to death.*" (Mt. 27:20) When Pilate requested the reason, he received only their decision, not their reason. Reasoning had been rejected. They demanded that their will be

done. There was a real danger of a riot. It was better that one man die rather than many. Pilate preferred peace to justice. However, he surprisingly made the crucifixion their business, not his. In keeping with an ancient Jewish custom described in chapter twenty-one of Deuteronomy, *"he called for water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, declaring as he did so, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just man. The responsibility is yours.' The whole people said in reply, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children.' At that, he released Barabbas to them. Jesus, however, he first had scourged; then he handed him over to be crucified."* (Mt. 27:24-26)

THE MOCKED KING

Choosing Barabbas over Jesus has been viewed by many as the moment of Israel's public apostasy. The Evangelist John dramatizes this even more powerfully when he records the Jews as saying, *"We have no king but Caesar."* (Jn. 19:15) It becomes clear in the narration that Jesus dies in the place of the sinner. Jesus dies that the sinner may live. John the Baptist said of Jesus, *"Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (Jn. 1:29) Isaiah foretold, *"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."* (Is. 53:11-12)

The Romans regularly scourged those sentenced to the death of crucifixion with the intention of hastening the death on the cross. After being condemned to death, Jesus was turned over to the soldiers to be scourged. The soldiers of the high priests had ridiculed Jesus for being the prophet. Now the Roman soldiers ridiculed Jesus for being the King of the Jews. The image of Caesar appeared on the Roman coin with a radiant circle around his head and a scepter in his hand. In mock imitation of Caesar, the Roman soldiers adorned and ridiculed Jesus, *"They stripped off his clothes and wrapped him in a scarlet military cloak. Weaving a crown out of thorns they fixed it on his head, and stuck a reed in his right hand. Then they began to mock him by dropping to their knees before him, saying, 'All hail, king of the Jews!'"* (Mt. 27:28-29)

It is indeed the somber hour in which the Prince of Darkness rules. Jesus experiences upon His Person the full effect of the evil which flows from the sinful, corrupted spirit. He becomes the object and the helpless victim of its sickness and malice. It is a frightful scene which reveals, unmasked, the

ugly face of sin. Yet, despite the horror of it all, Matthew does not wish his readers to miss the prophetic symbolism hidden within this mockery, this cruel ritual. The Jews have rejected Jesus as their King. The Romans, in their contempt for the Jews, treat their Messiah as a fool-king. Precisely because of what Jesus suffers now, He will become not only the King of the Jews, but the Gentiles, who now offer him mock adoration, will come to adore Him as Christ the King.

THE CRUCIFIXION

The place of crucifixion, called Golgotha or Calvary, lay just beyond the walls of the city. The journey from the praetorium – the place of judgment – to the place of execution was a short distance. However, Jesus was already in such a weakened condition that the guards, fearing He would die along the way, “*pressed into service*” a passerby, “*a Cyrenian named Simon,*” and forced him to carry the cross behind Jesus. Simon became the reluctant symbol of the disciple taking up the cross and following in the footsteps of Jesus.

For the Messiah of Israel to die this horrible, disgraceful death, was indeed a difficult reality for the disciples to comprehend. The enemies of Jesus considered it a proof that He was a false messiah. As Paul would write, “*Christ crucified – a stumbling block to Jews, and an absurdity to Gentiles.*” (1 Cor. 1:23) We read in Deuteronomy, “*God’s curse rests upon him who hangs on a tree.*” (Dt. 21:23) The body of such was a defilement upon the land. Only when the Church could see the death of Jesus in the light of God’s Will and as a fulfillment of the Scriptures, did it behold the hidden glory of Jesus revealed beneath the shame and ugliness of crucifixion. Then the Cross became the sign of victory and exaltation of Jesus – His ascending to the Father. Jesus had humbled Himself to accept death as the Will of God, “*even death, death on a cross.*” (Phil. 2:8)

The Evangelist Matthew beholds the crucifixion of Jesus as the literal fulfillment of Psalm 22. It is this Psalm which gives meaning and significance to Jesus’ death upon the cross.

Again, in the Book of Wisdom, the Church saw the image of Jesus in the “*just one.*” There, the wicked say, “*He calls blest the destiny of the just and boasts that God is his Father. Let us see whether his words be true; let us find out what will happen to him. For if the just one be the son of God, he will*

defend him and deliver him from the hand of his foes. With revilement and torture let us put him to the test that we may have proof of his gentleness and try his patience. Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him." (Wis. 2:16-20) It is against this Old Testament background that Matthew writes and in the light of which he wishes the crucifixion of Jesus to be seen. (See Mt. 27:39-50.)

Jesus triumphed over the full force of evil – the full evil effect of sin upon mankind. Jesus' triumph consisted in not swerving, amidst it all, one meter from the Will of God. Although the diabolical storm which whirled around Him destroyed His physical life, it touched not His Spirit. He continued in absolute confidence, faith and love in God, His heavenly Father. He breathed forth His Soul with childlike confidence, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*" (Lk. 23:46) Never for a moment did He withdraw an ounce of compassionate love from those who so cruelly despised and rejected Him. As He most painfully experienced in body and soul the full effect of evil in mankind, He prayed for all sinners, "*Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.*" (Lk. 23:34) Indeed, He was the Son of God. For the Scriptures have said, "*Love your enemy and do good . . . Then will your recompense be great. You will rightly be called sons of the Most High, since he himself is good to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate.*" (Lk. 6:35-36)

THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF JESUS

When Matthew writes, "*Once again Jesus cried out in a loud voice, and then gave up his spirit*" (Mt. 27:50), he does not imply that death has occurred, but that new life has been issued forth from the dying body of Jesus. Man's relationship with God will never be the same. The old is passing away and all shall be made new. Death has been conquered, and the dead shall rise to a newness of life. The Church veritably rises out of the dead body of Christ filled with the Holy Spirit of Jesus. The prophecy of Ezekiel has been fulfilled. (See Ez. 37:12-14.)

Matthew expresses these truths in the apocalyptic scenes which follow the death of Jesus. (See Mt. 27:51-52.) He teaches here that a world has ended and that the beginning of the Final Age has begun. The conversion of the soldiers signifies that the faith of the Jews has passed to the Gentiles.

Matthew relates that certain women who had followed Jesus from Galilee

witnessed the death and burial of Jesus. He named three of them, *“Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.”* (Mt. 27:56) Since the apostles all fled, these women became the official witnesses to the death and burial of Jesus. They likewise became the first witnesses to the empty tomb.

There was a law to the effect that a criminal had to lie in a criminal’s grave for one year before the body could be returned to the family. Jesus was spared this by the influence of a wealthy disciple, Joseph of Arimathea who – we know from other sources – was a member of the Sanhedrin. Joseph requested the body of Jesus from Pilate, and when Pilate ascertained from the centurion that Jesus had already died, he issued the order to relinquish the body of Jesus to Joseph. It was he who took the body down from the cross and wrapped it in fresh linen and laid it in *“his own new tomb which had been hewn from a formation of rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance of the tomb and went away.”* (Mt. 27:60) However, Matthew tells us that *“Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb.”* (Mt. 27:61) They alone remained to mourn the death of Jesus.

On the following day, we are told that the chief priests went to Pilate and requested a guard for the tomb. They recalled that Jesus had made a promise to rise from the dead on the third day. They feared the disciples of Jesus would come and steal the body and claim He rose from the dead. Some see behind this episode, a reflection of the Church’s battle with the Jews over the resurrection of Jesus. It has been observed that they are in agreement on one point – the tomb was empty on the third day – the first day of the week.

THE LORD OF GLORY

The Scriptures mention an eyewitness to the rising of Jesus from the dead. Both the disciples of Jesus and His enemies testify to the fact of the empty tomb. The Scriptures mention many witnesses after the fact that Jesus Crucified had risen from the dead. One of the earliest accounts is given by Paul; it was written in a letter to the Corinthians about twenty years after the event took place. Paul recounts, for the Corinthians, the tradition living within the Church. (See I Cor. 15:3-8.) Paul’s mention of the five hundred witnesses may be a reference to the appearance of Jesus in Galilee, now recorded by Matthew.

According to our gospel account, Mary Magdalene and another Mary arrived early on the first day of the week *“to inspect the tomb. Suddenly there was a mighty earthquake, as the angel of the Lord descended from heaven. He came to the stone, rolled it back, and sat on it. In appearance he resembled a flash of lightning while his garments were as dazzling as snow.”* (Mt. 28:1-3) This entire scene, with the appearance of the “angel of the Lord,” signifies that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was the work of God being symbolized in the angel of the Lord. The rolling back of the stone from the tomb and the angel sitting upon it signify the Lord’s conquest and triumph over death. The angel spoke, addressing the women, *“Do not be frightened. I know you are looking for Jesus the crucified, but he is not here. He has been raised, exactly as he promised. Come and see the place where he was laid. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead and now he goes ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see him.’ That is the message I have for you.”* (Mt. 28:5-7)

These women have become the first recipients of the “tidings of great joy” – Jesus has risen from the dead! We see immediately that the news is not merely for their enjoyment: it commissions them to become apostles of the resurrection, apostles to apostles. They accept their mission with a mixture of joy and fear – they *“ran to carry the good news to his disciples.”* (Mt. 28:8) However, *“Suddenly, without warning, Jesus stood before them and said, ‘Peace!’ The women came up and embraced his feet and did him homage. At this Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Go and carry the news to my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, where they will see me.’”* (Mt. 28:9-10) This manifestation of Jesus verifies the mission of the angel, but it also verifies the fact of the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus from the grave – they “embraced his feet.” It likewise makes clear that their old relationship with Jesus has ended. He now has become a proper object of human worship and adoration.

This is not to imply that Jesus was not the Son of God before the resurrection, but since the resurrection, the human nature of the Son of Man now shares in a new, irrevocable manner in the Divinity of the Son of God. It is now a proper object of human adoration. Nevertheless, Jesus cuts short the time of adoration in favor of their apostolic mission. He sends them immediately to those still in ignorance of Him, still in the darkness of doubt and disbelief. He grants them vision, not for the fulfillment of their personal spiritual needs, but to make them zealous missionaries of the Risen Lord. *“To my brothers”* (Mt. 28:10) means much

more than it first appears. These were the men who had abandoned and disowned their discipleship. They broke away from Jesus. The women are to carry to them the Good News of absolution – of the forgiveness of their sins. The Risen Savior calls them “brothers” – they are reinstated into the family of God.

Between the message of Good News to the “brothers” and the final commissioning of the apostles, Matthew inserts the incident of the guards reporting the scene at the tomb to the chief priests, who bribe the guards to lie and go around telling, *“His disciples came during the night and stole him while we were asleep.”* (Mt. 28:13) This Incident is intended to teach that, along with the spreading of “the Good News,” there will always be evil and unbelieving people in this world who actively impede the spreading of the Gospel and vilify it.

The climactic moment towards which the life of Jesus has been directed in this Gospel account is now reached upon a mountain in Galilee.

The final scene of the Gospel centers upon the final commissioning of the apostles by the Risen Lord. *“Jesus came forward and addressed them in these words, ‘Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name “of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world.’”* (Mt. 28:18-20)

With this commission, the Church comes to life. Five profound religious truths are declared in this proclamation: First, Jesus, who possessed power always as the Son of Man has become, by His resurrection, the Cosmic Power of the universe. All power in heaven and on earth rests in His hands. Second, in the fullness of this power and authority, Jesus commissioned His Apostles to make disciples of all people. Third, those who believe and profess faith in Jesus are to be incorporated into the very life of the Triune God. Fourth, the Apostles are commissioned to teach. Before, they had been empowered *“to heal”* and *“to proclaim.”* Now, they know and understand what it truly and fully means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ: they are qualified to teach. As qualified teachers, they are charged to teach *“everything I have commanded you.”* The true Church of Jesus Christ must possess and must proclaim the fullness of Christian Truth in the world. It must proclaim, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” but it must also preach, “Jesus

Christ Crucified.” Fifth, Matthew does not speak of ascension, but teaches that Jesus remains ever present in the Church, *“I am with you always.”* This reveals to every disciple of Jesus that He is present in all the situations of life. He is present with those who declare that the fullness of power is His. What does this mean to a disciple personally? It means what his faith lets it mean.

No one expressed the full meaning of Christian Discipleship better than Paul when he wrote, *“Those things I used to consider gain I have now reappraised as loss in the light of Christ. I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ . . . I wish to know Christ and the power flowing from his resurrection; likewise to know how to share in his sufferings by being formed into the pattern of his death. Thus do I hope that I may arrive at resurrection from the dead . . . Brothers, I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line. I give no thought to what lies behind but push on to what is ahead. My entire attention is on the finish line as I run toward the prize to which God calls me – life on high in Christ Jesus. All of us who are spiritually mature must have this attitude . . . It is important that we continue on our course, no matter what stage we have reached.”* (Phil. 3:7-8, 10-11, 13-16)

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations . . . And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world.” (Mt. 28:19, 20)

PRAISE BE JESUS CHRIST!

THE VICTORY OF JESUS CHRIST

SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS AND QUESTIONS SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“FULL AUTHORITY HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME BOTH IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH; GO, THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL THE NATIONS.” (MT. 28:18-19)

FIRST DAY: Read Introduction through “The End of Judas,” Mt. 27:1-10; Mk. 14:55-64 and Jn. 18:12-24.

1. What was the significance of the Great Sanhedrin condemning Jesus to death?
2. What was their main accusation against Jesus?
3. Why do you think Judas killed himself? What did it indicate?
4. What does the end of Judas teach you about discipleship?

SECOND DAY: Read “Trial before Pilate” and Mt. 27:11-26.

1. What does Matthew seek to teach in the presentation of the two trials of Jesus?
2. What was being symbolized in the choice between Barabbas and Jesus?
3. How would you describe the behavior of Pilate?
4. What does verse 25 imply?

THIRD DAY: Read “The Mocked King” through “The Crucifixion,” Mt. 27:27-49, Psalm 22 and Wisdom 2:12-20.

1. What is the prophetic symbolism of the mock crowning and adoration of Jesus?
2. What helps the Church to accept and understand the crucifixion of Jesus?

3. How do you understand Matthew 27:46?
4. In what do you think the triumph of Jesus on the Cross consisted?

FOURTH DAY: Read "The Death and Burial of Jesus" and Mt. 27:50-66.

1. What do you understand by Matthew 27:50?
2. What does Matthew wish to teach with the apocalyptic scenes described in verses 51 through 54?
3. What was the importance of the women at the Cross?
4. What does their presence tell you about them?

FIFTH DAY: Read "The Lord of Glory" and Mt. 28:1-20.

1. What does the vision of the angel and the circumstances surrounding it signify?
2. What does Jesus' attitude towards the women teach you?
3. What three-fold commission does Jesus give to His Church?
4. What does Matthew 28:18 mean to you personally?

SIXTH DAY:

1. How would you describe the role of Christian Discipleship?
2. What do you see to be your own personal responsibility in the Church?
3. What do you think the last commission Jesus gave to His apostles teaches us?
4. What does "I am with you always" mean to you?

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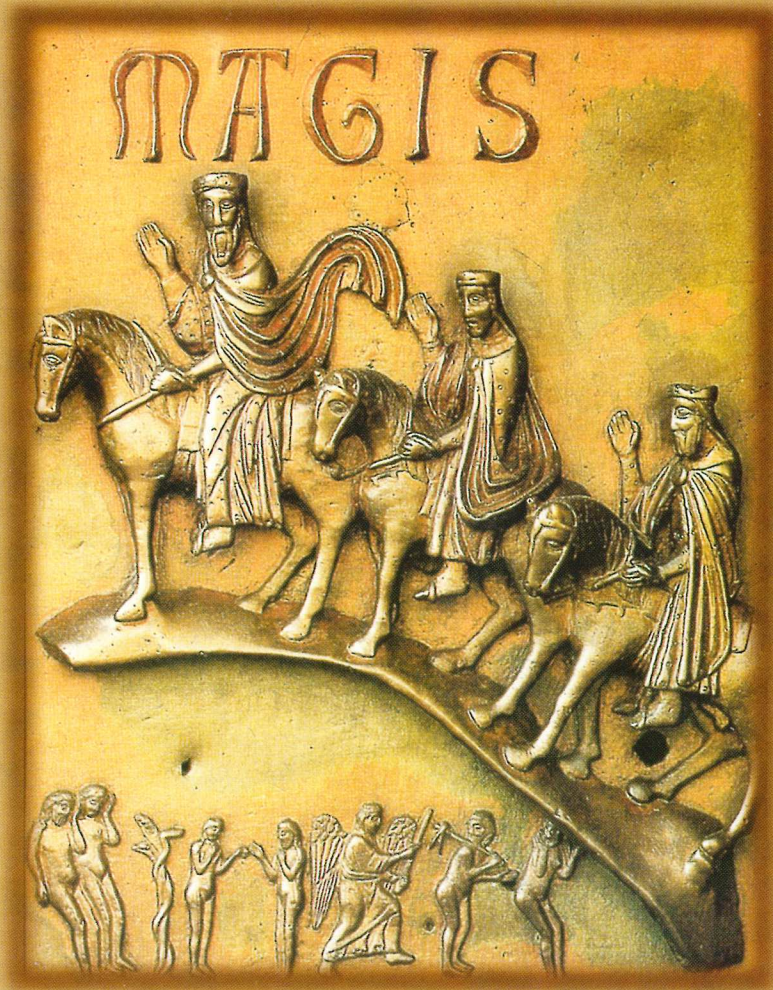
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