

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 9, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Good and gracious God, you lavish us with your Word and bless us with your presence. Be with us now as we gather to share life and break open your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: How was your week? How did you experience God this past week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first and third readings, Isaiah and Jesus use the image of a sumptuous banquet to describe the fullness of life that God offers us and the abundant mercy that God wishes to offer not only to Israel but to all people. In the second reading, Paul shares how he has come, through grace, to depend on God in good times and in bad.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 25:6-10a

This reading uses a set of dining images to sum up the blessings that God's people will experience on the last day. Notice that this heavenly banquet is prepared not only for the people of Israel, but for *all* people who hear and answer God's call. At this feast, the "*veil*," or all that separates us from God, will be lifted and the spider's "*web*" that imprisons us in ignorance and isolation will be brushed aside. Tears, guilt and shame will be replaced with joy.

The reading is intended to give hope to a people who may have felt abandoned by God because of some bad things that had recently happened to them. Isaiah also speaks of a time of restoration in these verses. The day will come when God will return and renew the broken covenant. This will take place symbolically on a mountain just as the original covenant was made with Moses on a mountain.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 23

God's shepherding care for his people is celebrated in both pastoral and banquet imagery.

SECOND READING: Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20

This reading concludes our month-long series of readings from Philippians. While in prison, some of the Philippians send Paul gifts to help him endure the hardships of prison life. While grateful for the gifts received, Paul shares that through his missionary journeys he has learned to be content with both famine and feast. Eating well or going hungry cannot compare with the strength Paul experiences in surrendering his life to Christ. He

learns what Mary, the sister of Martha, had also come to know: "that only one thing is necessary," namely, belonging to and being possessed by Christ. With Christ, Paul can say: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn 4:34). Paul concludes by exhorting his readers to place their trust in the "magnificent riches of God."

GOSPEL: Matthew 22:1-14

This reading, like our first reading, images the kingdom of God as a banquet to which all are invited to attend. The main focus of the parable is the *response* or *lack of response* of the invited guests. In this parable, Jesus continues to call the Pharisees and the religious leaders to conversion. Two invitations are extended, but the invitees refuse to come. Some even abuse and kill the servants (a reference to the Old Testament prophets and the early Christian missionaries).

By the time Matthew writes his gospel (85AD), Jesus has been killed and Jerusalem has been sacked and burned by the Romans (70AD) and the Gentiles have been invited into the kingdom. It would be wrong to assume that the king in the story stands for God—which would leave us with a pretty nasty image of a punishing God, rather than of a God who saves. As stated above, the main point of the parable is not about what God is like, but about the *negative response* of the religious leaders and all invited to Jesus' call to enter the kingdom that he is inaugurating.

The final piece about the '*wedding garment*' underlines the importance of not only saying 'yes' to Christ, but also *living* according to his values. It is one thing to present oneself for Baptism; it is

another thing to *live daily* the Christian way of life. While all are invited to the banquet of God's kingdom, not all will respond.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most in the readings?
2. Why do you think the image of a beautiful banquet is often used in the Bible to describe heaven?
3. Paul speaks of times of famine and feast. Due to the economic downturn, many people today who used to have much now have less. What advice would you offer people who have to move from having much to having little?
4. In the Gospel, many reject Jesus' call to enter the kingdom. Why do people continue to reject Jesus' invitation today? (See the *Catechism*, para #29, for some possible reasons.)

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestion: Try to live the message of the second reading. Remember that while Baptism is a blessing, it is also a responsibility.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for all who are presently saying "no" to God's call to sit at his table and for us who do come, that we may live out our baptismal commitment.©

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 16, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Lord of the Universe, we gather in your name to share your Word. Open us that we might believe in you more fully. Mold us that we might place our hope in you even in difficult times. Melt our hearts that we might love all that you have created. In the name of Jesus who has redeemed us, we pray. Amen.*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings tell us that God is the King of the universe and that our first allegiance belongs to him. In the second reading, Paul sees the Spirit is active within the community as a result of his preaching.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

This reading is like a royal decree, a formal statement wherein God addresses a king to authorize him for some task. What makes this decree extraordinary is that it is addressed to a pagan king, Cyrus, who is unknowingly anointed by God to defeat the enemies of Israel and return the exiles to their homeland.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 96

This psalm celebrates God as the King of Israel.

SECOND READING: 1Thessalonians 1:1-5

For the next five weeks, the second reading will be from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. The tone of the book is warm, tender and positive. Paul obviously has great affection for this particular Christian community. In these opening verses, Paul warmly thanks God for the way the Thessalonians are growing in faith, hope and charity. He reminds them that their conversion was due to the power of the Holy Spirit working through him.

GOSPEL: Matthew 22:15-21

In this "entrapment story," the Pharisees seek to trap Jesus in his teachings. They ask him, "is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor or not?" The question is put to Jesus to see whether he would declare himself on the side of those who oppose paying taxes to the Romans (the Pharisees), or on the side of those who collaborate with the Romans (the Herodians). If Jesus said "yes" that the Israelites should pay taxes to Caesar, he would lose the esteem of ordinary Jews who very much

resented the payment of taxes to the Romans. If Jesus answered "no" he could be accused of instigating rebellion against the state. Jesus' response, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God," suggests that one can indeed be loyal both to a religious tradition and to a secular power. It may be difficult at times, especially when their claims conflict. But at least it is possible.

Since God has dominion over the whole of creation, Caesar's relative power is subservient to the ultimate power of God. All authority and power have to be evaluated in the light of God's plan. It is for the people to decide whether in demanding tribute Caesar is reflecting the things of God.

Patricia Sanchez writes: "Everywhere we go we belong to God for we bear his imprint. We belong to God, not just in church but, in our homes, our work places and in the voting booth and we must bring God's values to all of these places."

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?
2. In the time of Isaiah, God used Cyrus, a pagan king, to achieve his purposes. Can you name a recent or current ruler, who is not religious and yet God has used or is using to achieve his purpose?
3. In the second reading, Paul reminds the Thessalonians that it is the power of the Holy Spirit working through Paul that brought their conversion. How have you experienced the Holy Spirit at work in you recently?

4. How can our allegiance to Caesar (reading country or political party) and our Catholic faith cause us some inner conflicts especially in the voting booth?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings.
Suggestion: Reflect and act on the truth that God is Lord of *every area* of your life.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for government leaders, that they seek to bring and protect God's values in their place of work and in their discussion of issues. ©

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 23, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Loving and compassionate God, today you place before us the Great Commandment of Love. You call us to love the stranger and people at risk in our society. Fill us with your love for all people and breathe your Spirit upon us as we gather to share life and your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: How was your week? How did you experience God this past week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings speak about love of God and love of neighbor. In the second reading, Paul offers words of encouragement to his readers.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Exodus 22:20-26

Commenting on this reading, Patricia Sanchez writes: *In this reading the author reminds us that by virtue of our shared covenantal relationship with God, each one of us is responsible for one another. Moreover, because of the special divine concern for the poor, those who are bound by covenant to God and to one another must necessarily share those same concerns.*

At issue were three perennial concerns of the ancient world: the treatment of aliens and strangers, the welfare of widows and orphans and the lending of money and exacting of interest. Because they did not have the protection of their tribe or clan or the same rights as the local citizenry, strangers, aliens and other people displaced by war, famine and/or disease were susceptible to maltreatment. Therefore, Israel's covenantal legislation provided for their welfare. To motivate them in their concern for and treatment of aliens, the Israelites were to remember their years as displaced foreigners in Egypt and to exercise toward others the same compassion with which their cries had been heard and their needs had been met by God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 18

This psalm is a prayer of confidence in God's love and care.

SECOND READING: Thessalonians 1:5-10

Thessalonica is a thriving crossroad city in the Roman Empire. As a result of Paul's anointed preaching, a dynamic Christian community is

founded and nurtured. In fact, this small Christian community becomes a wonderful example for many others, a model for all believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Their "lived faith" sounds forth to all around them. People everywhere can see by their lifestyle how they have embraced Jesus and his teachings.

GOSPEL: Matthew 22:34-40

Having failed to trap Jesus on the question of paying taxes, the Pharisees try again. This time they have an expert in the law raise the question frequently asked of rabbis in those days. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus' answer combines two quotations from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. From Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus takes these following words: "*Therefore you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.*" From Leviticus 19:18, Jesus quotes: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus and the Pharisee do not dispute the importance of the law. Their disagreement has to do with *emphasis*. The Pharisees, who tend to be legalistic, underscore *compliance to the law*. In contrast, Jesus places emphasis on *love*. For Jesus, love of God and people is more important than obedience to the law. Also, in the Great Commandment *joined together* love of God and neighbor – something that had not been previously done. In one of his epistles, John remarks: "*How can you say you love God whom you do not see when you do not love your neighbor whom you can see*" (1 Jn 4:20).

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?
2. Was there a time in your life when you tended to be a legalist or when you experienced church as very legalistic? Where are you at now when it comes to the role of law in religion?
3. How do you feel about lending money to family or friends? Do you have a rule that guides your behavior in this area of your life?
4. Who is the most loving person you know? Why?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings. Suggestion: Show love and respect for the stranger.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the ability to grow in the love of God and neighbor. Pray also for our government leaders as they struggle with immigration issues. ©

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 30, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Lord Jesus, thank you for gathering us together to share life and your Word. Breathe your Spirit upon us so that we can be led by you as we break open your Word.*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings have some tough words for the religious leaders who lived in the time of Malachi and Jesus. In the second reading, Paul shows himself to be a good and effective leader by serving with love those whom he was sent to preach the Word to.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Malachi 1:14, 2:2, 8-10

Roughly a century after the Babylonian exile and prior to the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, the priests play a central role in the life of Israel. In this reading, the leaders are castigated for failing to follow the ways of God and for leading others astray. For this, they will be cursed by God. They, like the Pharisees, have been poor and false teachers of their people.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 131

This beautiful psalm calls for trust and confidence in God and for a spirit of humility—attitudes in sharp contrast with the pride and haughtiness present in the leaders mentioned in the first and third readings.

SECOND READING: 1Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13

In contrast to the priests in Malachi's time and the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' time, Paul proves himself to be an authentic teacher who nurses his flock into God's ways. The passage is full of warmth and affection for the Thessalonians. While Paul is with them, he is like a "nursing mother." Not only does he preach and teach, but he shares with them his very self. Because he does not want to be a burden to his new converts, he works for his own living. Finally, Paul reminds us that the Gospel he preaches is no mere human work but the power of God in our midst.

GOSPEL: Matthew 23:1-2

The Gospel is a strong condemnation of the Pharisees and Scribes. This whole chapter must be read in the context of the historical situation that

Matthew is dealing with. Around 85AD, Christians are being expelled from the synagogues, which resulted in a lot of antagonism between Jews who became Christians (people like Matthew himself) and Jews who did not convert to Christianity. While Jesus, most likely, did say some harsh things to the Pharisees and Scribes (just like the prophets of old condemned the leaders of their time (e.g. first reading), it seems that Matthew exaggerates Jesus' words. For one thing, not all Pharisees and Scribes are bad. The language of chapter 23 is that of a prophet who chastises a stubborn people.

Also, when reading Matthew 23, we need to remember that Matthew's primary concern or focus is *not* the Pharisees and Scribes but the leaders of his *own* community, some of whom may have been throwing their weight around and beginning to manifest the bad traits of the Pharisees and the Scribes who lived in Jesus' time. Some of the leaders may have been more concerned about their own self-importance than about the Gospel. The warning for the *leaders* in the Christian Church is that they should not follow the bad example of the Pharisees and Scribes. If God did not spare them or their temple, surely he will not spare an unfaithful church. In today's section of chapter 23, Jesus specifically levels *three criticisms* at the Scribes and Pharisees. They do not practice what they preach. They are too legalistic in their interpretation of the Scriptures. They are full of their own self-importance, seeking the front seats and titles. This Gospel challenges today's shepherds *and* all disciples to look into their own hearts and see to what extent the spirit of the Pharisee lies within.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?
2. Paul showed great affection for his communities and yet he often chastised them for their failings. As parents, teachers, leaders, managers, etc., what suggestions do you have for balancing these two roles?
3. Are there forms of Phariseeism present in today's Church? If so, how do they manifest themselves?
4. What qualities in leaders turn you off the most? What qualities attract you the most?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday's readings. Suggestion: Pray for leaders, including yourself, that all may have a deep desire to follow the humble servant leadership style of Jesus.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for government and church leaders. Pray also for teachers and coaches of the young. ©

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 6, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Lord God, in today's Gospel, you call us to be always ready for your coming. Help us to develop a spirit of vigilance. Be with us as we share our lives and listen to your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: Wise people make God the center of their lives and are prepared for God's unexpected coming. In the first reading, personified Wisdom comes to those who are morally attuned and prepared to receive her. The Gospel speaks about the importance of readiness for God's visitation. In the second reading, Paul speaks about the fate of those who die before the Lord's return.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Wisdom 6:12-16

For the ancient Israelites, "wisdom" means much more than "intelligence" and "knowledge." It is all one needs to live a happy and fruitful life. In this reading, Wisdom is personified as a woman who is ready to help all who seek her. The wise person seeks the company of Lady Wisdom who is only too willing to "make herself known" to all. The relationship between Wisdom and the one who seeks her is reciprocal. The seeker seeks out Lady Wisdom but she also hastens to make herself known in anticipation of human desires.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 63

This psalm is a beautiful song of one seeking a relationship with Divine Wisdom. Having this relationship is "greater than life" which reminds us that life without God and his love is no life at all.

SECOND READING: 1Thessalonians 4:13-18

Expectations of the return of Christ, his Second Coming, are ripe in this Christian community. Many believe that Jesus will return in their lifetime. Disappointment sets in when it does not happen. Anxiety sets in when loved ones start to die. What will become of them? Paul seeks to address these concerns in these verses.

First, he tells the Thessalonians that they should not act as if they had no hope. Belief in the Resurrection implies that if we die with Christ, we shall rise with him. Mourners should temper their grief with hope.

Having assured his readers that believers—living and dead—will live forever with Christ, Paul tries to describe *how* the Second Coming will happen. Fundamentalist Christians interpret these verses literally and believe that Paul is giving us an *exact* account of *how* Christ will return. Their interpretation is known as the "rapture," which means "being caught up." Most, if not all mainline churches see Paul's words as largely *symbolic*. He draws on the imagery of the prophet Daniel to express an indescribable theophonic (divine) experience. As Catholics, we would say that we do not know the *when, how or where* of Christ's Second Coming. We just believe that Christ *will* return and all the faithful who have ever lived and believed will enjoy his presence for all eternity.

GOSPEL: Matthew 25:13

Scholars tell us that many of Jesus' parables have two or more levels of meaning to them. The first level is the *intended* meaning for the *original* audience. In the original audience, the *wise* ones are those who hear and embrace the message of Jesus. The *foolish* ones are those who close their hearts to his message. At the *second level*, the intended audience is Matthew's own community (living some 40+ years later). His fellow Jews, who choose not to receive Jesus (the bridegroom) or the church, are the *foolish and unprepared bridesmaids*. But others, mainly Gentiles, accept the message of Jesus as preached by the early Christians. These are regarded as wise.

At a *third level*, the parable is used by Matthew to teach a lesson about *vigilance* to *all* believers. Here the wise ones are those believers who keep their

lamps trimmed in preparing to meet Jesus by daily hearing and keeping of his Word. The 'foolish' ones are those who hear Jesus' message but do not act on it, just like the man who builds his house on sand and has nothing to fall back on in time of crisis. The Gospel ends with a warning for all readers. Since no one knows the day or hour of Jesus' return, all would be wise to sustain an attitude of continuous preparedness. Some may wonder if the five people with oil were not selfish for failing to share their oil with those who had none. Some things are not easily shared, e.g. spiritual capital. We cannot live on what others have spent a lifetime developing.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?
2. What is your definition or description of Wisdom? How can we grow in Wisdom?
3. How differently would you live your life if you knew that you had only six months to live?
4. What helps you to be vigilant for God's inbreaking into your life?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday's readings. Suggestion: This week, be more vigilant and attentive to how God may be trying to get through to you in the events and encounters of your daily life. ©

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

November 13, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Loving God, in your Word today, you call us to be wise and industrious stewards of all that you have placed in our care. Help us to develop and utilize all that you have given us to bless the communities we belong to. Breathe your Spirit upon us as we gather to share life in your Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing life: What brings you most joy?

Facilitator reads focus statement: Two interesting but contrasting figures appear in this Sunday's first and third readings. Proverbs' wife and mother, with all her domestic duties, finds time to develop skills and to dedicate herself to the needs of others. In Matthew's Parable of the Talents, the rejected servant is totally devoid of an enterprising spirit. We are told in these readings that the fruitful use of God's gifts enter into the final assessment of our lives. In the second reading, Paul urges vigilance in the light of the uncertainty of the time of the Second Coming of Jesus.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

The Book of Proverbs is a part of Israel's Wisdom literature. It is a collection of teachings on how to live a good and virtuous life.

Chapter 31, from which today's reading is excerpted, is introduced as advice given to Lemuel, King of Massa, by his mother. The reading sings the praises of a good wife. The author looks upon this wife, not just as a companion to her husband, but also as a worker and producer. In the light of today's Gospel, this reading offers us a practical example of a woman who did make good use of her God-given talents. In the Gospel, fear paralyzes the third servant. In this reading, fear of the Lord seems to motivate the woman to live an industrious life, using her talents to create clothes, etc. Also, "she reaches out to the needy." (See chapter 31 for a full description of this woman.) Most of all, she has a deep reverential fear of the Lord. These lasting qualities are far more important and superior to a vanishing physical attraction. Even though in the culture of the time the woman is seen as property, ("a good wife is an unfailing prize"), she is also portrayed as one who employs her gifts for the good of the family and the other members of the community. The reading reflects an image of a woman prevalent at that time. She is valued for what she can do for her husband, rather than recognized for her true value as a woman of wisdom and enterprise.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 128

This wisdom psalm refers to the blessing of a worthy wife extolling the virtues of family life in general.

SECOND READING: 1Thessalonians 5:1-6

These verses speak to the question: *When* will the Second Coming occur? Paul responds: Who knows? It will come like a thief in the night. But, if we live in the light of Christ, we will have nothing to fear. Because the Lord could return when we least expect it, we should put aside all deeds of darkness.

GOSPEL: Matthew 25:14-30

These verses continue the theme of preparedness that began in last Sunday's Gospel. Here, the focus is on the manner in which one is expected to use the time before Jesus returns.

The man who goes on the journey (Christ) shows great confidence in all three servants, for he gives each one a significant amount of money. When the man returns from his journey, he settles accounts with his servants. He praises the first two for being industrious and enterprising but condemns the third servant for his lack of enterprise in failing to use well his master's money. The master is obviously not happy with those who "bury" their gifts. Reflecting on this Gospel, Fr. Dennis McBride writes:

The parable imagines God as a gambler, one who is forever taking risks in entrusting us with his gifts. He has no guarantee on his return, but that is the risk. He dares us to share a common enterprise; he trusts us to do it in our own way, knowing that if we succeed both will have reason to celebrate.

The defense of the third servant is interesting. He focuses on the reputed meanness of the master, not on his own proven lack of enterprise. He takes the problem away from where it is— with himself— and places the problem where it is not—with his master.

He portrays the master as harsh; there is no admission that his own creativity leans toward the cemetery. He ends up burying part of himself. And we should only bury what is dead.

The bottom-line message is: Faithfulness, risk-taking and activity are blessed. Unfaithfulness, cowardice and inactivity are condemned.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?
2. What quality do you most admire in the woman described in the first reading?
3. Husbands or single men, what qualities do you or would you seek in a wife or female friend? Wives or single women: What qualities do you or would you seek in a husband or male friend?
4. What talent(s) have you developed and shared with the community? What talent(s) do you feel you may be sitting on? Is there a talent you have that you are not using that you would like to use?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday's readings. Suggestion: Activate a gift/talent you are sitting on.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for the grace to see gifts that you are not utilizing. ©

THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST THE KING

November 20, 2011 A

Opening prayer: *Jesus, our good Shepherd and King, rescue us from the power of sin and heal our wounds. Instruct us in your ways and guide us as we journey in faith and love. Let your coming at the end of time be a time of rejoicing for each of us as we strive to live out your great commandment of love. Amen.*

Sharing life: Name three things that you are very grateful for this Thanksgiving.

Facilitator reads focus statement: On this last Sunday of the Liturgical Year, the Church celebrates the Kingship of Christ. This year (Cycle A), Christ is presented as a King unlike any other. In the first reading, God is the Shepherd and Provider of his people. In the Gospel, Christ is presented as the Judge who will evaluate all human conduct in the context of compassion for others. In the second reading, Paul states that one day all things will be brought to completion in Christ. At the end of time, Christ will triumph over all evil, the last evil being death itself.

If you have not read the commentary before your gathering, consider reading it before or after each reading.

FIRST READING: Ezechiel 34:11-12, 15-17

Our first reading is one of reproach for the leaders of Israel (34:1-10) for they live off the sheep without responding to their needs. They provide no care for those who remain close and leave to their own resources those who stray. With their people in great danger the religious leaders provide for themselves even when many people are lost. There is no noticeable difference in their leaders' care for their flock. Now God himself will assume the role of shepherd. He will bring back the exiled and go after the lost, the wounded, and the ill.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 23

This psalm uses the imagery of the Good Shepherd to describe God's care for his people.

SECOND READING: 1Corinthians 15:20-26, 28

In her excellent book, *Breaking Open the Lectionary*, Margaret Nutting Ralph writes the following commentary on today's second reading.

The context for our passage from 1 Corinthians is an argument that Paul is having with some Corinthians who do not believe in the resurrection of the body. Paul is arguing that the fact of the resurrection is central and crucial to the Corinthians' salvation.

In today's passage, Paul is describing the ramifications of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and what remains to be accomplished before the coming of the kingdom is complete. The reading

begins: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." The Israelites offered the firstfruits of their crops to God, symbolic of offering the whole harvest to God. The fact that Christ is called firstfruits implies that those others who have fallen asleep will also be raised from the dead: "...in Christ shall all be brought to life." Just as he did in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul claims that this will happen at the second coming.

When Christ comes again he will hand over the kingdom to his Father: "...then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power." The second coming will happen only when all evil has been conquered. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

GOSPEL: Matthew 25:31-46

Commenting on this Gospel, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the great Russian author, also a Christian who took seriously the demands of the Great Sermon (Matthew 5-7) and attempted to live his life accordingly. One day, a beggar stopped him while he was out walking and asked him for alms. Tolstoy searched his pockets for a coin but, finding none, he said with regret, "Please don't be angry with me, my brother, but I have nothing with me. If I did, I would gladly give it to you." At that, the beggar's face brightened with joy. "You have given me more than I asked for," he said, "you have called me brother!" Tolstoy had not only grasped the intent

of the Great Sermon but he had also penetrated the truth of today's Gospel. He regarded the poor man asking him for alms as a brother because he had understood and made his own the great commandment (Matthew 22:37). But he had also learned to see the face of Christ in the poor and, because of that insight, he met the criteria of judgment set forth for our consideration in this Matthean text.

So many of the important themes of Matthew's Gospel come to a climactic crescendo in this eschatological (end times) scene. Up to this point, readers of Matthew have been told that wheat and weeds will grow together until harvest, that all species of fish will be hauled together in one net, that good and bad will grow together until the final separation. Believers have also been instructed, through many parables, with lessons of watchfulness and waiting. With this passage, it becomes evident that the time of growing together and waiting has passed, yielding to the moment of separation and judgment. In this Gospel, Jesus is revealed as the King who will judge us on the criteria of compassion for the least of our brothers and sisters. The blessed are those who have ministered to the needs of the poor. In doing so, they have ministered to Christ himself.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse, idea or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?
2. Images of God as judge and shepherd are brought together in the first and third readings. How can we hold both images together?
3. How do you seek to live the call to compassion presented in today's Gospel?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday's readings. Suggestion: Express your concern for the poor in some concrete way.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for all those who daily seek to improve the lot of the poor. ©