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Lay Christian Communities

They thrive in the Catholic Church and they may be its best hope but are surprisingly unknown to a great many Catholics. Run this list by a parishioner and see how many they can identify or accurately describe: the Neo-Catechumenate. Focolare. Opus Dei. Cursillo. Sant’ Egidio. Omitted is the largest grouping of all, the basic or small Christian communities that have multiplied in Latin America and elsewhere who, through their lay ministry and trained catechists, carry on much of the evangelization and works of the church.

The organizations we cited share the one faith but are by no means the same. Think how often Opus Dei has been described as conservative or ultra-conservative, even a form of cult. It has many critics. But movements, like religious orders in the past, change with history. And that may happen to an organization that numbers 83,000 people and is embedded in at least one section of Catholicism. The Focolare movement, which stresses home and hearth and family, has a charismatic founder and has flourished enough to begin founding settlements or towns where its members choose to live and work in a like-minded community. The Neo-Catechumenate is the largest of the associations—about 100,000. An Anglican bishop speaks of “attending their lively and dramatic celebrations of the Eucharist on Saturday evening” but adds his awareness of the criticism that they have been divisive in a parish and tend to become elitist. The Neo-Catechumenate stresses the formation of disciples and close scriptural study. The Cursillo (the little course in Christianity) is probably recognized by more parishioners. Like the Neo-Catechumenate and Opus Dei, it began in Spain.

Sant’Egidio, on which we have commented before, continues to grow; its numbers may now be as high as 30,000 in 15 countries. An easy way to read of their history and promise is to buy the book by Thomas Cahill, The Desire of the Everlasting Hills. It is a useful book on New Testament times and the gospels, in a readable, almost slangy style. And good scholarship. His final five pages give the story of Sant’Egidio as a striking sign that the church can do it again. Do what? Re-create itself as a community centered around Jesus Christ, attentive to his word, and committed to compassionate service. And, yes, still in communion with that immensely larger and hierarchic structure which is the Roman Catholic Church.

If you don’t buy Cahill’s book, here is a brief summary of Sant’Egidio by Claire Haynes, in The Tablet. “(It) started in 1968 when students gathered in Rome to share the Word, to pray, and to be friends with the poor and with one another.” She continues, “I had never before gone inside the world of the poor; now I was serving food to the homeless, painting with severely disabled adults and visiting in their tiny caravans gypsy families who had no access to water. I loved it; I had never felt so alive and so close to God. No amount of rousing choruses could bring me to Christ more directly than a gypsy child’s joy at being able to wash for the first time that week.”

It is not all service and no worship or sacramental
life; she adds, "It all made sense, too, in Sant' Egidio's compelling nightly prayer services. The quiet, meditative style was exquisitely beautiful to me. I discovered a peace I had never known." All this led her to begin the first cell in London, 15 members. "We meet weekly at the housing estate to visit elderly friends, splitting off in twos to spend time with them. Then we gather again as a community, Anglicans and Catholics together, to pray around an icon and a burning candle in the chapel of a local hospital. London is such a lonely city, brimming with people who don't connect. Our elderly friends show us what it means to love, and what London could be like."

There is a similar planting of the seed in New York City and Boston, and perhaps elsewhere in this country; the movement grows like the early church. And it is church. If you ask them in Rome, at the beautiful eponymous church which is their headquarters, how much are they "approved," the answer that comes with Italian gestures is all about conservative cardinals who come by and the Pope's blessing upon their work. Countless visitors do come by, and you should put the church of Sant' Egidio on your list of things to do and pray in Rome.

An Anglican bishop writes about all this, also in The Tablet, and his words surprise us with just how much ecumenical outreach is taking place. He speaks of being connected with SE for many years, and recently going to Rome to attend a congress for bishops and priests hosted by SE in the Church of Saint John the Lateran. It was their way of celebrating their 34th anniversary. More than 300 were present, including some Anglicans, one Orthodox bishop, one Lutheran, and one from Ireland. He comments on the striking absence of any Roman Catholic bishop from England (the United States is not mentioned). The assembly was received by the Pope with a blessing and "a greatly encouraging homily," affirming the work the Holy Spirit is accomplishing through these small communities in communion with Rome.

Small groups are not new. The old parish had pious societies such as sodalities, guilds, and service organizations like the excellent Vincent DePaul, which continue right on. The Sant' Egidio community also answers a need that many young people have: how to find a partner for life, a man or a woman to marry who share common values? The answer is found very much in groups like these. The community spirit is a great factor. As one young woman said in answer to the question what does all this mean to you, "The community is my life."

The present troubles of the Catholic Church have led some to think that organizations like these can really be "the church within the church," satisfying deeply one's need for growth and holiness, belonging to a community, sharing the liturgy and structure of larger church, and authentically committed to the gospel.

Questions and Comments for January

For bulletin or homily preparation or just reflecting.

January 5, 2003. Epiphany. I. Read closely and you can see a rough draft for Matthew to use in writing his gospel. Here are the camels and the gift-bearers and those who come from afar. The occasion for the prophet was a triumphant procession to Jerusalem, a city which he praises as a light to the nations. For us, Christ is the light, and today's feast emphasizes that the light shines for all—all nations, all people.

II. One almost smiles as the apostle tells of "God's secret plan!" And one made known only to him. But Paul more than anyone is credited with moving the new Christian faith out into the wider world, out of the synagogue and into the streets and homes of the gentiles. He calls us co-heirs of salvation with the Jews. But there is no doubt, from his other writings, that he expected them to follow his example and find their way to Christ.

III. This gospel of the magi is as much loved as Luke's account of Jesus' birth. It is all part of the wonderful Christmas story that, at least in the churches, is still being celebrated. The joyous Twelve Days reach their climax with this revelation of God through Christ—indeed, through an infant in Mary's arms. It is made to the world of learning and power. These strangers who come from afar and bring him gifts really are our predecessors, our pathfinders.

January 12, 2003. Baptism of the Lord. I. The prophet writes of the ideal servant, and for us, this is Jesus who will say of himself, "I stand in the midst of you as one who serves." Other things remind us of Jesus: we fragile humans, subject to sin, to mistakes, errors, losing our way, at times even our faith, are the bruised reeds he will not break; we are the smoldering wicks he will not quench. From our first breath to our last breath, God does not give up on us.

II. These words from Peter sting our conscience. "God shows no partiality"—often we do. In history we have shown partiality to men over women, to the white race over all others, to the rich and powerful in preference to the poor and the humble. And also, to our own way of seeking holiness and salvation, even though the apostle gives a much more inclusive view. The passage concludes with a famous summary of Jesus' life. It is understated
yes—"God was with him" even in the moment of his death, when he raised him.

III. All sacraments are signs, and the sign in baptism is water, which is life-giving, but also washing, bathing, renewing oneself. John sought that renewal in the Jews who came to him by insisting on repentance. The power to repent—indeed, to do any good work—is from the Holy Spirit. And we are told that this is the gift that comes with Jesus. He did not baptize in his own person but has done so ever since through the ministry of his church. And yes, he himself was baptized. That part of the gospel is factual; the rest is symbolic, declaring his divinity.

January 19, 2003. 2nd Sunday (B). I. There is a mystery about Samuel’s calling—it’s evident that the Lord was trying to get through to him! And there is a mystery about our own calling. Life is given to us, and to what end? For more than the old answer: the salvation of our souls. If, as the text suggests, we consider ourselves God’s servants and listen to his word, we will be enlightened many times about what we should do in large or small ways to bring about the reign of God.

II. The body is cheapened so much by our culture that we need to hear Paul’s words and rethink who we are. We are living bodies and our life is God’s gift. It is not for what Paul calls “lewd conduct or immorality.” God creates new life through us, and through our talents and labor, a new kind of world or society. Paul speaks in this passage as any good Hebrew would who understands that all life is a divine gift and it is exercised through the body.

III. Evidently a tension had grown between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus, and this gospel indicates that Jesus is “the One”—the one we call savior or messiah, the one we should follow, even as John’s disciples make the decision to follow him. Scholars tell us that the conversation of the two with Jesus is not everyday politeness. “Where do you stay?” Elsewhere the answer given by Jesus is, “in the house of my Father.” He is the one who stays or abides in God’s presence. And they come to see this only when they take his invitation; then they begin to see with the eyes of faith, and are ready to begin their mission.

January 26, 2003. 3rd Sunday (B). I. Why Jonah, and now? The story is good anytime because it emphasizes God’s great mercy and the reward that repentance brings. And this is true for gentile as well as Jew. The great city of Nineveh was certainly not Jewish. But they answer the call for repentance, the same call the Baptist will give. Unlike the Baptist, Jonah does not praise the Lord.

II. This passage is not appealing, particularly with its implied criticism of sexual love. Yes, they expected the end of the world in Paul’s time, and it didn’t happen. We can take profit from his words if we think about the shortness of life and assign good priorities. And also, reflect on our society, how true it is that even in our lifetime “the world as we know it has been passing away.” The world we knew in the 20th century was filled with terrible wars and unparalleled violence. Perhaps this century will be different.

III. Notice the new element in the call of Jesus to be baptized. It is different from John’s appeal. He follows it with his favorite line, his oft repeated theme: the kingdom of God is at hand. Look to yourself, or within yourself. The good news was then, and is now, that God is with us, and it is a call to action. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were certainly motivated to act decisively. They later received the nickname, “the sons of thunder.”

To Whom Are We Preaching?

No, don’t call it the audience, even though that word etymologically means listener. God is really the audience, listening and observing what do we do together in worship, and afterwards. There is too little research in how people listen, or to what. What do they hear and retain of a sermon or homily which you have spent several days (or several hours) and which seeks to become, with the help of the Spirit, a word of life?

The people before us and we ourselves have a lot in common. Call it the human condition. We have fundamental needs for love, meaning to life, self-esteem. We have common ways of hurting and loving. We need to find relationships, and ways of shaping our temporal existence with sometimes rather vague hopes of an eternal one. We inherit the creed and rituals and customs of our churches. What about our values? Are they from the gospel, or other sources like the media? Are people, for example, inclined to accept violence as a way of life because, beginning from childhood with their computer games, and going on to various kinds of music, television dramas, films and the Internet, they—we—drink in violence all the time? And don’t forget the format of the daily half-hour local news.

Some statistics might jolt us into sharing experiences that millions of people, perhaps some from our congregation, already share. Two examples: the enormous popularity of the Left Behind novels. And the long run of the Oprah Winfrey show. The magazine Christian Century (9-25-02) thought it worthwhile to take up both subjects in detail. Statistics help. They say of the Left Behind novels that their huge popularity
“continues to frustrate mainstream pastors and biblical scholars who object to an ‘end-times’ theology they consider just as fictional as the books’ genre. The readers are real, however. The tenth and most recent volume in the series, The Remnant, picked up 2.4 million orders in the two months before its July release. Then they quote a resolution passed by the 2001 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. which says the theology presented in this series is “not in accord with our Reformed understanding of the New Testament Book of Revelation. The resolution urged pastors to lead their congregations through studies of the novels if they are causing confusion and dissent.”

The series “has true believers taken from the earth in a ‘rapture’ that precedes seven years of suffering—the great tribulation—for those left behind. Drawing on images in Revelation, the books predict an Antichrist demanding universal loyalty and acceptance of a ‘mark of the beast’ on their bodies. Plagues and suffering ensue until Jesus returns to establish a 1,000-year reign on earth.”

There are some surprising defenders from theologians who are not all fundamentalists. For most of us, all this is apocalypticism or Second Coming gone wild. But it is worthwhile to hear other views. A convert to Catholicism, “leaving behind” all this literature, nevertheless defended it in part by saying that it does make you think you are responsible for your life, and your life is not forever. Not here. (Yes, but at what a price, of mangled scriptures and disordered fears.) This is not a new phenomenon in the publishing world. As far back as 1970, The Late Great Planet Earth by Hal Lindsey sold 15 million copies. I recall that statistic from a lecture by Harvey Cox, who said, “My own books have never been as popular.” Would that they were; Cox has never ceased writing in accessible English on important theological and spiritual subjects.

The Oprah article, “Oprah on a Mission” by Marcia Z. Nelson, is huge, needed some editing, but makes for good reading. They note that her show, now in its 17th year, is “an hour long ritual each weekday at 9 A.M., adding up to a lot more pulp time per week than the average pastor enjoys, and in front of a lot bigger congregation.” Yes—22 million. And then there is an “After the Show” in which the conversation and the issues continue to be discussed. Available on the website. People send 3,000 emails a day to Oprah’s website. People who have seen the show quickly distinguish it from the garish and even obscene talk shows. But “confession is the show’s signature. Talk is crucial, even salvific,” says Oprah.

The author is positive about this remarkable woman, whom most of us met when she played an unforgettable role in the film, The Color Purple. He sums up her success as a communicator (would you say preacher?) in a number of points that are useful for our own homiletic purpose. Here they are:

1. She’s easy to understand. Never uses words like “hermeneutics,” or “interdenominational.” Her column in her own magazine (two years old, readership 2.5 million) is called “What I know for sure.” (Think what we know for sure about Jesus and the faith we profess.)

2. She admits her failings. The author calls it being human. We might call it the confession that we are all sinners. She shares her own struggles (like her famous battle with losing weight).

3. The reality of suffering. And desire. She does this in two ways, by bringing in witnesses who tell their stories. And supporting their needs privately (she tithes) and through her network.

4. Community. There is a network community. The book club (now over, after a long run) had many people reading the same book. As you may know, some cities have tried the same thing. At least it gives us something to talk about besides the weather, politics, or sports.

5. Self-examination. We would call it conscience.

6. A strong emphasis on gratitude. She has a moving recommendation that one should keep a gratitude journal.

7. Good examples. Everyday saints who tell their positive stories.

8. Role models. Similar to the above.

9. Listening. She is a good listener. The author compares her approach to the Catholic practice of hearing confession.

10. Forgiveness. She urges it, like any good gospel preacher, but doesn’t pretend it’s easy. She has a line, “Forgiveness is something you do for yourself.” Yes, it can help the other person and bring peace, but her insight is correct.

Perhaps we won’t take time or have the time to read even one of the apocalyptic novels, or watch at 9 a.m. an Oprah Winfrey show. But we can reflect on Oprah’s approach, and perhaps emulate it.

Peace

7-28-2009

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MARY, MOTHER OF GOD: 1 JANUARY 2003

Prayers for Worship

BEGINNING

O God who gave us time,
let us stop complaining
that we are short of time,
out of time, have no time.
We are alive.
We are listening to you at this moment
and you call us to have a good time.
Jesus speaks of a more abundant life.
We give you thanks that we are so blessed.

OVER THE GIFTS

Mary’s gift to us
becomes our hope and joy,
the glad name of Jesus,
his presence among us.
May these gifts and our faith
bring us once more into his presence
and unite us in his sacrifice of praise.

GOING FORTH

(the Aaronic blessing, from the first reading)
“The Lord bless you and keep you!
The Lord let his face shine upon you and be
gracious to you!
The Lord look upon you kindly and give you
peace!”

EPIPHANY: 5 JANUARY 2003

Prayers for Worship

BEGINNING

Lord of light, your day has broken in the east
and we give you thanks!
It is not a star that guides us
but a Son who is risen.
In his light we walk,
and in the end which is our beginning
we shall find our way home.

OVER THE GIFTS

We, too, bring gifts:
of song, and prayer, and faith,
of bread, and wine.
Gifts for the banquet of life,
for the table you spread with your goodness.

GOING FORTH

We pray to you once more, Lord, as the seekers,
like the shepherds and the Magi
who sought and found your Christ.
Open our eyes and our hearts
and help us to find him.
Then lead us by a different way.

These prayer models are usually based on the scripture, and you may prefer to use some of them before or after the reading, or after the homily.
EPIPHANY: 5 JANUARY 2003

Prayer of the Faithful

It is still the season of Christmas, and it should be a time of peace. Let us pray for our troubled earth:

For peace in the land of your son’s birth—a peace that will be just to Palestinian and Jew, let us pray to the Lord...

For peace in Ireland, a land where so many revere your name and keep with pride the ancient faith. For all the Irish north and south, let us pray to the Lord...

For peace in all those other lands that are torn by war and hatred—and wherever men destroy each other and the innocent suffer, let us pray to the Lord...

For ourselves, that we may be less greedy and less violent, and contribute to peace in our society, let us pray to the Lord...

For ourselves and our families, that the peace of Christ may spread from Mass to home, and to those other tables of the Lord, let us pray to the Lord...

Father, it has been a long time since the Prince of Peace was born and we are still a people of violence. Teach us the ways of justice and peace.

BAPTISM OF THE LORD: 12 JANUARY 2003

Prayers for Worship

BEGINNING

Father, we come to this place for the word you speak, for the conversation called prayer, to offer ourselves with Christ and even enter a deeper communion with him.

For this worship, for the gift of life and faith we give you thanks.

OVER THE GIFTS

Lord, do not let our worship be one of words, we ask that what we now do in faith may be the offering of Christ who shares his life with us.

GOING FORTH

Father, we believe that we do not just happen to exist but are planned in your love and gifted with your Spirit, that we too are anointed with the Holy Spirit and power. Then let us do the good works that Jesus did and wills to continue through us. Let us turn this week into a Mass, a sacrifice, in which you are glorified and our brothers and sisters are served.
SECOND SUNDAY: 19 JANUARY 2003

Prayers for Worship

CALL TO WORSHIP

My sisters and brothers, the apostle Paul teaches us to speak of the Church of God in __________, and so we greet you as the apostle did, you who have been consecrated in Christ Jesus and called to be a holy people. Let us worship the Father of Jesus and the Father of us all.

BEGINNING

God of power whose word is life and death, in whose hands is the whole universe of stars and planets, earth and people, remind us that we are powerless when we are filled with our own strength. We cannot bring tomorrow or even live today without your help. Help us now, with your good Spirit, to thank you for your word, your Christ, this life. Amen.

OVER THE GIFTS

May the offering of ourselves be signified in these gifts of bread and wine and tithes. We made them, and we return them in Christ to the One who has given us life.

GOING FORTH

It is the Lord “who has formed us as servants from the womb.” Then let us serve him! Jesus is God’s chosen One and the Father has chosen us to share his life, to be his presence in the world. My brothers and sisters, grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

SECOND SUNDAY: 19 JANUARY 2003

( these introductions reflect or repeat the readings )

THE PENTITENTIAL RITE

The psalmist cries out today, “I have waited, waited for the Lord, and he stooped toward me, and heard my cry.” With confidence, then, let us bow down our hearts and confess our sins before him....

BEFORE THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

We are warned by the psalmist that God does not wish sacrifice or oblation, but ears open to obedience, a servant ready to do his will. Let us dare to offer the sacrifice, then, only because we seek to make it an inward offering of our hearts and wills, to invite the Spirit to unite us with the perfect sacrifice of Jesus.

BEFORE THE LORD’S PRAYER

My brothers and sisters, by our baptism we have been “consecrated in Christ Jesus and called to be a holy people.” Let us, then, call upon the Father, as Jesus our brother has taught us:

BEFORE COMMUNION

It was John who confessed that he did not recognize Jesus, but who then hailed him as the Lamb of God. Let us recognize him as Lord and receive him in faith.
THIRD SUNDAY: 26 JANUARY 2003

Prayers for Worship

BEGINNING

O Lord, your prophet speaks of abundant joy,
a light in darkness,
an end to gloom and doom.
Often we don’t believe it.

Shake us out of our pessimism.
Remind us that you have given us your Christ.
Let us hear his message to reform our lives
and let us act like those who belong to his
kingdom.

OVER THE GIFTS

We can make no worthy gift
unless we are united,
free of factions, one in Christ.
We have one bread, one cup, one Lord.
My brothers and sisters!
Let all divisions cease.

GOING FORTH

Lord, you call us to change our lives.
Help us to answer yes.
You call us to ministry
as once you called Simon and Andrew, James
and John.
Help us to answer yes.
You give us the Good News of the kingdom.
You heal us, free us from evil.
Help us to be a good news to those we meet,
to witness to your transforming love.

THIRD SUNDAY: 26 JANUARY 2003

FOR THE PENTITENTIAL RITE

(Reflecting the second and third readings)

Brothers, sisters, we are the family of God,
united in Christ. Let all discord and
divisions cease. Lord have mercy....

To whom do we belong? Is it not to him who
lived and died for us, in whose name we are
baptized? Christ have mercy....

Christ has healed us from our sins, called us
to his ministry, announced to us good news.
Let us repent whatever sins still keep us apart.
Lord have mercy....

BEFORE THE EUCHARISTIC PrAYER

The Lord has called us to be his people.
Our covenant is sealed with the blood
of Christ. Let us renew that covenant which
makes us his children, brothers and
sisters of his Son.

BEFORE THE LORD’S PRAYER

The apostle begs us “in the name of the Lord
Jesus Christ to agree in what we say.” Let
us agree, then, to forgive each other, to
unite our minds and hearts as we offer the
prayer he taught us:

BEFORE COMMUNION

Once again Jesus calls us—Simon, Andrew,
James, John, you and me—to share his life.
Let us enter upon a deeper communion with
him.
Theme/Call to Worship

What is the meaning—the religious meaning the deep truth—of this Christmas story? We discover what a great feast Epiphany is or has been in the past. Combined with the Baptism and Cana it is all part of a theophany or showing forth of Christ’s divinity. Originally this was the great feast, Christmas and all. The Orthodox church continues to celebrate it (or all three feasts together) in depth and splendor. The Latin people love these three kings. We all can join in the celebration.

Introduction to the Word

I. Is 60, 1-6. It fascinates us how much the prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, foretell the Christ whom they never knew, writing centuries before his time. They give us the stories and symbols that help us to interpret his life. Today Isaiah writes historically about Jerusalem and the return of the exiles but prophetically he describes (or anticipates) a glory that will draw people from afar—and lead to adoration.

II. Eph 3, 2-3. 5-6. Paul, himself a Jew and educated as a Pharisee, becomes the apostle to the gentiles. For many scholars he is the architect of the church, the one who understood that it would not remain a sect or group within Judaism. He envisions their conversion. We don’t—now—but remember in his time they expected the quick end of the world, and the way to salvation seemed clear. He speaks of his God-given ministry. It has served us well.

III. Mt 2, 1-12. Here is the other great story of Jesus’ birth. Were it not for Luke and Matthew we would be left in the dark and poorer for the lack of the people and the symbols that make up part of the Christ story. The star, the strange seekers, the variety of their unusual gifts—all this can teach us much. It is our story, for most of us are gentiles.

Homily Model

The Gospel is full of wonderful stories, and today’s is one of the best. If you doubt its ability to capture the imagination, look in any art gallery and see how many times the story of the Magi, commonly called the Three Wise Men, has inspired great artists to some of their best work. Or you don’t even have to do that. What proportion of the cards you received this year, the religious ones, showed us that famous scene—the farm, the stable, the shepherds and angels, the baby in a crib, Mary and Joseph—and the Three Wise Men? No children’s Nativity Play would be complete without them. But that are they doing there? Who do they represent? Who invited them?

The last question is the key to the other two. God invited them. It is plain from the pages of Luke’s Gospel that they were guided to the Holy Land after they saw a bright star shining in the heavens. We can if you like imagine them to be experts on astrology, ancient sages who studied the arrangements of the stars and planets in the hope of foretelling the future. They lived at a age when great things were expected, good or bad, and
when the favorite literature consisted of prophecies of the end of time. The Magi were, if you will, a Think Tank. They were wise, but don’t think this just means clever or learned. They were honest and humble men, straightforward, even simple in a certain way. No doubt they had considered and dismissed all sorts of other signs and portents before this one literally rose on their horizon. This is it, they thought, no doubt having to endure the scoffing of other ancient sages who were sure they were wrong. But they set out to follow their star. It seemed completely right. Something within them said so.

What country or culture they came from we do not know. It could have been what we now call Arabia or Mesopotamia, or it could have been Persia, or it could have been India. We can fancy if we want that it might even have been Afghanistan. They had their own religious beliefs—they were certainly not Jewish. But they were also looking for something. And this is a hint to us of whom they really represented. They stood for all the people all over the world since the start of human civilization who have been prompted by God-given grace and God-given wisdom to ask the most fundamental questions. What are we here for? What is good? What is the meaning of life? What shall we do to be saved? And so we see that the invitation to embark on their journey came from God, both because of the sudden appearance of a new star in the sky and because they were given the insight to understand what it meant. Their story is our story.

Don’t forget they lost their way once they got to Palestine, and they went to the religious authorities of the day, in Jerusalem, to ask directions. For Bethlehem had been foretold as the birthplace of a Jewish leader or Savior (Micah 5:2) as any learned rabbi would have explained to them. Some commentators say that this message is also meant for us. If we lose our way on our own spiritual journey, then we should go to the religious authorities of the day—the teaching authority of churches—and ask directions. Bear in mind that these same religious authorities were corrupt and Jesus would later denounce them for their failings. Despite its sins and failures, the truth and the way of salvation are still conveyed by the church. A poem on Epiphany puts it thus:

Mark how they read out
the word they do not heed
while those more wise
hear in silence
and go on to find the Child

So they received fresh directions and went in search again, and found what they were looking for. And indeed far more than they were looking for, though in the eyes of the world obviously rather less. This was no enthroned king surrounded by courtiers, no jewels, no fine garments, no guards and trumpeters. No doubt the manger was dark and dank and even a bit smelly. This was a tiny baby, a peasant child, born into poverty. And they had the wisdom and insight to see immediately the point God was making, and fell down on their knees and adored him.

Don’t forget the name of this feast is Epiphany, from a Greek word meaning a revelation, announcement or discovery. We understand it better if we recall that when the feast was first celebrated, especially in the Eastern part of Christendom, two other Gospel stories were marked that day alongside the tale of the Three Wise Men. They were epiphanies too. They are both stories about when Jesus was first revealed or disclosed to his companions his real identity. One episode is about Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist in the river Jordan when, you remember, God spoke and said “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Until then, nobody had seen him that way, though we may be sure John the Baptist had more than an inkling of it. The other event is the marriage feast at Cana, when Jesus at first declined to perform a miracle because his time had not yet come, but then changed his mind when nagged a little by his mother—perhaps there is a message for us there too! But his miracle of turning water into wine told those who were watching who Jesus really was. Notice, by the way, that Mary didn’t need telling. She never doubted him. There’s mothers for you!

Because the second of these three epiphanies was connected with Jesus’ baptism, the feast of Epiphany on January 6 was a popular time for baptizing people, though some church authorities did not like it and thought
the only proper time for baptisms was Easter or Pentecost. In those very early days of Christianity, Epiphany was believed to be a much more important day than Christmas. As well as the Three Wise Men, the baptism of Jesus and the wedding feast at Cana, many early Christians also celebrated the Nativity itself on that day. When Christmas eventually became a separate celebration it was put back—as the timing of the arrival of the Wise Men indicated it had to be—to 12 days earlier. When someone tells you Epiphany is on January 6 because that is 12 days after Christmas, you can politely point out to them that the truth is exactly the other way round.

For all these centuries, the Three Wise Men have always been taken to stand for the gentle world, the world beyond the immediate Jewish society into which Jesus was born. It teaches us that right from the start, the Gospel was for the gentiles as well as the Jews. The Jews of his time had their Scriptures to guide them to Jesus, while the Magi had their ancient wisdom, their understanding of signs and portents, their knowledge of the movements of heavenly bodies, and that interior illumination which we call grace. We have our equivalent gifts and talents. Not that we all use them: and though it was given to the Three Wise Men to understand the meaning of the star, no doubt plenty of equally wise men were not so blessed. God sometimes helps us to see the truth, but sometimes, in his mysterious way, he doesn’t. He who switches the star on can switch it off again, and we are left floundering.

The last point is important. We tend to think that spreading the Gospel requires a huge amount of effort on our part. That baby in that crib did not have to expend any effort at all, and the Three Wise Men found him nevertheless. Whenever people are confronted by genuine holiness, in whatever form it takes, something within them can awaken an impulse to respond. A star lights up in the heavens for them too, you might say. They can resist its pull, or fail to read its meaning correctly, but it is there. So God draws them into the divine Presence, often through this extraordinary magnetic effect of holiness.

Think of Christian pilgrimages, the millions drawn every year to Lourdes in France or to Compostella in Spain or Guadalupe in Mexico City. Or just think of the Three Wise Men drawn hundreds of miles, over deserts and mountains, through drought and storm, just to see a Holy Infant. Yet they knew they had found the meaning of their lives.

What is so strange about these three is not how little they understood, but how much. Think of those famous gifts. Gold, which has always stood for royalty, kingship, and also for purity and faithfulness. So this child in the manger was to be a king! Frankincense, reminding us that the burning of incense in the presence of the sacred long predated Christianity—it was obviously part of the religion the Three Wise Men had left behind. So this king was also to be a sort of priest! But myrrh was a strange gift indeed. It is a substance well known in the ancient world as a medicine and a drug. The Romans traditionally offered a drink of myrrh mixed with wine to people about to be crucified. It put them into a daze—we would say to make them high—to deaden the pain and make the anguish of dying more bearable. This was a portent of martyrdom.

Think of it as a bit like the pain-killer morphine. Jesus was offered just such a drink at his crucifixion, and declined it. But what sort of birthday present was that, to give a newborn baby? The Wise Men were wise indeed, wise enough to know that the likely fate of the person they thought Jesus to be was sure to be a cruel one. The life of this one child, born to be a holy prophet, will end in grief and sorrow, they seemed to be saying. Yet the myrrh did not cancel out the gold and the incense. Even after death, Jesus would be prophet, priest and king. Gold endures; it is pure, faithful and true. And the gift of myrrh—were they foretelling not just his death but his resurrection?

We do not know exactly how much detail in the story of the Three Wise Men is historically accurate, nor will we ever know. But we can trust Holy Scripture not to lie to us. The religious truth in the story of the Magi is really true. We can rely on it. And it is a truth about ourselves: that if we follow the signs God gives us, we will find Him, even if it takes the eye of grace to know Him. We cannot do better than to follow in the footsteps of these three; and when they found what they were looking for, do as they did, and adore.
Homily Overview

TODAY’S GREAT STORY HAS CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF ARTISTS. LOOK IN THE MUSEUMS—AND AT YOUR CHRISTMAS CARDS.
—And in every crib scene. (The timing may be off, but no matter.)
—Who sent them? What is the deeper meaning of their journey?

GOD INVITED THEM. THE STAR IN THE HEAVENS IS GOD’S SIGN, OR SIGNAL.
—And were they astrologers, or just deep thinkers who studied the heavens?
—They try to discern the patterns of life, the future, and the meaning of it all.
—They were given what we call grace to understand.

TO FOLLOW A STRANGE STAR APPEARED, NO DOUBT, ABSURD TO THEIR COLLEAGUES.
—But they were guided by an inner light.
—We don’t exactly know their origin but we do know what they were seeking.
—The answers (or better answers) to the fundamental questions of life.

THEY LOST THEIR WAY AND SOUGHT DIRECTION FROM THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES.
—There is a lesson for us in this. We are part of a teaching church.
—Despite its sins and failures, the truth and the way of salvation are still conveyed by the church.

THEY FIND AND THEN ADORE A CHILD, A HELPLESS INFANT.
—Their adoration is a sign that Jesus is divine.
—And this is the message of the other two feasts associated with Epiphany: the Baptism, and Cana.
—A big day! Yes, and once the only day in the Christmas cycle.

IT IS THE FEAST THAT ANNOUNCES THE SALVATION OF THE GENTILES. THE MAGI WERE NOT JEWS.
—Remember it is God who draws them from afar, God who enlightens them to understand.
—They respond to genuine holiness. And we have many examples of how that works today.
—Not only saints we know but shrines that draw millions of pilgrims.
—In a sense the whole pilgrimage thing began with the journey of these three from afar.

THEIR GIFTS ARE POWERFUL SYMBOLS, AS IF THEY KNEW WHAT TO BRING.
—Myrrh suggests his death. But gold and frankincense, his divinity. Does it also hint at resurrection?

WE DON’T KNOW THE HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THIS SUBLIME EPISODE. BUT WE RECOGNIZE ITS RELIGIOUS TRUTH.
—And it should guide us as once a star guided them to a child whom we too adore.
Theme / Call to Worship

What did baptism really mean for Jesus? What does it mean for us?

Introduction to the Word

I. Is 42, 1-4, 6-7. Isaiah never knew that his touching and eloquent words would describe the one we know as Jesus, the Savior. Indeed we now understand who is the servant whom God upholds, upon whom he has put his spirit. The prophet describes someone of great compassion and patience—patience with sinners and his fellow humans. And here is one of the many references in Isaiah to the Messiah as servant.

II. Acts 10, 34-38. Luke, the author of Acts, sums up a sermon by Peter. The apostle gives the heart of the good news. It is a classic description of Jesus in a few words: the man who went about doing good, and confronting evil (the grip of the devil). Evil is not a demonic procession but the many ills and sins which are part of the human condition. Evil is so powerful that our only hope is that God is more powerful—and Jesus is God’s emissary.

III. Mk 1, 7-11. Hear this passage as both fact and symbol. Jesus indeed is baptized, not for remission of sins but to begin his ministry and set the pattern for our own baptism. The symbols make up a theophany, which means that, in the minds of the people who were there and now write this account, God was in this place, manifesting his glory and the vindication of his Son.

Homily Model

Why was Jesus baptized if he was sinless, and John’s baptism called for repentance? A good question, because it points to the further meaning of baptism beyond the forgiveness of sins. For adults who are being baptized, that repentance and forgiveness is still true—the sacrament, properly received, remits all sin. But this is not something automatic or magical: an adult preparing for baptism (a catechumen) is certainly disposing himself by faith and repentance to receive the sacrament. What about infants? We have changed our understanding of original sin, and infant baptism, our usual practice, points to that further meaning of the sacrament. The same is true of Jesus’ baptism.

In the description we hear today from Mark’s gospel of that baptism, three things are particularly striking. The first is that Jesus is baptized, neither by God himself nor by an angel, but by a mere man: John the Baptist. John has been preaching a gospel of repentance and baptizing people by water. But John has also been preaching that there is one coming who is greater than he. This one will baptize in the Spirit. John thus indicates that this new baptism will bring more than a cleansing from sin. The baptism by this one who is coming will give each recipient fullness of life in the Kingdom of God (cf. John 3:5).

But who is this John? It is often forgotten that he is a blood relative of Jesus: he is the son of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. More importantly, John was the first prophet in Israel in over 300 years: a long time for a people who at certain times had many prophets among them. So John created quite a stir. Crowds flocked to him. We
hear in an earlier passage that “all Jerusalem” was receiving John’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But with great humility, John realizes that his baptism is inferior to Jesus’. When John says he’s unworthy even to loosen Jesus’ sandals straps, this is significant: the Talmud states that a disciple will perform every service for his rabbi that a slave would do for his master except to stoop and loosen his sandals. So John does not see himself worthy to do even what only a slave could! (It is noteworthy, then, that in Luke’s gospel, John does not even baptize Jesus—no one does. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descends upon Jesus while he is in prayer. And in Matthew’s gospel, John initially refuses to baptize Jesus, proclaiming his unworthiness. (But he later gives in and does baptize him.)

So now we have two significant contrasts between John’s and Jesus’ baptisms: while many were baptized by John near Jerusalem, now in Galilee only Jesus comes forward. And while the many needed John’s baptism because they were sinners, Jesus is without sin in a representative sense takes on the sins of all his people. Jesus does not set himself apart from his people’s guilt. Jesus is not an isolated individual who is responsible only for his own righteousness—he is to lay down his own life for his flock.

The second striking feature is that Jesus’ baptism reveals that he stands in a unique relationship: a relationship of sonship with the Father. This is one of the few places in Scripture where Jesus is explicitly proclaimed to be God’s son. The voice from the heavens proclaims not that Jesus has become God’s son, but he is so. His baptism reveals his participation in the community of life of the Trinity itself. This life can now be mediated to us through our baptisms in the Spirit that Jesus brings.

Third, Jesus’ baptism signifies the inauguration of his public ministry. His mission is to preach the word of God and heal and bring salvation to God’s people. Both the first and second readings today help us to understand the meaning of baptism. The passage from the prophet Isaiah encapsulates the mission that Jesus took up (see Luke 4:18). Isaiah is describing the Servant of Yahweh who is anointed to serve the people. The Servant takes the guilt of his people upon himself by his eventual suffering and death for them. Thus Jesus’ baptism thus reveals that he is this Servant of Yahweh. Like the Servant, Jesus is also called the “favored” one: the one who will bring salvation to the poor and downtrodden and eventually suffer and die for all.

Jesus’ baptism thus shows that there is a strong link between baptism and a life of love and service. After his baptism, Jesus opens the eyes of the blind, brings justice, and frees prisoners. Later during his ministry, Jesus in fact refers back to his baptism as a source for his power. He invokes his baptism by John when asked by what authority he carried out his powerful and miraculous works.

Like Jesus’ baptism, our baptisms are a beginning for us. They are an initiation into a life of loving service. They grant substance and meaning to our lives as Christians. How does baptism symbolize this?

The primary symbol of baptism is water. Water is a symbol of life, since it cleanses and nourishes all living things. But water is also at times a symbol of death and destruction. The power of oceans and rivers can, at times, overwhelm and drown.

A good illustration of this double nature of water is found in the recently released film, Iris. The film is a richly textured account of the life of the Irish born philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch and her husband John Bayley. During their courtship, Iris and John would often swim in a river near where they lived in England. They particularly enjoyed diving deep into the water, and then gliding back up to the surface together; enjoying the sheer experience of submersion and movement. In these early years, their swimming was robust and flirtatious. But much later in life Iris develops Alzheimer’s disease. Her memory and intelligence fade. Her spirit, mind, and body all slow significantly. Yet John still dutifully takes her swimming. The water still provides a profound release for the aged and confused Iris. When swimming now, it is as if time is reversed—she can feel her mind and soul relive the memory of her youthful swims together with her beloved John. Her stiffened limbs feel supple once again when she is in the water with him. But one day while in her submerged state, she suddenly freezes up, as if she realizes just how old and frail she really is. She begins to thrash violently in the water, as if doing all she can to avoid drowning. John barely manages to drag her, coughing and gasping, to the safety of the shore. It is almost as if the river’s water, cherished by her for so many years, has now betrayed her.

This dual nature of water aptly symbolizes Jesus own baptism. His baptism in the Spirit inaugurates his healing ministry to the people. But it is a ministry that inevitably leads also to his eventual suffering and
death. Later in Mark’s gospel, Jesus even refers to his Passion as his baptism (Mk 10:38). As St. Paul says, all of us who are baptized are baptized in Jesus’ death (Rom 6:3). But it is through this death that we have life—life in Jesus. It is full participation in God’s kingdom: both here in the present and in the future glory to come.

Because baptism has this life giving power, it is understandable that, at a certain point in history, some thought that the Church should forcefully baptize all persons, even non-Christians. But in the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III halted the practice. He proclaimed that anyone unwilling to be baptized “receives neither the reality nor the character of the sacrament because express dissent is something more than the absence of any consent.” This invitation must be received freely. When freely received, as Pope John Paul II writes, baptism “communicates to us a share in divine life.”

How do we concretely understand our free share in this divine life?

Baptism bridges the divide between the human and divine. As the biblical theologian Philip Carrington aptly puts it, Jesus’ vision at baptism “smashes to pieces any idea of a remote deity; God’s power, God’s spirit…God’s voice are immediately present and potent in the here and now. The Spirit is visualized indeed as winging its way downward into the human flesh and blood…Heaven was, by an ancient convention, the ‘place’ of God, and yet His Spirit blows into the world like a great wind, or flows into it like a great river…. He makes himself known by an energy or activity or power striking into this world.” The Scriptures give us a fresh and vivid way of imagining this divinization of our world and our lives.

Baptism opens our eyes to see what we could not see before. In anthropological circles they tell about villagers who lived on a tropical shore and literally could not see a ship as it approached their shores because they had never before seen a ship. The people had no frame of reference that would have made recognition of it possible. Literally they saw nothing on the horizon. Baptism, as it were, gives us this new perspective; we can now see God’s presence in the world because we have been intimately initiated into it through baptism.

Through baptism we are divinized not only as individuals, but also as a people. According to Vatican II’s Lumen Gentium, by means of our baptism we enter into the “sacred and organic nature of the priestly community.” We are “consecrated to form a kingdom of priests and a holy people.” This is our identity: our collective sonship and daughtership. We form a familial community of love. We thereby have the rights to the “privileges” of that consecration: participation in the word, sacramental life, and mission of God’s People.

Within a divinized community, we are all equals. The Christian community needs, of course, its authority, order, and tradition. It also needs its diverse gifts of the Spirit. But viewed from our baptismal charism, “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10). We are all members of one body. The poet W.H. Auden wrote that the ideal Christian faith, “while it condemns no temperament as incapable of salvation, flatters none as being less in peril than any other.” A Christian “has to make his public confession of belief in a church which is not confined to his kind, to those with whom by nature he feels at home, for in this church there is neither Jew nor German, East nor West, boy nor girl, smart nor dumb, boss nor worker, Bohemian nor bourgeois, no elite of any kind; indeed there are not even Christians there, for Christianity is a way, not a state.” Thus does Auden express the radicality of our baptismal identity.

And yet, most of us baptized struggle with our mission to live out our baptismal identities. We have difficulties working and living with others; we have trouble with diversity and lack of continuity; we crave stability and hierarchies. Dorothy Day pointed out that “If everyone were holy and handsome, with ‘alter Christus’ shining in neon lighting from them, it would be easy to see Christ in everyone. If Mary had appeared in Bethlehem clothed, as St. John says, with the sun, a crown of twelve stars on her head, and the moon under her feet, then people would have fought to make room for her. But that was not God’s way for her, nor is it Christ’s way for himself, now when he is disguised under every type of humanity that treads the earth.” That is a powerful statement from someone who read the face of Christ in the poor. Saint Teresa of Avila put it in a slightly different but equally striking way: “We cannot know whether we love God, although there may be strong reasons for thinking so, but there can be no doubt about whether we love our neighbor or not.” A community of love strives to see all as neighbors, sharing in the same mystery of God’s love.

Our baptisms are merely a beginning of a road towards divinization we are still on. It is a road that leads to life in the Spirit. It is a life that encompasses and radiates from every aspect of ourselves: ultimately even from the sheer act of our own existence. The great twentieth century Christian apologist G.K. Chesterton was
inspired to say, “There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and that we are ourselves incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously real.”

What does Jesus’ baptism mean, then? It means that those who receive it have a continual share in the dynamic and blessed life of the Trinity itself. Every moment of our individual, and communal, lives becomes palpably and beautifully real. And reality—all reality—is precisely where our incarnate God is always waiting to be drawn forth.

Homily Overview

JOHN’S MINISTRY WAS A BAPTISM BY WATER AND A CALL FOR REPENTANCE THAT LED TO THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN.
—Jesus’ baptism in the Spirit (which John predicted) brings fullness of life in the kingdom of God—a major difference.

JOHN WAS NOT ONLY A COUSIN OF JESUS BUT THE FIRST PROPHET IN ISRAEL IN 300 YEARS.
—He was therefore hailed, and obviously became an important person for all Jerusalem.
—But he professes his own lowliness or unworthiness compared to Jesus.
—His statement about sandal straps indicates (according to the Talmud) a profound abasement.

YES, JESUS WAS REALLY BAPTIZED. SINFUL, HE TAKES ON (OR EMBODIES) THE SINS OF THE PEOPLE.
—His baptism also reveals a unique relationship with his Father.
—The text and the symbols are a theophany: this is God’s son.
—The baptism signals the beginning of his public ministry. Isaiah foretells that ministry as one of service.
—There will be a strong link between a life of love and service.
—Jesus cites the authority of his baptism acknowledged by John. And like Jesus, our own baptism is a new beginning.

WATER—WASHING, BATHING—IS THE CHIEF SYMBOL HERE OF BOTH LIFE AND DEATH.
—The swimming scenes in the film Iris and the lives of the characters indicate the ambivalence of this symbol.

JESUS’ MINISTRY IS LIFE-GIVING, LIFE-RESTORING. BUT IT ALSO LEADS TO HIS DEATH.
—St. Paul asserts we are all baptized into his death. We move from death to life, from passion to resurrection.

BAPTISM (AND ALL SACRAMENTS) MUST BE ACCEPTED FREELY. FORCIBLE BAPTISMS WERE A SAD PART OF EARLIER CHURCH HISTORY.
—Baptism gives us a new perception. We can see God’s presence in each other and in the world.
—We are truly divinized by this sacrament. But as a community, we all enter into the kingly and priestly roles of Jesus Christ.
—And in this community, although we need special charisms to function, we are basically all equals.
—The poet W. H. Auden gives that truth a striking testament.

BUT (IT ALMOST GOES WITHOUT SAYING) WE HAVE DIFFICULTY LIVING OUT OUR BAPTISMAL IDENTITY.
—Dorothy Day said “If every person were handsome, noble, obviously graced by God, it might be easier for some. But that is not Christ’s way.”
—Theresa reminds us that our love for God remains mysterious. But there is no doubt whether or not we love each other.

THE GOAL OF BAPTISM (DIVINIZATION) IS OFTEN OBSCURED OR PURSUED FAINT-HEARTEDLY.
—But the reality is there. Human existence, even before baptism, is God’s work and reflects his goodness and glory.
A homily model
for January 19, 2003,
the second Sunday of the Year (B).

GOOD NEWS

Theme / Call to Worship

'Teacher, where do you live?' We search out the full meaning of that question.

Introduction to the Word

I. 1 Sm 3, 3-10. 19. Samuel answers God's call to become a prophet. Never mind that this account seems fanciful; we don't all agree that our lives are or should be directed by dreams (nor do we have a direct conversation with God). But some how God gets through, makes the divine will known to us, a call to serve him. And others help, just as Eli, the elder, helps Samuel to understand. And the boy gives his perfect answer.

II. 1 Cor 6, 13-15. 17-20. These are very great lines from Paul about the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is a truth once grasped that should keep us from any of the many ways of hurting the body or misusing its powers. His last injunction, to glorify God in our bodies, means with our whole lives—all that we do.

III. Jn 1, 35-42. John's following was much larger than the first group that gathered around Jesus. The first prophet in 300 years, there were many who thought John might be the Messiah. This dialogue today shows him pointing to Jesus. And even John's disciples leave him to follow the new teacher. Notice how brother brings brother. We enrich each other's lives; we share the good news.

Homily Model

'Rabbi, where do you live?' It strikes us as an odd question for John the Baptist's disciples to ask of Jesus. Surely there were more important matters to discuss? Then again, there is something strangely telling about the place where someone lives.

It was after a visit to the battlefield of Eylau that the French author Jean-Paul Kauffmann decided to go to St. Helena. Eylau, in what is now Russia, is still remembered as the most terrible of Napoleon Bonaparte's battles, a scarce-won victory against the Tsar, costing 18,000 of his soldiers' lives. It is the beginning of Napoleon's slide from glory to ignominy, a descent that would end in exile at a house called Longwood on the windswept rock in the South Atlantic known as St. Helena. Kauffmann writes of his visit to the island and of the moment he finally arrived at Longwood. This shoddy, rambling place was built as a cowshed and served as Napoleon's prison for the last six years of his life—an exile he occupied by dictating endlessly to his companions, rewriting the history of his life, creating the myth that has grown ever since. 'I had already seen numerous engravings and photos of Longwood,' writes Kauffmann, 'and yet none of them could account for what I see at this moment. I'm dumfounded.' When you finally stood on the doorstep there was something strangely unsettling about this place, about its smell, about its oppressive humidity. It was so overwhelming that you left, wrote one visitor, feeling that you had seen Napoleon's ghost.

Going to the place where someone lives, or where some significant event occurred, transforms our
understanding. Going to Jesus’ place marks the disciples for ever. Andrew dashes out early next morning and finds his brother. ‘We have found the Messiah,’ he says to the man we shall soon know as Simon Peter. So begins a story of discipleship that will run through John’s Gospel until the moment, with the smell of roasting fish in the air at Lake Tiberias, when Jesus will say to Peter for the last time, ‘Follow me.’

Follow? Indeed we would. But where, Lord, do you live? It turns out to be a very telling question. If only it were as simple for us to find the place as for those first disciples. But that, of course, is a childish wish. It is a longing for a Sunday School world where God calls our name as he called Samuel. The ancient Jews believed their God was to be found on Israel soil, and above all in the Temple. So we have the beautiful story of the first prophet, Samuel, who hears God’s voice in the Temple. ‘The Lord,’ we read, ‘came and stood by.’ It is a story that every little child should read and know and love—because God does indeed seem to stand by little children in a special way. No wonder Jesus told his followers to receive the Kingdom like a little child. For most of us, however, our minds and lives have become too complex and confused to perceive God standing by in such simplicity.

The story we read from John’s Gospel is, however, a pointer for the perplexed, a signpost for those who would find Jesus but struggle to know how. As ever in John’s writing, the clues are there in the writing if we take a moment to find them. The first is the chain of witnesses John pictures as Jesus first meets the men who will be his friends. It’s a deliberate touch. First there is the Baptist, staring at Jesus and calling to his followers, ‘there is the lamb of God.’ Then there is Andrew who goes to find his brother. Had we read on we should have discovered Philip, bringing Jesus to Nathanael, and Mary, Jesus’ mother, telling the servants at the wedding to do as he says. Here are the people who, as John has put it in his prologue, ‘are not the light, only a witness to speak for the light.’ They are the successors of Eli, Samuel’s old priest.

Even the child is unable to discern the presence of God without someone to point the way. The first step to discovering Christ—finding where Jesus lives—is to learn listening, to understand how much we need each other’s help. Pope John XXIII always kept with him a few pages covered in tiny handwriting. They were a copy, written when he was 14, of the rules given him by the man who was then his spiritual director. They begin with the words, ‘First and main principle: choose a spiritual director from among the most exemplary, prudent and learned.’ Finding Christ takes a search party, not a lone ranger. During the 1930s, at the time when the future pope was just a papal envoy in Bulgaria, an English woman sat down to try to write a book of spiritual comfort. Nothing came. She had, she says, ‘known more suffering and worry than the majority ... tragedy after tragedy.’ But still she seemed to have nothing to offer. When, however, she tried praying and writing together with a friend, the floodgates opened. What emerged became a minor classic of the mid-twentieth century, a little book of comforting words for each day of the year, published anonymously as God Calling. It sold over half a million copies around the world. Look up today, 19 January, in God Calling and you read ‘none ever sought me in vain. I wait with a hungry longing to be called upon.’ We know those words are true, but we struggle to find a way. The first clue in today’s Gospel is that we are not alone. Together we can find it.

The second clue is that it will take action. John is very precise in his description of these scenes. While the Baptist stands and stares, Jesus is on the move, on his way somewhere, turning aside to talk, going to his house. ‘Come and see,’ he says to the men with John the Baptist. They are words that will echo again and again through this Gospel. Just as Mary tells the servants at the wedding, ‘do whatever he tells you.’

We find it easy to forget that our faith is something that we do. There is an advertisement on British television in which we see a young man, perhaps 20, lying on a sofa watching television. He’s not unattractive and it’s a chic apartment. But it is oddly quiet. Then without warning the camera lurches out of the scene, apparently through a window and into the street where four young people are talking and laughing as they career through town in a small car. We see them for a few exhilarating moments—with a wild sound track in the air—before returning to the boy in front of the box. The ad, of course, is selling the car. ‘Get out more’ is the slogan. Yes, go somewhere. Or in the current phrase, be pro-active.
Following Christ undoubtedly means action. Constantly in his letters Paul reminds his hearers that new life means new ways of living. Salvation is not about memory or hope alone, but also about action. We read one extract today from his letter to the Corinthians. Mind and soul, he reminds his readers, do not ascend to higher places leaving the body behind. ‘Our bodies are us, and we are members making up the body of Christ.’ Following means doing, not just talking. The men around John the Baptist could hear all the stirring words they needed—‘look, there is the lamb of God.’ But when Jesus arrives they are set in motion.

Jesus is, after all, constantly on the move. One of the reasons the young men’s question, ‘where do you live?’ strikes us at first as odd is that we know Jesus will not have a settled place to stay. In a more profound way we are called to action because the truth rarely seems to stand still for long. One day in Napoleon’s house on St. Helena, Kauffmann comes across a few fragments of the building’s original floor. Almost everything else has been destroyed by termites and replaced. He finds himself oddly moved. Holding something the old French Emperor himself would have known stirs ‘the regret for lost innocence in every human heart, that touch of eternity which is nothing but the memory of childhood.’ Only the young believe that things stay the same for long. It is a childish idea that God should be in his Temple, where we could report for duty and hear him speak. So the picture of Jesus in today’s gospel is of a man in motion whose call is for his disciples to follow.

‘Rabbi, where do you live?’ is a simple question that unexpectedly takes the disciples’ lives and whirls them into action that never seems to end. No wonder we need each other’s help if we are to keep up. This is a call to action. But Jesus wants more. ‘Come,’ he says, ‘and see.’ It is a word that John uses often and with rich meaning. Seeing, in this Gospel, is very close to believing. Think of the disciples running to the empty tomb. Making the connection is what John is always pushing us towards: the kind of connection you begin to make when you get to the right place at the right time and keep your eyes open.

Some years ago the BBC made a series for British television about the Spanish Armada. It has since been shown all over the world. Historians had never been able to work out how, in 1588, a little British navy successfully defeated a huge, well-organized Spanish fleet. The surviving documents tell us very little. But it happened that one of the filmmakers had grown up on that southern British coast where the Armada battles took place. So, in the films, we go to meet not just historians but fishermen, ropemakers, coastguards and other local people whose daily lives depend on knowing the water, its turns and tides. As we bob about the English Channel in a succession of their little boats something remarkable begins to happen. The tactics of the English, 400 years before, start to become completely obvious. Cleverly exploiting the fickle Channel tides the English prevented the Spanish from entering any of the harbors big enough for their ships. So simple and so effective—and so obvious once you are there, with a fisherman as your guide, the tide running fast around you, the dangerous ledges breaking foam and your sailing ship struggling to make way. With a little help from those who know, we go, we see and we understand.

It’s a metaphor for the beginning of discipleship in John’s Gospel. Listen, follow and see. And it’s more than a metaphor. This is the way our life seems to be. Making connections, understanding the truth, is about being attentive, about being in the right place and asking the right questions. Then the truth has a habit of finding us. It found Simon, going with his brother Andrew to meet Jesus. Christ looks intently into his eyes and spots something the rest of us would never have seen. ‘You are Cephas, Peter, the rock.’ Being there, then, the truth has found him out.

‘Rabbi, where do you live?’ It is a question that changes everything. In fact, the word for ‘live’ that John uses here means more than an address. It means something more like the old-fashioned word ‘abide.’ Where is it you belong, come from, return to? It’s a word the evangelist will use over and over. From the moment the Baptist spoke of the spirit coming and ‘resting’ with Jesus to those emotional hours during the last meal when Jesus tells his friends, ‘make your home in me as I make mine in you.’ The word in the Greek is the same. God abiding in us and we in him: this is John’s vision of our final joy.

So where does Christ abide? Where will our listening and following and seeing take us? Is he within us? Is he with the poor? Is he with our neighbor? There’s a clue on that windswept rock in the South Atlantic where the
English sent their defeated enemy in 1815. They thought they had imprisoned Napoleon in a grim, chill exile from which there was no escape. But the Emperor three times got away. Once to a tranquil grave in a wooded valley; once when, years later, his remarkably preserved body was recovered and taken to be laid in France’s finest tomb. And once through the stories told by his companions in exile, turning a very human soldier into a hero.

We are greater than the houses we inhabit. Children know better than to attach themselves to places or possessions. Wherever mum or dad is, that’s where home is. So too the living Christ cannot be contained in any one time or place or set of ideas. To find him is the lifelong quest in which, together, we are engaged. The question is a very good one: ‘teacher, where are you? Where do you live?’ His reply is the greatest of all challenges and the beginning of discipleship. ‘Come and see.’

**Homily Overview**

WHERE DO YOU LIVE? THE ANSWER OFTEN TELLS US MUCH.
—A French author visits Napoleon’s place of exile, and finds many things.
—Jesus’ answer was, “Come and see.” And whatever happened, they were moved to action.
—They even recruit Peter, the one Jesus calls the rock, to whom he says, “Follow me.”

THOSE WORDS WERE A CALL, A VOCATION. THE STORY OF SAMUEL’S CALL WOULD APPEAL TO CHILDREN.
—They can easily think they talk to God, that God is right there!
—We all need to learn how to perceive God’s presence.

JOHN GIVES CLUES. FIRST, THERE IS A CHAIN OF WITNESSES.
—The Baptist points to Jesus. The disciples tell their kinfolk and friends.
—They point the way. We need to learn to listen to others and learn from them.
—At some point we discover that God, the truth, is looking for us.

A CALL IS A CALL TO ACTION. REMEMBER MARY AT CANA: “DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU.”
—We may love (and need) our solitude. But we also need to be “pro-active,” to be involved in the world of people and ideas.
—Paul makes the same point with his talk about our bodies belonging to God.

WHERE DO YOU LIVE? REMEMBER JESUS’ ANSWER, “COME AND SEE.”
—Seeing in John’s gospel is very close to believing.
—And so we have witnesses to whom we should listen. And take action that helps us to see.
—(A BBC crew discovers that process in making a film on the Spanish Armada.)
—Listen. Follow. See. In other words, make connections.
—At some point the truth has a way of finding us.

WHERE DO YOU LIVE? THE WORD “LIVE” HAS A DEEPER MEANING: “WHERE DO YOU ABIDE?”
—For Jesus, in the heart of God. In the bosom of the Father. And one day, each of us.

ON EARTH WHERE DOES CHRIST ABIDE? WITHIN US? IN THE NEIGHBOR? ESPECIALLY WITH THE POOR?
—Each of us is greater than the homes we inhabit. We go beyond our boundaries.

THAT QUESTION KEEPS RECURRING: WHERE DO YOU LIVE?
—The challenge is to “come and see.” And then follow. And act.
Theme / Call to Worship

The call of God comes to all of us, servants willing or reluctant, to proclaim the good news of God’s salvation to all people. Some answer with enthusiasm, but do little. Some are reluctant, but answer the call, and are amazed at the results. A few, like Jonah, try to do anything else but what the Lord calls them to do. Still others, like those fishermen beside the sea, leave all else to answer the call to serve. Which are we?

Introduction to the Word

I. Jonah 3: 1-5, 10. The wonderful story of Jonah is a response to the narrow nationalism of Judaism following the exile in Babylon. In this imaginative and sometimes humorous story, the Lord speaks to Jonah, calling upon him to preach the word of repentance and salvation to the Ninevites, symbolic of the non-Jewish world.

II. 1 Corinthians 7: 29 - 31. Paul expected that the parousia (a Second Coming of Christ) would occur in his own lifetime. It is clear that he was mistaken in his expectation, and today we have a different idea of how the Christ comes to us. Still Paul speaks tells us that the world as we know it “is passing away, changing, and even in danger of destruction.

III. Mark 1: 14 - 20. The gospel today is based upon two calls. The first is the one proclaimed by Jesus when he appeared in Galilee: “The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the good news.” It is proclaimed to all of us, and adjures us to continually reform and renew our lives to love and serve God. The second call is the one that comes to us in the midst of our daily lives, reminding us to follow the Christ.

Homily Model

The small portion of the book of Jonah that we read today gives us precious little insight into Jonah, or even into the repentance of the Ninevites. It is a wonderful and creative story, and a perfect scenario for a stage production. If you don’t know the whole story, sit down and read it. Its one of the classic short stories of all time, even though it takes up only a couple of pages in your Bible. Jonah is rich in meaning, and also in humor for those prepared to find it. It is a little book with a big message.

The story is especially good because in Jonah we see some of our own tendencies. But let us hope we are not too much like him. Jonah was rather headstrong. He had his own ideas about things, and about other people. And furthermore Jonah hated the Ninevites! The story is set in a time of narrow nationalism, and hatred and arrogance are often the result. There’s a lot of that going around today, too. So the writer made his leading character, Jonah, a man typical of the Jews of the post-exilic era, disdainful of non-Jews whom they were quick to call godless heathens.

Being a religious man, Jonah listened for the word of God. But when the Lord God called upon him to go preach to those hated Ninevites, he was ready to do anything else but that. So Jonah tried to run from the Lord’s call, and boarded a boat headed to Tarshish, “away from the presence of the Lord.”
Perhaps we know how that works. And we can find all kinds of other things to do instead of that thing we’re trying to avoid. (In all honesty you should know that there are preachers, unnamed of course, who sometimes find the golf course or a good book more tempting than preparing a sermon.) Or like Jonah we might say, “Sorry, Lord, but you see I have something else planned that takes me in another direction. Surely you could find somebody else. But feel free to call on me another time, perhaps for something else.”

So Jonah sailed off in the opposite direction from Nineveh. The ship was caught in a great storm, and was being tossed around. But Jonah was down in his stateroom fast asleep. The sailors on deck were afraid, and praying for their lives. One of them went down and rather forcefully told Jonah to get busy praying to his god that they would be saved.

How interesting, that the very people Jonah would have called heathens proved to be more religious than he was. They were praying. We can become so isolated in our own religious ghetto, and convince ourselves that ours is the only way to God, and that God hears none but us. Listen to Jonah so arrogantly proclaiming to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” And when, to his credit, Jonah admitted that he (or his disobedience) was the problem, and that they should throw him overboard, their morality caused them to strenuously resist casting him into the sea. Rather, they prayed and worked and struggled to bring the ship to shore. But alas they could not, and as a very last resort they did as he bid them, and threw him into the water, praying all the while that they not be held guilty of an innocent life. And the sea was calmed.

The Lord was prepared for this. One translation of the scriptures says that God “appointed” a great fish to swallow him up. And there, in the belly of that great fish Jonah had time to reconsider, and pray. A second chance, as it were, came when the fish “spat him out on dry land,” and Jonah, the reluctant prophet at last headed for Nineveh.

Second chances do come to us from time to time. Second chances at vocation, or education, or marriage, or even second chances just to live. When they do we ought to make better use of them than with our first chance. Make better decisions. Avoid earlier foolish mistakes. And give thanks and pray to do the right thing as the Spirit leads us. A second chance is a special gift—even a gift of God — not to be wasted or received lightly.

Jonah went to Nineveh and preached to the Ninevites to repent of their evil ways and turn to the Lord. To his surprise and dismay, they did. Jonah was really upset. The Ninevites had changed, you see, but Jonah had not. He did what the Lord had commanded, but he still remained his prejudiced, vindictive, old self. And while the Ninevites put upon themselves the signs of repentance, and prayed to the Lord, Jonah still hoped they would return to their sinful ways and be destroyed. He wanted to have the best seat to see when that happened, so he took himself off to a hill and sat under the shade of a vine to wait. But (now how’s this for humor!) the Lord “appointed” a worm to attack the vine and destroy it, and Jonah sat there complaining in the heat of the sun.

Yes, the Lord uses difficult and imperfect and reluctant servants. Why did the Lord call Jonah? Couldn’t he have found someone better? But we might also ask, why us? Perhaps the answer is that the Lord goes with the best available people, asking, urging, and persuading. Even with all his prejudices, his arrogance, his headstrong nature, he was effective. In fact it was much easier to change the Ninevites through Jonah, than it was to change Jonah. Perhaps that’s a clue—we may be more the problem than the one we perceive in other people.

The Jews were so sure they were God’s chosen people that they almost thought they had proprietary claim on the Lord, and that salvation was for them alone. This wonderful short story proclaims clearly that the salvation of God is not just for the Jews, but for all. Salvation was indeed for the Jews, but they were thus called to preach the salvation of the Lord to all peoples.

The words of the psalmist fit here: he prays to be shown the way to become a messenger of God’s truth. “Your ways, O Lord, make known to me; teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior.” (Ps. 25:1,2.)

Mark’s gospel tells us a more pointed story of call and response. It begins with Jesus’ appearance in Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, “This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the good news.”
Then quickly it tells of Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee and seeing two fishermen, Peter and his younger brother Andrew, casting their nets. He invited them in words playing upon their occupation, “Come with me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Then a bit further on they saw two more brothers, James and John, with their father and hired men, working on their nets. He called them to come and go with him, and they left their father, Zebedee, and went off with him. Some translations say they “abandoned” their father, but that seems too harsh and final a word. Rather, they sought Jesus’ discipleship as their life’s vocation.

Perhaps another true life story will help us understand this.

In previous days many fathers just naturally expected their sons, especially elder sons, to follow in their footsteps in terms of vocation. It was certainly true in Jesus’ time. Jesus undoubtedly grew up learning the carpenter’s trade. Peter and Andrew were probably sons of a fisherman, as we know James and John were the sons of fisherman Zebedee.

A young man named Vernon grew up in what he called a “hardcrapple coal town” in Pennsylvania. It was poor. Vern’s father owned a garage and fixed people’s cars, even did paint jobs. His father always talked of Vern growing up and taking over the business. That was the farthest his father could see for his son. But Vern had been to the city and the art museum and loved art. He wanted to study art. He saw art as the fulfillment of his greatest dream for himself. “Why would you want to do that? Here’s a job and a good business just waiting for you.” His father thought studying art was useless, an idle dream. Useful art, to him, was doing a bit of fancy pin-striping on a car’s new paint job.

But Vern persisted, and with his own hard work, and the somewhat grudging help of his father, went to the university to study art. A war intervened, but he returned to his art study, married his college sweetheart, and winning scholarships to foreign study, became a fine artist, and a knowledgeable art historian. Thus he landed teaching positions, first in a Quaker school, and later in a university where he became head of the school of art.

His father might have felt disappointed for a while, even “abandoned,” in a sense. Perhaps may who have had a family business feel the same when the progeny show no interest and take off on their own. The son who chose art was enriched in other ways. In one teaching position he was profoundly influenced by the Quakers, and the fact they tried to let their faith permeate their whole lives, everything they said or did. Up to that time he had not been especially religious. Now he was captured by their service to God, and their influence guided his life.

Jesus came to Galilee to tell people of a greater fulfillment than they had ever dreamed of. In fact, it was at hand. It was now. All they needed to do was to reform their lives and believe in and act upon it. But many who heard this message ignored it. You can almost hear them whispering to each other, or saying aloud that this was the talk of an idle dreamer.

Still he caught the imagination of a few. Chances are that Peter and Andrew, and James and John had already heard what he had said in the town. They thought and talked about it. They began to have dreams larger than what they already were. And so when Jesus came to them directly and called them, it was a challenge to enlarge and fulfill their lives. It was a chance to grow. Perhaps even in the little they knew of Jesus then, they heard the unmistakable call of God. So they left their accustomed work. Yes, there was a time when they returned to it, but only briefly. And they followed Jesus.

Was Zebedee one who thought his sons, James and John, were pursuing an impractical dream, and the dreamer? Well, let them go and find out. They’ll come back soon enough. But they never did. When one allows the spirit to grow, and the mind to think, one can never return to the smaller existence of that earlier time. We do not denigrate others or our own earlier life by seeking to grow and change. It is only through growth and change that we can find fulfillment and realize the God-given potential of our lives.

Half a century ago a young priest was given a mission assignment in the desert of Arizona. It was a lonely assignment. He didn’t want to go there, but he was sent, and he was obedient. In some of the communities he served there was no building in which to meet. He would arrive and find a few people gathered. He would hear a few confessions, standing apart from the others there, and then hear the news of people who were not present that day. Then he would set up his portable altar and celebrate mass. Afterward he would move on to
the next town, perhaps forty miles away, where others waited. It was a lonely assignment. He confessed to having been discouraged many times. It wasn’t what he had anticipated as a seminarian. But he remembered that Jesus did not always speak to crowds, but to people who saw him as the one who made God real and personal for them. Now in retirement, those early and often difficult days of his early priesthood are recalled with a new appreciation, and often with humor. For it was there that his response to God’s call gained strength, and his love for people was deepened.

The call of God comes to us at times unexpected. Sometimes it comes in the gentle urging and prodding of conscience, or in the inspiration of an idea. We are surprised when the Spirit moves us to do something we’ve never done before, or to reach out to people quite different from ourselves. Sometimes we find ourselves reluctant, and make our excuses or, like Jonah, seek to run from the presence of the Lord. We confess to being imperfect servants. But we have heard the call of Jesus to believe in the good news, and to reform our lives.

To reform and perfect our love of God is not a once-for-all-time thing but a day by day growth and change in which we are invited to engage. We may be surprised that even when we are at our daily work, like those disciples by the sea of Galilee, the call of Jesus reminds, even compels us to follow him. That does not necessarily mean to leave the kind of work we are doing, though for some it may, and it certainly does not mean to neglect our families, but he calls us to follow him as a lifetime commitment and adventure. Come and be a disciple, he invites us. Come, grow, and be fulfilled. Come, show the love of God in your own life. Come and proclaim good news—the good news that is for all people. You can, each of us do it in our own way. How will you answer that call?

Homily Overview

JONAH IS A LITTLE BOOK WITH A BIG MESSAGE.
—We may even see something of ourselves in Jonah.
—The writer’s message to the narrowly nationalistic Jews of that time is that God’s salvation is for all people.

JONAH WAS THE EPITOME OF A RELUCTANT SERVANT.
—He tried to run away from the presence of the Lord.
—The sailors Jonah would have called heathens proved to be more religious than he was.
—The Lord gave Jonah time to think, and a second chance.
—The Ninevites heard the word of the Lord proclaimed by Jonah, and repented.
—The Ninevites changed their ways, but Jonah remained his unrepentant self.

THE LORD USES DIFFICULT, IMPERFECT, AND RELUCTANT SERVANTS.
—Why does the Lord call upon us?
—Do we, like Jonah, think we have proprietary claim on salvation?

THE CALL OF JESUS CAME TO FISHERMEN BY THE SEA OF GALILEE.
—They had heard him proclaim the time of fulfillment.
—A young man sought to find his fulfillment in art rather than in following in his father’s trade.
—We must learn to have dreams larger than what we already are.

THE CALL OF GOD COMES TO US AT TIMES UNEXPECTED, AND TO DO THINGS WE’VE NEVER DONE BEFORE.
—To reform our lives and perfect our love of God is a continual process.
—We may be surprised at what we can accomplish in his name.
—He invites us to come and be a disciple. How will we answer the call?
the church where the cave is has a door below that all must stoop to enter. It is supremely fitting that everyone should approach the infant Jesus upon his knees."

**January 5, 2003. Epiphany.** These three strangers from the east are just that, strangers. They are aliens, foreigners, outsiders. And yet they find a place at the crib of Bethlehem, the rich among the poor, the scholars among the shepherds. When popular piety took over this marvelous story in Matthew’s gospel the artist often pictured the Magi as people of different color. One is usually a black person.

We should have learned long ago a lesson from creation. It is this—the variety of the human race, which is black, brown, gold and various shades of white, is like the variety in a flower garden or the colors of the rainbow. We were meant to enjoy all this. Instead we tragically missed the point, and learned to mistrust or dislike people unlike us. We became racially prejudiced; we often grow up imbibing this attitude from our family or culture. When people deny they are prejudiced they may be speaking the truth; we have come a long way. But we often forget our past, which is still so much of an influence on our present. Racism was a major part of American history. It began with the rejection (or displacement or killing) of the native population, then moved to profit from the enslavement of the Negro, and then to discrimination against not only the black but the immigrant, the various races that come to our shores.

Commentator Bill Moyers focused on this problem in his television series “Walk Through America.” He chose just a few examples. This was one of them. He said that World War I based a unique problem for the United States—what to do with black soldiers? They volunteered and even formed a division but the Rainbow Division (even with a name like that) would not accept them. The solution found seems incredible to us today: the U.S. government turned to France and asked them to accept these troops as a combat unit. So they went overseas as our soldiers and fought with our allies because of the prejudice of their fellow Americans. They were decorated, honored in battle and returned to a tumultuous welcome in New York, a great march uptown to Harlem. The year of their return there were 25 race riots in the U.S. In the next few years the Ku Klux Klan enrolled three to six million members.

As a footnote to the above, in 1987 a Catholic was elected the head of the Ku Klux Klan in Connecticut. Church officials were at pains to point out that this was a contradiction in terms. In other words, “real catholics” (or Christians) don’t do that. We call to mind all this sad history only to understand the continuing problem of racism today.
And hearing the story from the gospel of the foreigners who came seeking the Christ might help us all to understand that Jews and Gentiles, Israeli and Arabs, the black, brown, yellow, red and white peoples of the earth are all the children of God.

January 12, 2003. Baptism of the Lord (B). You may think what follows is too heavy to incorporate in a Sunday sermon. It is presented for two reasons: first, the need to move people to a deeper understanding of scripture is very great. The fundamentalist and literal approach is everywhere. I quoted a scholar a few years ago who thinks the majority in our parishes think this way. This same majority doesn’t go to scripture class and, unlike many Baptist churches, we don’t precede our worship with a hour of Bible study. The second reason: it is possible to teach simply and with inspiration, to present “matter with spirit,” or life— even if you use a term like subjectivity! Some congregants are equally or more educated than you: they have no problem. In any case, this can be explained in terms that reach any congregation. For the past few weeks we have been reading gospels, which are partly or wholly stories (the Nativity, the Epiphany, and now two references to his baptism). At Pentecost each year we read a highly “loaded” or symbolic story. We know how to interpret all this for ourselves. What about the parish secretary, the retired people who count the money, the custodial staff, the people home from college, the computer or factory worker? They may or may not be interested (that’s another problem). But you should give those who are the opportunity to advance in their understanding of the word.

What we just heard in the gospel is both fact and fiction. The fact is that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. The fiction is the second part. About the sky opening, the dove appearing and the voice speaking. To call this fiction immediately troubles many people. They think, “You mean it’s all made up; it’s not true!” The answer is that the story, like so many biblical stories, conveys truth at a deeper level. The early communities of faith came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God and the one who possessed God’s spirit in an extraordinary way. When they wanted to express that conviction they drew upon symbols in their scriptures. It is probably better to describe this second part of the gospel not as fiction but “an account that uses traditional biblical symbols to express their understanding of who Jesus was.”

Another way to put it is to say that this is a story of fact, which is then embellished or interpreted. This goes on all the time. The two Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke proceed from the fact that Jesus was born and then fill out the story with angels, prophets, poor people, strange visitors, exotic gifts, a flight into Egypt and an exodus back home. A biblical episode may be both factual and figurative.

We have to get used to this approach because much of the Bible proceeds this way. There are multiple stories all to illustrate some perception or deep level of truth.

“In one of his many books Elie Weisel, the great Jewish author and winner of the Nobel peace prize, talks about stories and whether or not they are true. His remarks can help us very much if we paraphrase and apply them to our own situation. He thinks back to his grandfather in a small Romanian village; he was a great storyteller. And he says, “My very first Hasidic tales I heard from him...He spoke of entering a universe where facts become subservient to imagination’ and beauty. (Think of our nativity stories, or this one today of Jesus’ baptism). The author continues: “What difference did it make that events and chronological dates no longer matched? I surely did not care. What mattered to me was not that two and two made four but that God is one. Better still that man and God are one”

He concludes quoting his grandfather again: “There will, of course, always be someone to tell you that a certain tale cannot; could not, be objectively true. That is of no importance. The call here is to subjectivity, to passionate involvement. And the tales told...appeal to the imagination more than reason: They prove that man is more than he appears to be and that he is capable of giving more than he appears to possess.”

“Subjectivity” is a typical word people shy away from but it simply means that what is said gets inside us transforms and energizes us. A story of compassion, such as Jesus tells about the Good Samaritan, may move us to empathy and action. The stories of his baptism may move us to think of our own and what it means to be beloved of God to receive the gift of the spirit. Finally, all good stories, including Jesus’ parables try to convince us that “man is more than he appears to be and that he is capable of giving more than he appears to possess.”

January 19, 2003. 2nd Sunday (B). As many know there is a crisis in the church over the supply of priests. The story of Samuel today seems to indicate no problem with at least that vocation. “Here I am Lord, you called me.” As for the original apostolic band we hear of them tumbling over each other in their haste to follow Jesus. We know these accounts are idealized, but nothing remotely like that is happening today. What does it all mean?

First, the shortage. A priest from Maine describes it thus in a letter to his diocesan paper: “How can anyone miss the irony in the fact that as the Catholic population continues to grow each year the number of ordained ministers continues to shrink? The shortage is a disservice to the people. Praying for vocations isn’t enough. I think the Holy Spirit is counting on us to use our heads. To limit or deprive
the faithful of access to the sacraments is unjust. To add twice or three times the responsibility to middle-aged and aging men is only to hasten their demise."

If you drive through many cities you will see buildings that once were churches, either Catholic or Protestant, now no longer houses of worship. The priest says he is concerned that they will become no more than "nostalgic ruins on the architectural landscape." (One cannot help thinking of Shakespeare’s line, “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet bird sang.”) In fact, many of the church buildings that survive are being sold, often to become restaurants and office buildings. In upstate New York a religious order, forced to sell its property, discovered too late that the purchaser was the well-heeled cult known as the Unification church, or the “Moonies.” In Kansas a venerable house of theology for generations of Jesuits became through the same kind of blind sale, the headquarters of a schismatic sect, the followers of Archbishop Lefebvre. These are certainly signs that we are going backwards not forwards. And the Maine priest is right to ask, “Does anyone consider the economic losses we will face, the squandering of the patrimony established and bequeathed to us by generations of the faithful? The Church will be forced to preside over the secularization of many of its institutions and buildings if current practices holds. How many churches and rectories are on the market already? Does God want these marvelous places of worship to become bowling centers and local eateries? The Church will survive—but a divinely instituted organization needs effective human management.

All this is dismal. Are there any possible solutions besides prayer? The correspondent says, “The Holy Spirit is counting on us to use our heads.” For him that means looking again at the requirements that all priests in the Latin rite be celibate and male. That’s been the status quo for a long time: the priest gives up marriage and must be a man. But the pastor notes, “The precedent for a married clergy already exists in our own early history, and across denominational lines.” However, it would be less than frank not to note that neither of these proposals—a married priesthood or a female clergy—is viewed with favor in Rome. But does that mean that the subjects should not be discussed?

A further suggestion is being advocated by thoughtful observers. It is the possibility of ordaining priests not for life but for a period of time, such as ten years. Fr. Andrew Greeley advocates this, and while many find Fr. Greeley infuriating, he has emerged as a prophetic voice in the church, one that should be listened to. Another suggestion is that priests become part-time ministers, engaged in secular work and obviously undergoing a shorter time of preparation. The apostle Paul serves as a model: he had a secular occupation; he was a tent maker, and mentioned one time, even bragging about it, that he was not a financial burden to the community. (He also said, however, that the laborer is worthy of his hire!) The Church endorsed the idea of worker priests advocated by Cardinal Suenens of Belgium right after World War II: they were priests who worked in factories and mines or anywhere to give witness and perhaps win back the working classes. It seemed like a great idea. But then conservative factions in the church feared that the priests were becoming Marxists or Communists. The experiment continues with diminished numbers today. And the Episcopal church in the United States has moved to ordain part-time or worker-priests for its smaller missions in places like New Mexico and Alaska. It is a solution, which they feel is adapted to the real-life situation.

When we speak of priests with other occupations we should not be surprised—look at any Catholic university, especially Jesuit schools. The priests there may also be economists, physicists, biologists, English teachers, and certainly they are administrators. Their primary job is not to lead eucharistic worship or preach and hear confessions. Because they are learned men they can usually do these priestly functions well when called upon. But they have what is called a hyphenated priesthood. It’s not a new idea.

It is dangerous to ordain clergy just to fill a gap by giving them a hasty or inadequate training. There is more to priesthood than just saying the words of consecration and absolution. That kind of minimal approach became a corrupt practice in the late medieval period, when some candidates were given just enough Latin to mutter the Mass, and then tied to a permanent stipend, to offer endless Masses for the beneficiary. Like a prayer wheel. It was one of the abuses swept away in the Protestant Reformation and on the Catholic side, by the reforms of the Council of Trent, which set up the prescribed seminary training we have, more or less, today. But that system has its dangers, too; it can produce “the sanctuary priest,” one removed from the realities of the world and one who sees himself as belonging to a privileged caste.

Why are there so few responding to this need—the call to priesthood, or the life of the religious brother or sister, the convent or the monastery? There are many answers given. Some say we have lost the capacity to make long-term commitments—look at the reluctance of many people to get married or to have children. Others point out that the more traditional religious groups are, in fact, gaining candidates, and the shortage we discuss is mainly in the western world. They say it is typical of the European or American approach to talk of a crisis; we belong to a world church and the future leadership—and personnel—may well be
predominantly African and Asian. Others say we do not demand or present a heroic vocation; ads for seminars feature their swimming pools. But religious societies like Maryknoll and the Jesuits and many others certainly present the image of heroic commitment; their blood has been poured out in Latin America and elsewhere. Still the disciples are few.

January 26, 2003. 3rd Sunday (B). Jesus follows up his baptism with announcing his work: it is to declare that the reign of God is at hand, and to recruit his first followers to bring it about. We have all been enlisted in that work—it is our calling too—through our baptism. But we have not made enough of those beautiful lines in Isaiah: “A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench.” It is an image of infinite solicitude and compassion by the servant of God. Jesus, Us.

What is the reed in danger of breaking, the wick in danger of going out? It could be a human person just beginning life, or one moving slowly to the moment of death. Those who seek to protect the unborn, and those who refuse to give up on the handicapped, are lending their strength to others who are weak, unable to help themselves. Those who care gently for the dying, who ease their pain and lessen their fear, are the compassionate servants we are talking about.

Another example of the bruised reed are the mentally ill. A beautiful development in our time has been the movement called L’Arche, communities where the mentally ill live with their co-workers. L’Arche was begun by Jean Vanier, a man with a privileged background, son of a former governor general of Canada. A writer in America magazine says of him, “Endowed with position and connections, Vanier did not find contentment in wealth and power. It was when he bought a little farmhouse and invited two handicapped men to find refuge with him that he began to experience the joy, contentment and empowerment that is to be found in a truly Christian community.” Many now join him in his work; L’Arche communities exist around the world. It is like a new form of a religious order. Vanier says he was moved by “the amazing reality that Jesus our God is hidden in those whose lives are not valued, and in our own poverty.” One of his principles in working with the mentally ill could be applied in any neighborhood: he says to “be attentive and caring toward those who live close to us, who are weak and lost, and see in them their gifts, appreciate them.” There is a story of a group of L’Arche patients who were able to go to Israel on a pilgrimage. As they left the plane the Israeli soldiers, each with his Uzi machine gun, were stationed all over the airport, as usual in these days of violence. One of the pilgrims simply went up to the nearest soldier to shake his hand and tell him how happy he was to be in his country.

L’Arche means “the ark.” The symbol is taken from the biblical story of Noah because the ark rose above the waters and is a sign of hope, of life that continues. A bruised reed that is not broken, a smoldering wick that is not extinguished. The prophecy in Isaiah is speaking of the Christ when it says that God upholds his servant, his chosen one upon whom he has put his spirit. We are all “in Christ” and those words could be spoken of us.

January 26, 2003. 3rd Sunday (B). Long years ago we obtained permission to reprint the following poem by Anthony Smith which appeared in America magazine (4-19-86). It’s titled “Zebedee” and you recognize the name from the gospel today. The poem is pure gold. Used in a homily (or anytime) it reminds us of so many things: God’s ways are not our ways, our children don’t always follow the paths we lay out for them, “all things work together for good for those who love God,” and so on. Listeners relate immediately to these verses.

Alone among the broken nets
he watched them go. His flesh,
now grown, but still his hope, not just
for those declining years of splicing rope
and spinning yarns among his peers, but for
that fragile continuity
the simple rightly see avenging death.
What father doesn’t long to have
his sons about him at the end?

Yet secretly, he’d always known
they weren’t cut out for this. The younger,
an incorrigible scribbler,
who spent tomorrow’s catch on books;
the other, driven by God knew
what wonderlust. That was
the mother’s influence: she always said,
“They need a bigger pond than Galilee.”
Well, now she had her wish.

But quit like that? Throw twenty years’
apprenticeship and steady work away,
after five minutes’ chat with some
smooth-talking landsman, offering dreams for
pay?
The old man studied his hemp-hardened hands,
not daring to admit he might have gone,
had he been called. Instead he thought
about a wasted life of toil,
of hauling fish to buy this boat
and, through his boys, leave something to
posterity. Now who would ever hear
the name of Zebedee?
Scriptural Commentary
for January, 2003 (B).

The following passages are from The Word in Time, by Arthur Dewey.

*Epiphany. Matthew 2:1-12.* The Gospel passage for today, throughout Christian history, has spoken to the popular imagination. From the evidence of second-century catacombs to twentieth-century opera, the mysterious “Wise Men” from the East have always appealed to the interest and piety of Christians. This story and its subsequent portrayals demonstrate that the task of interpreting the Christ event is a never-ending challenge. This reinterpretation has not been left to specialists; it has been performed by artists and by peasants, by scientists and by children in Christmas pageants.

The exotic elements of the Magi story—strangers from distant lands, a star marking the birth of a new king—are similar to those found in other tales circulating before and during the first century regarding the birth of a heroic figure. Not only do the astrologers come from the mysterious East, they also appeal to the first century’s interest in what is now condescendingly called the occult.

In the first century, astrology had captured the imagination of shopkeeper and philosopher alike. Underlying their interest was the implicit hope that somehow the universe made sense and that one could interpret events and discover their meaning. It should also be noted that this story in no way criticizes such an approach. Even the Jews of the first century could link Abraham with the practice of astrology.

The first scene, verses 1-8, brings these exotic figures to Jerusalem. The astrologers, however, need further clarification from the Hebrew writings in order to continue their quest. The use of Hebrew writings was a common element of Jewish religious propaganda. The writings were seen as elucidating the truth that the gentiles only implicitly saw.

Matthew has the Magi confront Herod, thereby setting the stage for the slaughter of the Innocents and the subsequent Christian claim that the leaders of the Jews had rejected the Messiah. The second scene, verses 9-12, comes from what may be a pre-Matthean source. Note that Joseph is not present, although he figures greatly in the infancy narrative (1:18-25). The out-and-out Christian propaganda of this scene indicates that even the gentiles have found their hope in Jesus.

From the perspective of the Matthean community, this passage confirms once again what has been spoken of the Messiah who was to come. By placing Jesus’ birthplace in Bethlehem, the community attempts to answer the probable charge that the Messiah was not expected to come from Nazareth.

The presence of the Magi points to the universalistic claim by the Jewish Christian community of Matthew that Jesus, the incarnation of the Torah, fulfills the quest of all peoples. The rejection by the Jewish leaders was seen as an intimation of what was to happen, not only at the death of Jesus, but also during the time when the Gospel of Matthew was being composed.

The story’s momentum does not end in the first century. It has already been pointed out that this passage has furnished the basis for innumerable interpretations. And it is the vein of popular interpretation that should be mined by both scholar and preacher. The question before us today is whether our relationship to Jesus is still a quest springing from the deepest longings of the heart. Our task is to identify these longings and dreams, and to place them before the One who still comes.

*The Baptism of the Lord. Mark 1:7-11.* In celebrating the baptism of Jesus, the Church, in effect, is meditating on the basis for Christian self-identity. This passage deals not only with the legend of Jesus’ baptism but also with the Christian community’s understanding of what it means to be identified with Christ.

In order to consider this notion of Christian identity, we must first inspect how the writer of this gospel has joined two separate sources in order to reach such an understanding. The passage divides itself into two parts. The first part, verses 7 and 8, probably comes from pre-Markan material.
concerning the Baptizer (see 1:2ff.). The second part, verses 9-11, appears to be a legendary story of the baptism of Jesus. “During that time,” the opening phrase of verse 9, points to the insertion of the legend within the context of the Baptist’s activity. (This point is more evident in the Greek text.)

If we consider verses 7 and 8 by themselves, however, the identity of the One who is to come, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, is not at all that clear. In previous commentaries, it has been suggested as quite probable that John the Baptist considered himself to be announcing the very advent of God. Indeed, after John’s death, his disciples may have envisioned him as the Messiah who was to come. Within the Christian revision, however, both the ambiguity of the One who is to come and the role of John have been dramatically clarified. Indeed, by placing the legendary story of Jesus’ baptism directly after the words of John, Mark has directly linked the witness of John with the figure of Jesus. Instead of viewing this passage as something self-evident, by noting the creative composition of the writer, we can gain an insight into how the early Jesus believers came to interpret the meaning of Jesus.

The second part of the passage, verses 9-11, bears many characteristics of revelatory scenes found elsewhere in the New Testament and in the literature of the period. The “rendering of the heavens” indicates that a direct, heavenly communication is taking place. The Spirit promised in verse 8—the word may have originally meant “Wind”—becomes a reality as it descends upon Jesus. The vision of the Spirit is confirmed by a heavenly voice in verse 11. The voice illuminates what the presence of the Spirit in Jesus means. Without this clarification, Jesus could be seen simply as a miracle worker, but his significance would still be ambiguous.

The private nature of the event should not be overlooked. Only Jesus sees and hears what is revealed. This secrecy continues throughout the Gospel of Mark, for no one, not even his disciples, truly understands the meaning of this man from Nazareth. It is only from the post-Resurrection experience that the community of Mark can discern the genuine identity of God’s Son.

This last point allows us to focus more directly on the meaning of this passage. For the early tellers of this legend, the concern was not whether such a revelation had happened sometime in the past but how the believers’ presence experience was linked to Jesus.

Indeed, it would be better to view the scene as the early community’s understanding of its own baptismal experience. The believers’ discovery in faith that they were adopted by God in the Spirit permitted them to recast the story of Jesus as revelatory moment. That this moment was revelatory for them indicates that the One in whom they found their destiny revealed who they really were before God.

Second Sunday of the Year. John 1:35-42. In its own way, today’s Gospel continues the themes of the search for, and discovery of, the meaning of Christ for each believer. Though one may be tempted to harmonize apparently related Gospel readings as if they were successive historical accounts, to do so would be historically inaccurate and theologically misleading.

Today’s passage is another creative reinterpretation of earlier Jesus traditions. The task is to determine the underlying question through which this passage becomes meaningful, both for the Johannine community and for the modern reader.

The basic materials presupposed by today’s passage in John are the call stories (see Mark 1:16ff.). The brief encounter with Peter, in verse 42, may well be based on the Easter vision to Peter (see Matthew 16:18). In any event, the writer of John has substantially changed the movement in these stories. Instead of a simple invitation to follow, we find an underlying sense of inquiry on the part of the disciples. Having heard John proclaim Jesus as “the Lamb of God,” the two unnamed disciples take off after Jesus. Indeed the Johannine Jesus continues this new movement by asking, “What do you seek?” What they find out causes the man, now named Andrew, to seek out his brother and bring him into the picture.

By employing a dialogical format, the writer has accomplished a number of things. The reader is exposed to a variety of titles the early Christian communities used in speaking of Jesus. The dialogical format also emphasizes the typical Johannine stress on personal response to the
challenge of the Word. John also shows us that the encounter with Jesus entails asking ourselves what we seek as we approach this Jesus and how the discovery of who he is affects our lives.

From this passage we can see that, for the Johannine community, an encounter with Jesus brings about a curious dynamic. One becomes impelled to share this good news. One’s discovery of, and witness to, Jesus does not demand a complete understanding of his identity. Indeed, though today’s verses contain a number of titles for Jesus—Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah—all these titles were understood by the community of John to be inadequate for describing his significance.

For the Johannine community, Jesus is God’s Son, who delivers the Word directly to every believer. Only insofar as the other titles enable us to come to this understanding, to recognize that we are actually called to live the life of God through the Son, can one appreciate such titles. Thus the titles become benchmarks indicating that we have begun to follow Jesus in order to find out for ourselves what he means.

Today’s passage, therefore, grows out of the Johannine community’s need for personal experience of the identity of Jesus and to express this discovery. The revision of traditional call stories is evidence that the community was concerned to discover their current meaning. The Johannine community passes on to us an ever-challenging question, What do we seek in approaching Jesus?

Third Sunday of the Year. Mark 1:14-20. Today we resume the reading of the Gospel of Mark, which will be presented on Sundays that fall outside particular seasons of the Church Year. As will be seen throughout the year-long meditation on the Gospel of Mark, the writer manifests—as do the writers of the later Gospels—a creative theological perspective from which has been forged a remarkable understanding of Jesus.

The passage for today can easily be broken into two segments. Verses 14 and 15 not only introduce the following section but also summarize the entire message of Jesus. Verse 14 may well indicate that Jesus did not enter his public ministry until the arrest of the Baptist forced him, as a follower of John, to take up the proclamation of his master. The arrest of John may indeed have signaled for Jesus the beginning of the final eschatological crisis.

The declaration that the time of fulfillment has come, that the rule of God is at hand, nicely sums up the entire work and teaching of Jesus. The brevity of the verse points up the urgency of this vision. But verse 15b, “Reform your lives and believe in the good news,” may well be a later addition, influenced by subsequent Christian preaching, that Mark has introduced into the tradition.

The second section is made up of two call stories (verses 16-20). In both of them, the main actor is Jesus, who summons his disciples to a radical decision. In contrast with last Sunday’s call stories, there is no dialogue or indication of searching on the part of the disciples. It should be noted that the format of the call story was not unusual in the ancient world. These stories share with other stories about various teachers and their disciples an anecdotal quality along with a call for a dramatic shift from one way of life to another. Note, by the way, that the typical image of Jesus’ disciples as poor is not substantiated, at least, not in these two stories. In each case, we have men who are leaving financially comfortable careers.

The sense of urgency is what differentiates these Markan call stories from other call stories. This is made quite clear throughout the Gospel of Mark, particularly in his use of word immediately, which occurs 41 times! In this section, it is found twice—in verses 18 and 20, where it is rendered “on the spot.”

The note of urgency sounded in verse 14 now receives a dramatic confirmation. The radical decision to leave one way of life for another is linked to Jesus’ declaration that the time of fulfillment is at hand. The theme of urgency is further complicated when the passage is placed within the context of the community of Mark. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the Markans saw themselves as involved in a great eschatological drama. Their own persecution as well as the Roman military action in Palestine signaled for them that the end was near.

In composing this Gospel, the writer saw in the fates of Jesus and of John models of what the community was experiencing at that time. Just as
John and Jesus had preached and were delivered up, so too would the faithful of the Markan community be delivered up. Their present experience became the occasion for entering into the drama of Christ's destiny.

Thus the urgency of Jesus' message continued to speak to their own time. And it is this note of urgency that the Markan community hands down to us. Do we perceive in the good news and in our own times the need to become aware of our allegiances? Do we understand that the times we live in may demand a radical challenge to all that we hold dear in our lives?
We come again to the feast that might be called, for many of us, "the lost Christmas." Lost because unless we are of Latin American or Hispanic background, we do not celebrate with the great festivity that this day deserves. It would be a blessing if we could regain the original Twelve Days of Christmas that climax on Epiphany. But we are defeated by a commercial society and the rush of the world that pushed Christmas back into Advent and makes observing our church calendar very difficult.

Never mind, at least we should have an Epiphany party! And sing the lovely carol that fills in so much the legend of the three kings. And if we are gentiles, in a very real sense this is our feast. Salvation is for all. We are now co-heirs with the Jews, as Paul declares today, to all that God has promised.

What a contrast in Matthew’s account of the nativity to the beloved story given in Luke. Then it was the poor who came, shepherds from the hills, often considered outcasts in that society because their work often kept them from observing the prescribed rituals. But no matter, they were the first to bring gifts. And now come the scholars. A verse from a poem on Christmas puts it thus:

Shepherds run and wise men ponder.
Stars become a lantern
at the house of bread
where David’s son holds court.

It puzzles some that those who have been called wise men, kings, and magi are also described in the present text as astrologers. We don’t give much weight to astrology, and indeed it appears to be a real anomaly that in an educated society the newspapers continue to carry an astrology column. But it was common in earlier times to study the stars, seeking for some pattern to the cosmos and to life itself. We still do that—although it is not astrology—and indeed it fascinates us to learn that we ourselves could be called stardust. When the first stars exploded in the phenomenon that produced what is now called the black hole, the release of carbon into the atmosphere was essential to the eventual emergence of life. Incredible—but we don’t look to the heavens or the motion of the stars for the meaning of our lives. That comes from wise teachers, and from hearing, pondering, and praying the word of God. And now, the word made flesh in Jesus. He is the last and greatest of the teachers.

How were believers guided in life before? For the Jewish people, by the Torah, and the multiple commandments of the Law. By the teaching of the prophets, with their stern insistence on justice and love. Remember Micah’s injunction, “to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before your God.” There was a strong sense of commitment to God and a covenant between God and his people. There was honor paid to one God, who was worshiped in the temple. The psalms gave a profound sense of God as overwhelming or transcendent, but also present within each of us. All of this was the religious heritage of Jesus. He taught us how to live by giving up the great summary of the commandments, and with the pattern of his own life of self-giving and unconditional love.

The wise men came from afar. So do we. Our origin in a material sense, as we have just noted, is far back in the evolutionary story of creation. But our real origin is in the mind and heart of the Creator who set all things in motion. And then, at a point in time which we have just been celebrating, the Incarnation happened. The Creator God became one of us, a person whom scholars now like to describe as Yahweh Jesus. This is the same Jesus, finally perceived as the Christ, whom scholars later would carefully define as fully human, and fully divine.

Epiphany is also the feast of variety. Nothing in the scripture indicates that one of the travelers to the crib was of a different color. And in the legend and in all the fanciful images of Epiphany, the black man is not shown as a servant. He appears as a figure of equal regality and splendor. The legend has created a powerful symbol that speaks to us. The human race is a wonderful variety that we should celebrate and enjoy. The curse of racism, the hatred that springs from prejudice, have no place in the heart of God and should have no place in the life of Christians. It is a lesson we have painfully learned, and are still learning. The kings should become our patrons in a society that celebrates its diversity, and from that variety draws strength.

A constant theme on this feast day is that of a journey. When T. S. Eliot wrote his great poem on Epiphany, he said “they had a hard time of it” as they made their way to Bethlehem and the Christ. But in the end they felt changed. Or, as the older Bible translation said, “They returned by another way.” Every encounter with Christ is like that. Eliot also wrote that famous line that says we journey to a place where we first began, and know it for the first time. The deepest meaning here is that we come from the heart and mind of God, and in the end which is our beginning, we return to the Loving Parent who made us. “Where do you live,” the rabbi asked God. And the answer? “Wherever people let me in.” And where do we live at the end of the journey? In the house that Jesus promised, when he said, “Where I am, you also shall be.”
A short homily
for January 12, 2003,
Baptism of the Lord (B).

"THE ROLE OF THE SERVANT"

When we think of Jesus there is one title or description that is slowly beginning to come into awareness. It is Jesus as servant. We hear it today on the feast of his baptism. It is the Father speaking through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant whom I uphold." This is the same Jesus we know as Redeemer, Savior, Lord and King, Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. "Servant" seems the very opposite of these powerful titles.

Isaiah of course is speaking prophetically, long before the time of Christ. God uses his words to give us a description of his son, the chosen one, whom he sent among us. And Isaiah continues as a spokesman for this servant theme. He even introduces the thought of a suffering servant in a passage that suggests the very passion Jesus underwent.

But servant as a job description is not just for Jesus. It is for us all who are baptized “in Christ.” Isaiah described Jesus as the one “upon whom God has put his spirit.” And we are told in the gospel today that Jesus through the ministry of his church will baptize us in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is like a divine energy, an impulse to goodness, indeed, the source and power through which we do God’s work. Everyday in some way we should advance the kingdom of God about which Jesus talks so much. For this we are baptized.

When someone serves God or God in neighbor to an extraordinary degree, the church may eventually declare them saints. That makes their lifestyles better known and they become really a new page in the ongoing story of Jesus Christ—living still, the risen Christ among us, living within us and using us as instruments of his work.

Here is the story of an exemplary priest—we need to hear of them because the priesthood must now win back the love, respect, and above all the trust of their people. This priest never lost it, and gave himself so completely that before long he will be declared a martyr. Already his name was included in the centennial service held in the catacombs for martyrs of the 20th century. His name was Giuseppe Puglisi. His father was a shoemaker; his mother, a seamstress. He entered the seminary at the age of 16. His first assignments included a rural parish torn apart by a bloody vendetta. He was then named pastor of the church of San Gaetano, in a poor section of Palermo in Sicily. We know his story because of an article by Lawrence Cunningham, a gifted writer and scholar who teaches at Notre Dame (Commonweal, 10-11-02). The priest continued to teach at a Catholic high school along with being pastor. His parish was no choice assignment: an 18th century church with the roof falling in. Parishioners: 115 out of a population of 8,000.

What distinguished him as a priest was a heroic and fearless opposition to the Mafia. Films like The Godfather have given us a somewhat romantic view of the Mafia, but there is nothing romantic about a vicious criminal organization that, especially in Sicily, has held people in its power by threats and murder. The local politicians were corrupted or in fear of them. The priest was not. He refused to accept their donations for the feastday celebrations, he denounced from the pulpit those who gave and accepted bribes, and tried to move the municipality to some decent levels of service. But especially he worked with the youth. We are told that “he organized camping trips for classes at the high school, and at San Gaetano he hammered away at the same themes: take responsibility for your life and for society; resist the values of the Mafia; refuse to collaborate in their criminality; say no to contraband goods, to discounted (that is, stolen) motorbikes, and to drugs.”

Cunningham calls his crusade “a kind of exorcism in the name of the Gospel.” The priest even composed a parody of the Lord’s Prayer in Sicilian dialect to mock the Mafia: it can make one smile, but all this was serious business. “O godfather to me and my family, You are a man of honor and worth. Your name must be respected. Everyone must obey you. Everyone must do what you say for this is the law of those who do not wish to die. You give us bread, work; who wrongs you, pays. Do not pardon; it is an infamy. Those who speak are spies. I put my trust in you, godfather. Free me from the police and the law.” All this heroic stand had a price. On his 56th birthday, returning from a round of pastoral duties and a small birthday party, he stepped out of the car and was immediately shot in the head. The assailant, caught four years later, was a low-level Mafioso, who reported that Puglisi had seen him approaching and said, “I was expecting you.”
There is a time in life when suddenly and with exhilaration you feel you are your own master. No one is going to tell you what to do. This high point commonly hits the freshman at college when his parents go down the walk and—not out of his life but removed to a safe distance! For the first time he can eat, drink, oversleep, wear what he likes, slop around. All this is called freedom. It’s necessary but it can be disastrous.

We all need each other.

We need to share what others have learned of life and pass on as wisdom or insight. The warning here is not to go it alone, not to isolate yourself from people, to exaggerate your own self-sufficiency. Once again: we need others to guide and enrich our lives. We can indeed draw that lesson from the first and third readings today. The boy Samuel—and it’s emphasized that he is only a boy—is guided by Eli, the old man, to his life’s vocation, his work for God. And the same thing happens when Simon, who is Peter, is confronted by his enthusiastic brother Andrew. What a discovery Andrew had made—he had encountered Jesus, and possibly the Christ.

Those are good lessons from the two readings. Listen to other people, consult them. Share their experience. People who love you don’t charge for their advice! Sometimes what we seek can concern bodily health, such as the question, “How do you manage to stay in such good shape?” The answer may be, “I walk two miles a day,” That sounds simple, and has been recommended so many times by experts that it’s almost banal, old stuff. But most of us are like that young man in the gospel who asked Jesus for advice and then turned aside, because he had many possessions. We have, perhaps, too many automobiles! We don’t take good advice seriously if it goes against our customary or indulgent lifestyle. The experts are now alarmed because Americans eat too much, and some say that junk food will go the way of cigarettes. Don’t bet on it. Life is short, and there’s too much pleasure in our favorite dessert (even if, as the killjoy is sure to say, it makes life shorter).

St. Paul talks about the body today in forthright language. First he says the body is not for immorality, it is for the Lord. Tell that to those who exploit the body everyday in the world of advertising. There is a powerful scene in that remarkable movie, Jesus of Montreal. Daniel is an actor trying to enlist other actors to put on a passion play, and his choice to play Mary is Mireille, a young woman very unsure of herself, short of money, and committed—so she thinks—to one more TV commercial. The script is to sell beer, and they do it by selling bodies—or a woman’s allure. Daniel accompanies her to the studio. She forgets to bring a bikini, and the sneering producer orders her to remove her outer clothing. Suddenly Daniel in a rage shouts, “Don’t do it!” and then smashes the TV cameras, overturns the tables, and picking up a heavy coil, quite literally lashes the whole film crew out of the studio. We recognize the parallel, it is a replay of the scene in the gospel in which Jesus chases the money changers from the temple. Jesus too was in a rage and shouting angrily, “You have defiled this place!” Daniel is also concerned with the temple, in this case the human body. He believes what St. Paul says so clearly today, that “the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is within.” And that’s why the apostle says unequivocally: “Shun lewd conduct.” Think of our culture. If you add song to sight, our senses are assaulted with the scenes and language of lewd conduct all the time. The lyrics of some song writers have no place among people who have any taste or sense of propriety. It is not a matter of prudence but of privacy that leads us to protest what passes for entertainment in the advertising world and with certain types of music.

It is also important to understand what he means by “the Lord is for the body.” His church often has not been for the body and labeled it shameful, especially a woman’s body. Through the centuries artists and sculptors have portrayed women, especially Eve, as the temptress. And theologians in the past commented on sexual union, even in marriage, as sinful or close to it. The present pope has startled and embarrassed some people by his discourses on the theology of the body; he understands, as we should have known all along, that we are bodily creatures, made that way by God. And the expression of love that unites a man and woman is both designed and blessed by God. All our life is exercised through the body as instrument, and while we exult in our intellectual powers, there is no mind without a brain and without a body. We are a unity, one person, flesh and blood included. The challenge here is to transform bodily life into fully human life, serving human ends. Nothing makes this more obvious than to reflect on how sex is transformed by love. It is not bodies we love, it is persons. In living we do not leave our bodies behind, as some spiritual exercises have tried to make us do.

There is one time we leave them behind—yes, when we die. Benjamin Franklin in old age compared his body to a book that is tattered and worn, almost useless, and ready for a new edition! The apostle puts it more simply and powerfully in the language of faith. He says, “The Lord is for the body. And God who raised up Jesus the Lord will raise us also by his power.”

As persons of faith we await, even with a certain peace, that moment when we are embodied through the Creator’s power and love in a new creation.
A short homily
for January 26, 2003,
3rd Sunday (B).

"TIME FOR A BIG CHANGE"

We all need to work, and even more important, to enjoy it. The late George Burns, who seemed to enjoy his long life, uttered this wisdom: “If you’re a success at selling shoes, and you don’t like selling shoes, then you’re a failure.” Work is enjoyable when we make something that is well-made and serves a useful purpose. Thomas Aquinas called that art, and it’s true for a cabinet maker or a programmer in the computer world, or someone who makes a meal or a teacher preparing a lesson plan. There are so many kinds of work and there is some danger in reading the scriptures today that the field seems narrowed down to what we might call religious work, a calling to ministry or priesthood. Jonah is a prophet, God’s spokesman, and successful at it in spite of himself. Billy Graham could get a whole city, or at least 100,000, to repent. But unlike Jonah he rejoiced to do God’s work, to be the instrument of redemption. And the gospel is about four people who joined up with Jesus. Simon, who becomes Peter, his brother Andrew, and the two young fishermen James and John. One wonders what happened to their father Zebedee who was left, quite literally, holding not the bag but the fishing net. And the boat. It would not be so surprising to find out (in another life) that he too “joined up.” That really is a good hunch, based on the fact that Jesus had a powerful effect on people. A charismatic preacher, yes. But one so close to God that, like Moses, it is quite possible his face shone.

Finally we have gotten over the idea that vocation means priest, sister, brother or nun. We all have a calling. First of all, we were called to exist, to live. A careful theologian described God as “Being that lets us be.” Yes, the One who wills our creation as unique beings, somewhat like himself. Capable of good, of love, of wisdom. Because we are endowed with freedom we are also capable of evil, but that is another story.

Or is it? There is evil every day in the newspaper, and perhaps in the neighborhood, perhaps in our own lives. We are still recovering, and have a long way to go, from the evil called the scandal of sexual abuse and the unbelievable neglect by shepherds of the flock. In all the meetings that have followed, there is much talk about the calling of each of us as Christians. It begins with baptism. For twenty centuries people have been baptized, and the primary motive seemed to be to get rid of original sin and avoid a future in some place called limbo. But the understanding of baptism and original sin has notably changed, and now we are reminded that both infant and adult through baptism are called into the community of faith, to share the work of the church in bringing about the reign of God. We are in this together. It has been well said that “there is no such thing as a solitary Christian.” And the role of a bishop in a community of faith was never better expressed than in the words of St. Augustine: “With you, I am a Christian. For you I am a bishop.” We do indeed have a responsibility to be church together.

We are accustomed to a hierarchical and institutional church, and what is essential in those structures will remain. But what is also essential is the role of the laity, the newly educated and professionally skilled laity. There are many meetings going on as to just what that should mean. Does it suggest a role in knowing and managing church finances, at the diocesan as well as the parish level? Does it include a say, and more than a say, in who becomes pastor and bishop?

It is important to think about all this and to improve past performance. Lay people, for instance, may have had many grievances in the past (and still, perhaps) about poor preaching, poor music and liturgy, lack of community, poor use of funds, etc. These seem minor compared to the problem thrust upon them in the past year. But how did we go about the lesser problems in years past? We call for accountability in the financial affairs of the church, but we should recognize that there is no accountability, at least in the Catholic church, for the way sermons or homilies are given. “Church worker” in the past was taken to mean, for the most part, the ushers and the Altar Society—the women who cleaned the sanctuary. It is already beginning to look very different. We need lay people to commit themselves to learn theology, to post it and share it on the Internet. To become engaged in the affairs of the parish. To figure out and get involved in all the programs of outreach, especially tutoring and working with children and the underprivileged. There is so much we can do, and already being done in progressive parishes.

It is now ordinary to say that the word “crisis” in Chinese also means opportunity. But it is an opportunity. The other word used here is kairos, which means a time of action, an opportunity for significant change. In a religious sense it is a time when the Holy Spirit is pushing us to do something. We have been very late in picking up the mandate that came from Vatican II. And one more point: when people have different ideas on all these subjects, they need to have a forum and a place to express them, to create an interchange of ideas and learn from each other.

In the gospel four men follow Christ, serve God. You do it every day, not around Galilee but in all the walks of life and in every part of the world. The place to begin is where you are—in the home, the parish, the neighborhood, and in small groups. Crisis is indeed opportunity. The time of kairos.