

## **Sunday By Sunday**

Our regular guide to the Word of God in the Sunday Liturgy  
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### **23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B**

07.09.03 Mk 7, 31-37

· Grace perfects through human nature. Like a mantra, the Church emphasizes the beauty and goodness of creation as she meditates on the sacred humanity of Jesus, her spouse. The saving power of God does not suspend the created order, but works from within that process itself – at once ennobling and transforming it. Creation only finds its full meaning when taken up into the divine. Here the very fingers and spittle of Jesus become the human vehicles of miraculous divine healing, not just his words. With his heart's sigh, power goes out from the Lord and the world breathes new life.· Jesus cures physical deafness and impairment of speech, but not spiritual deafness and the temptation to speak when silence is demanded. The contrast could not be sharper, as Jesus opens the ears and loosens the tongue of one who then uses these newly restored means of communication in disobedience of Jesus' strict order to keep quiet about the incident ( Mk 7, 36 ). Perhaps humanly speaking we should not be too surprised, but Jesus wants to avoid at all costs any political or social exploitation of his Messiahship, which is rather to be expressed from the cross in one great act of self giving ( cf. Mk 15, 39 ).· School curriculums almost invariably teach the gospel of Mark in RE classes because it is the shortest evangelical work (only 16 chapters). This may be so, but it is also in fact the hardest, like climbing a sheer rock face with only limited toe holds. The view is stunning from the top, but the effort in reaching the heights is considerable. Detail is sparse in Mark's account, which emphasizes the loneliness of a Messiah, even whose followers consistently fail to understand him and catch the flame of faith ( cf. Mk 10, 32; 9, 18 ). Are we alive with that flame, or maybe deaf to Jesus' call?

### **FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE CROSS**

14.09.03 Jn 3, 13-17

· Every Catholic household should have a crucifix. Jesus was lifted high on the cross for our sakes, to become a living source of rebirth and new life for us all at the moment of his own death. Crucifixes remind us tangibly of this ever present reality, and for the one who looks upon the figure of the Crucified whilst bearing the burdens of the day, even in a brief second of prayer and offering up,

immense consolation and lifting of the spirit can be experienced. Christ is and should be the constant focus of our lives, our orientation to God.

· Salvation comes from the Latin word “salus”, meaning ‘health’ or ‘well being’. For Jesus to save us means that he, who is fullness of life, even and especially in his sacred humanity, communicates that life to us in a way that makes us complete and whole. The touch of the divine does not in any sense suspend our humanity, but rather brings it to a peak of perfection. This is entirely God’s work as free gift in Jesus Christ and knows no human meriting. The cross saves us because it imparts the life of God into our lives.· The saints, who welcomed the action of God in their lives to a heroic degree, are always full of a sense of their own unworthiness because the transformation in them is God’s work, not man’s. They are not being false modest when they decry their own efforts, because they know their need of God. The measure in which they surrender self to the will of God is the measure of their coming to life as human beings who do great work for God. St. Cyprian, St. Robert Bellarmine, whose memories we venerate this week, testify to this power of the cross.

## **25TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B**

21.09.03 Mk 9, 30-37

· Why did Jesus have to be handed over “into the hands of men and be put to death” ( Mk 9, 30 )? Some theories of the atonement render Jesus little more than a whipping boy assuaging the furious anger of the Father. Apart from a barbaric view of God, such a line tends to make the Son subordinate to the Father: little God must appease the wrath of big God. But Jesus is God the Son, predestined to take on human flesh as the integral part of the divine plan right from the first. Matter is made for him, and exists only in relation to him.· He is truth itself, and in becoming man makes that truth real and accessible in the flesh, uniting it to human nature ( cf. Jn 1, 1-14 ). Thus Jesus is fully God and fully man, the Way, the Truth and the Life ( Jn 14, 6 ). Throughout his thirty-three years on earth, Jesus acted in accordance with the truth, was true to himself and to the Father who sent him ( cf. Jn 5, 19ff ). If men showed they preferred darkness to Light, error to Truth, death to Life, then that fact did not alter the truth one iota. But it meant that Jesus clashed with the very people who should have welcomed him.

· It made the cross inevitable. But where sin seems to have triumphed over the plan of God, as Jesus gives up his life on the cross, the Resurrection shows God’s total triumph. Sin and death are made captive and vanquished by Christ. It is a victory effected by God as man, and therefore applicable to human nature: to you and to me. The cross is the most appalling aberration – something that should not have happened. But, given the fact of sin, it becomes a painful necessity, embraced for us by our loving Saviour.

## **26TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B**

28.09.03 Mk 9, 38-43. 45. 47-48

The three most odious sins in the Church's tradition are apostasy, treason and murder. Pope John Paul II refers to this in his encyclical, "Evangelium Vitae", as he explores the origin and development of Apostolic teaching on man's fundamental right to life. In this gospel we see why it is that apostasy is viewed with such horror: "anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith, would be better thrown into the sea with a great millstone round his neck" ( Mk 9, 47 ). This is a terrible saying of Jesus we dare not avoid. As a rabbi and teacher in Israel, Jesus frequently uses 'hebraisms', or Hebrew sayings exaggerating to the extreme in order to emphasize a point. Angry children may shout, "I'll never speak to you again" to a parent or sibling. This is not to be taken literally, but is a way of communicating in the strongest terms that a child is upset. Jesus does not mean here that all sinning through apostasy should take themselves off to the nearest cliff carrying the largest weight possible. But it does mean that their eternal salvation is in grave danger and that they should repent. Even if Jesus is using hyperbole as he preaches, there is still no escaping the direct forcefulness of what he is saying. Three times he stresses the reality of hell, and his dramatic treatment of offending with the senses brings home only too well the utter corrosiveness and devastation of sin ( Mk 9, 48 ). These words define Christian behaviour by outlining explicitly what is not permissible to the follower of Christ who hopes for a place in the Kingdom of Heaven . We are made for God, and can find no happiness outside him. We are not made to experience his absence in hell.

## **27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B**

05.10.03 Mk 10, 2-16

· The intrinsic link between marriage and family comes through clearly in Jesus' teaching and actions. In the same instant that he teaches conclusively "what God has united, man must not divide" ( Mk 10, 9 ), he embraces the little children brought to him and says, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" ( Mk 10, 14f ). Though it may be that the two incidents were separate historically, there is a clear connection made by the evangelist. Both life-long marriage and children that are the fruit of that love receive God's blessing. Marriage is fundamental to human existence and society, so it should not surprise us that Jesus' teaching goes back to the origins of the world. There is a deep mystery behind the whole creative purpose of God. Male and female were from the beginning, but this separation is

not permanent. Nor is any isolation implied or willed by God. Rather, the institution of marriage re-ones the sexes, joining the spouses in a holy bond that mirrors God's everlasting love for the works of his hand. Marriage fosters in the home the reality of God's love for us. In the spiritual life, a test is a trial with the expectation that we will succeed, whilst a temptation is a trial with the expectation that we will fail. Here the Pharisees test Jesus. Knowing the malice Our Lord experienced at the hands of some of the members of this party, it is hard to think of them as well intentioned, especially when Jesus refers to the hardness of their hearts ( cf. Mk 10, 5 ). But their question is well asked and important. Certainly, the disciples are staggered and alarmed at the teaching. Jesus insists on the sublime truth he has just revealed.

## **28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B**

12.10.03 Mk 10, 17-30

· Riches come to us from the hand of God – whether material or spiritual. We need to give thanks constantly for this divine largesse. We need also to pray for the grace of indifference, so that we may be free enough to use every other created thing only in so far as it gives greater glory to God. We must be free from within. The rich young man refused the vocation given him by God because his riches controlled him, and not the other way round. Winning the Lottery can be the biggest scourge in life for the same reason. Most tourists to Jerusalem have seen the narrow gateway in the city wall called 'the eye of the needle', where access is severely restricted and absolutely impossible for a heavy-laden camel. It seems that Our Lord is using a very practical image to illustrate the problem. The Kingdom of God is seen to be radically incompatible with attachment to wealth, because riches tend to avert the gaze of the one controlled by them from the vision of God. Also, the radical demand of the New Covenant to prefer absolutely nothing to the will of God is subverted. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" ( Mk 10, 18 ). The love of the young man for Jesus was true according to his own lights but imperfect. Only divine love is true in the absolute sense. So the young man was called higher by Jesus, to a deeper self-renunciation and richer reward in heaven. Many commentators say that he was in fact given a priestly vocation, but could not respond as generously and openly as he had done on approaching Our Lord at first. There can be no drawing back once a divine call is perceived and known.

## **29TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B**

19.10.03 Mk 10, 35-45

- "What is it you want me to do for you?" ( Mk 10, 36 ). Jesus knows what is in our hearts and thoughts, yet the prayer of supplication is vitally important for us. It trains us to humble ourselves before God, and in the very asking of the request we prostrate ourselves before the divine majesty and learn valuable lessons before we receive any reply. Praying is for us, not for God, as we seek divine intimacy and the needs of our lives. In opening striving hearts to God we allow ourselves to be molded and made fit for heaven.· There is very little humility in the request of James and John, but there is a profound lesson in the reply they receive from God. The Lord can change minds and hearts, purify intentions and expand our capacity for generosity. But he will not force himself on us. We need to use our freewill to approach the throne of grace. There can be no doubt that James and John did the right thing in revealing their deepest, if not darkest, thoughts to Jesus. They had over the initiative in their lives to the divine Master, who radically alters their perspective.
- The terrible thing about praying is not that God never listens, but rather that he might reply. Do not pray if you do not want an answer. James and John do not have a clue what they are asking, nor what they accept from the hands of the Lord, no doubt fortified by false bravado: " 'Can you drink the cup that I must drink?' 'We can' " ( Mk 10, 38f ). They are molded for martyrdom, and for the type of loving that continually fertilizes the seedbed of the Church. The strength for this sacrifice comes not from brute force, but from profound humility.

## **30TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B**

26.10.03 Mk 10, 46-52

- Faith is that inner certainty, as pure gift, of the truth regarding the unseen God, who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Bartimaeus had faith. He may have had nothing else, but it was this gift that gave him restoration of health. He knew his need of God, even though that need was for an immediate physical healing. His loss of sight would have meant the loss of his social status as well as any earning power. Jews believed that illness was a sign of God's curse and the result of sinning ( cf. Jn 9, 2 ), so Bartimaeus had nowhere else to turn.· As someone rejected by human convention and an outcast of society, Bartimaeus is not constrained by the necessity for politeness. Jesus is the only chance he has. His voice and hearing are also the only senses left to him whereby he can discern the presence of the Master, and make himself known amidst so large a crowd of followers. Bartimaeus is tested again, much in the same way that all his

life must have been one long test, but he comes through by perseverance and his prayer is heard. He knew that Jesus could heal him, and so he did. If death is taboo in our contemporary society, then so is suffering as well. It is not that we should cease in our constant battle to relieve suffering and pain, as is the motive force behind the whole hospice movement. Rather, we should not see suffering as the ultimate enemy. Indeed, just as Bartimaeus' suffering became the vehicle for his coming to God, so the experience of suffering and dying often becomes a moment of great grace and eternal happiness for many souls in hospices and homes