

St. Mary Magdalene**(22 July)****Old Testament Lesson: Proverbs 31: 10-31**

The Book of Proverbs was written by **King Solomon**, the wisest man that lived at that time. God had asked King Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, what he wanted most of all. When King Solomon responded with “**discernment**,” God was so pleased that he not only granted that request, but also added **honor, power, fame, and wealth**. That discernment gave rise to a **wisdom** that is staggering even today. The book of Proverbs was **his** way of passing on that wisdom to **today’s** readers.

The topic for this proverb is the characteristics of an excellent **wife**. What makes her a jewel? Solomon says a wife that can be **trusted** by her husband, who is **there** when she is needed and who **supports and protects** him throughout their marriage. In addition, she works **diligently** for her household, is astute in **business** matters, is **responsive** to the truly poor and needy, provides **clothes** and coverings for her entire family, and **runs a business** from home. As a consequence, she is **respected** by her children and husband, allowing him to achieve God’s plan for **him** and to be **respected** by friends, neighbors, and business associates.

Bottom line: charm and beauty may be great among the people of the **world**, but a woman who fears the **Lord**, and **shows** it in what she **says and does**, is **truly** worthy of praise.

Second Reading: Acts 13: 26-31

St. Paul is on his **first** missionary journey, accompanied by Barnabas. Our reading finds them in the city of **Antioch** in Asia minor, where they head to the **synagogue** to worship and to share the **Good News** when they are invited to share some words of **encouragement**. St. Paul is only too happy to oblige, and starts out with a very concise history of the Children of Israel, and finishing that

history with a concise history of **Jesus'** ministry. He then notes that the Jewish **rulers** did not understand that Jesus was their **Messiah** and had him **killed** but that **God** had raised Jesus from the dead. St. Paul concludes that he and Barnabas were now bringing this message of salvation to **them**.

Gospel Lesson: John 20: 1-2, 10-18

Mary Magdalene is a **follower** of Jesus who, during Jesus' ministry, had seven **demons** cast out of her. She consequently becomes one of Jesus' devotees and **supporters**, even staying with him to the **end** at the foot of the cross. Today's reading finds her **returning** to the tomb on Sunday morning, to **complete** the burial process that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had started Friday evening. Upon arriving, she sees that the **stone** covering the mouth of the tomb had been **moved**, so she turns around to report to Peter and John her **assumption** that Jesus' body had been removed. Peter and John verify that Jesus' body is no longer there, and return to their homes. But Mary **tarries**, crying. And when she stoops to look through the opening to the tomb, perhaps to convince herself that Jesus' body is no longer there, she is startled to see two **angels** sitting where Jesus' body had lain. In response to their question of **why** she is weeping, Mary expresses her puzzlement of **where** Jesus' body has gone, turns, and seeing a supposed gardener, asks **him** where Jesus' body is. The supposed gardener, Jesus, simply speaks Mary's **name** and she immediately **recognizes** him as her teacher and clings to him in **joy**. Noting that he still needs to ascend to the Father, Jesus asks Mary **not** to cling to him but rather go to his **disciples** to tell them the **Good News**, which she does.

St. James the Elder, Apostle**(25 July)*****First Lesson: Acts 11: 27 - 12:5***

It has been a busy year. St. Peter has experienced a **revelation** after the **Holy Spirit** arranged to have him witness to the household of the Roman army officer **Cornelius** in Caesarea, resulting in God **baptizing** the entire household with the Holy Spirit just as the disciples were on the day of Pentecost. After Peter was called to Jerusalem for entering the house of a **Gentile** and baptizing them with **water**, the early Christian church was beginning to realize that God meant to save **all** people, not just the Jews, after **St. James** drew it to their attention. Subsequently, we find the church in Antioch **growing** by leaps and bounds. And when the prophet **Agabus** appears in their midst to predict a forth-coming world-wide **famine**, the Antioch church starts a collection to help the persecuted saints in **Judea**.

But then **King Herod Agrippa I** (grandson of King Herod the Great) discovers that he can please the Jews by **persecuting** the Christian church, when he arrested **St. James** (the brother of St. John) and had him **executed**. So he followed that up by having **St. Peter** arrested and thrown into prison, guarded 24/7 by four squads of four soldiers each. Since Peter's trial was scheduled **after** the Passover, the Christian church made earnest **prayer** to God for Peter's return.

A **lesson** to be learned from **history**: When individuals and church bodies in the Christian church are experiencing persecution, the **church** should be making continual prayer to God for **His** intervention on **their** behalf. We cannot sit by **passively**, just **hoping** for the best.

Epistle Lesson: Romans 8: 28-39

St. Paul continues his treatise on the persecuted Christian by assuring us that, **if** we love God and are following His will, **then** He will make any circumstance we face turn out for our **good**. After all, God has determined from the **beginning** of time (**Ephesian 1:4**) that true believers would be called for **His** purpose, **justified** by Jesus' death and resurrection, and **destined** for eternal glory. But we need to

remember that God the Father allowed His **only** Son to die for **us** after being **falsely** accused, but raised him from the dead and elevated him to the **highest** position in Heaven after the Father. Likewise, even though God is **for** us, we can expect to be falsely accused because of **our** witness, and even **condemned**. But it is **God** who ultimately judges, and Jesus is **interceding** for us. Consequently, **no one** or **anything** can separate us from **God's love in Christ Jesus**, whether it be tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, war, demonic rulers or powers, or anything in all creation. Again, we need to **love, trust and obey God**, no matter the circumstances!

Gospel Lesson: Mark 10: 35-45

Continuing the ministry of Jesus as recorded by St. Mark, we find in today's reading some insight into the **thinking** of those first disciples. These were **disciples**, not of some itinerant preacher but of the **Messiah** Himself! Yet there was plenty of opportunity for **pride and arrogance** to creep in. This is shown in today's reading by **James and John**, the two sons of Zebedee, asking Jesus to put the two in the most **prominent** positions to Him in heaven, one seated on His right and the other on His left. Jesus' response? "You don't know what you are asking." Jesus notes that those positions are **reserved** for those for whom they were prepared by God the Father, and the requirements demand a **sacrificial** giving of oneself on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

The **response** of the two disciples? Oh sure, we're good with that. Jesus observes that they will **indeed** sacrifice themselves for the Kingdom, but then points out that it is not **He** who makes that decision of who sits next to Him in the Kingdom. Of course, the rest of the disciples are **incensed** that James and John were making an early pitch for the most prominent seats in heaven. Jesus then lays things out for all of them. **Honor** in the Kingdom of Heaven is not dependent on who is the **greatest**, but who is the most **humble** servant (for example, **Moses** is described by God as the most humble man on earth—**Numbers 12:3**). One does not strive to **get**, but to **give!**

Sunday on 31 July - 6 August (Proper 13)

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 16: 2-15

Let's get the overall **picture** here. God has just sprung the Children of Israel from **slavery** in **Egypt** through the working of ten miraculous **plagues**. In addition, God worked in the hearts of the Egyptians to allow the Children of Israel to "**borrow**" as much of their silver, gold, jewelry, and other goods as they wanted, to be **payment** for their **years** of slavery. Then he allowed them to pass through the Red Sea on **dry** ground, after which the Children of Israel watched as the waters of the Red Sea swallowed up the **army of Pharaoh** as they tried to follow the Children of Israel. Then, when the 2.5-million plus people **and** their flocks ran out of **water**, and the only water they could find was **bitter**, God through Moses made the water **sweet**.

With these **miracles** fresh in the memories of the Children of Israel, the first thing they do when they run out of food is **accuse God** and **Moses** of bringing them out into the desert to **kill** them, saying that their life in Egypt was **better** because they had their **fill** of meat and bread. So God responded by sending **quail** that covered the camp in the evening, and in the morning the dew that lay on the ground became **manna**, a **bread from heaven**, demonstrating that their God was not only their **deliverer** but also their **provider**. In other words, the lack of potable water was a **test**.

But there was **another catch**. God gave specific instructions on **how much** manna the Children of Israel were to gather each morning, and how they were **not** to look for manna on the Sabbath. This was **another** test, to see whether the Children of Israel would **obey** the Lord their God, or not.

Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 4: 1-16

As we continue reading from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we find him urging his readers to ***live up*** to the ***calling*** given them in Christ Jesus, which would be ***characterized*** by ***humility, gentleness, patience, empathy, love, unity of the Spirit, and peace***. After all, there is only ***one body*** and ***one Spirit*** to which all believers are called, ***one*** baptism in the name of the Trinity, and ***one*** God and Father who poured out His grace on all believers. Then St. Paul comments on what Jesus ***did*** when He ascended into Heaven:

- He led a host of ***captives***, apparently referring to the ***demonic*** hordes,
and
- He gave ***gifts*** to men.

What ***are*** these gifts? ***Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.***

And what is the ***purpose*** of these gifts? To equip ***every believer*** for the ***work*** of the ministry (*i.e.*, to make ***disciples***, someone just as capable as him or her), and to ***build up*** the body of Christ in ***faith*** and in ***knowledge of*** Jesus Christ so that ***each*** believer ***matures***, allowing the body of Christ as a whole to ***grow*** in ***love***, no longer individually ***snookered*** by the devil with ***false*** doctrine or beliefs, or ***temptations*** into worldly ways and habits, as would ***immature and gullible*** children be.

Gospel Lesson: John 6: 22-35

Let's again get the overall **picture**. Jesus is on the **east** side of the Sea of Galilee, where large crowds have followed Him because of all the **miracles** He did in healing the **sick**. In His **compassion**, Jesus tends to the **physical** needs of the people. But **evening** then draws near, and Jesus, **again** in His compassion, does **another** miracle in order to feed 5000 men (plus women and children). Jesus then sends His disciples ahead of Him to the **west** coast of the Sea of Galilee, while He stays behind to commune with His Father. This is followed by Jesus walking on **water** to **rescue** the disciples caught in a sudden storm on the Sea of Galilee.

As the reading for today begins, we find the crowd **still** at the feeding site, now observing that neither the **disciples**, who had gotten into a boat, nor **Jesus**, were there. So they cross the Sea of Galilee to its **northwest** corner, where **Capernaum** was situated. There they start looking for Jesus. And when they find Him, Jesus lays it on the line. They were not looking for **Him** for the **spiritual** nourishment that He could provide, but for the free **food**. Then Jesus springs on them the crucial question: are you working for food that will feed you **day by day**, or for the food that will give you **eternal life**? When asked what kind of **work** Jesus was referring to, He responded by saying that the **work** that God wants them to do is to **believe** in **Him** (*i.e.*, Jesus) whom the Father had sent.

Jesus must have been set **back** by the next question of the crowd: what **sign** are you going to do to show that God the **Father** has sent **you**? Don't they remember the free **meal** that they ate to the full the evening before? Or all the **healings** he did just recently? Apparently they thought that it was **Moses** who gave their fathers manna, because Jesus has to correct their thinking. It was **God** who gave their fathers manna, and it is now God the Father who is giving them the **true**, real bread of Heaven, the **bread of life**, who is Jesus Himself.

Sunday on 7 - 13 August (Proper 14)

Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 19: 1-8

Let's again set the stage for today's reading. The **Northern** Kingdom, or **Israel**, under King **Ahab** and Queen **Jezebel**, have not only promoted the worship of the **golden calves** made by Jeroboam I, but also introduced the worship of **Baal** (the male god of fertility, whose worship involved burning young children and babies alive) and **Asherah** (the female god of fertility, represented by the Tree of Life, whose worship involved **male and female prostitution**).

Elijah **challenged** King Ahab and the people of Israel to choose between their **idols versus the Lord God** by having a **face-off** on the top of **Mt. Carmel**, where the god who lit a fire under the sacrifice to it would be acknowledged as the true god. Consequently, Elijah faced off against 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. As we recall, Elijah, or rather, **God**, won. By the commands laid down by God through Moses, the prophets of the idols were then **killed** on the spot, per **Deuteronomy 13:5**.

But now **Queen Jezebel** hears about the event on Mt. Carmel, where her prophets, the ones who ate at **her** table (at **taxpayer** expense, of course), were killed. Infuriated, she sends a note to Elijah, telling him that she has put out a **contract** on his life: he will be dead within 24 hours. Prudently he takes off from **Jezebel**, in the northern part of Israel, to **Beersheba**, which lies in the south-central part of Judah, west of the southern tip of the Dead Sea. That was **already** a real hike. But here he leaves his servant and then heads off for the wilderness (that is, southeastward). After a day in this heat, he stops under a **tree** for shade, and in **weariness** (probably both physically, mentally and spiritually) he asks God to take his life. He then falls asleep. But God sends an angel, **twice!**, to nourish Elijah with a freshly baked cake (perhaps a cake of figs) and water. With that nourishment, Elijah strikes out for **40 days and nights** until he gets to **Mt. Sinai**, the place where **Moses** received the Ten Commandments from God.

Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 4: 17 - 5: 2

Building on the message that we read last week, for believers to become **mature** Christians, St. Paul admonishes his readers to no longer live as if they were still

unbelievers, whose **characteristics** would include **indifference, hardness of heart, sensuality, impurity, deceitful desires, lying, sinning in anger (i.e., holding a grudge), stealing, filthy talk, bitterness, wrath, clamoring for something, slander, and malice**. (Anybody see **themselves** here?) Rather, St. Paul states that we should **renew our mind** (i.e., controlling our thoughts so as to be consistent with **God's** values), **changing** into the **new** self that is in the likeness of God in **true** righteousness and holiness, speaking **truthfully**, doing **honest work** so that they can help those in need, speaking those **words that build up** rather than put down, being **kind** to one another, being **tenderhearted**, and **forgiving** one another. In other words, walk in **love** and **compassion** as Christ showed us.

Gospel Lesson: John 6: 35-51

Continuing from the point where we left off in last week's reading, where Jesus was directing the crowd from their focus on **earthly** bread to **spiritual** bread, Jesus identifying Himself as the **Bread of Life**, Jesus now chides his listeners, saying that they have seen Him and the **works** that He does but still **refuse to believe** that He is the Promised Messiah, the Son of God. He then states that His **Father** has sent Him into the world to ensure that those who **believe** in Him should have **everlasting** life, in accordance with the will of the Father.

But when Jesus mentions that He has **come down from Heaven**, the Jewish **leaders** start **grumbling**, saying that Jesus is merely the son of Joseph and Mary, so how can He say that He has come down from Heaven? Jesus' response is curious. He states that the **only** ones that believe in Jesus are the ones that the **Father** has drawn to Jesus, that is to say, those who have heard and learned from the **Father**, implying that the **religious** leaders do not believe in Jesus because they **refuse to obey the voice of God the Father**. Jesus notes that the Jews' fathers, who ate manna in the desert, died; and since **they** were **rebellious** throughout their journey, one might surmise that they would **not** live eternally (see **1 Corinthians 10**). Similarly, Jesus states later in **chapters 7 & 8** that **these** Jews will not go into eternal life **either**.

Jesus then identifies **Himself** as the Bread of Life, that whoever eats of **that** living bread (i.e., believes in Jesus) will have **eternal life**. Note that the way Jesus says it might cause some to interpret that Jesus is saying that people have to eat **Him**. However, what Jesus is doing is using **physical** life to illustrate a **spiritual** truth. So stay tuned for next week's reading to see how this turns out.

Sunday on 14 - 20 August (Proper 15)

Old Testament Lesson: Proverbs 9: 1-10

King Solomon, the author of the book of **Proverbs**, when asked by God at the **beginning** of his reign **what** he wanted God to do for him, requested **discernment**, so that he could judge God's people **correctly**. God was so pleased with King Solomon's answer that He gave him not only discernment (*i.e.*, a wise, insightful, and understanding heart), but also **riches** and **honor**. The book of **Proverbs** represents key elements of King Solomon's accumulated wisdom, which center around one simple fact: ***The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.***

In today's reading, wisdom is pictured as a **woman** who has built a large **house** (seven pillars), has prepared a sumptuous **banquet**, and has sent her young women out into the world to invite **anyone** who wishes to have **wisdom** to come to the **banquet**.

Then King Solomon compares the responses of a scoffer or **wicked** man versus a wise or **righteous** man: the **scoffer** or **wicked** man will **attack** the person offering wisdom, but the **wise** or **righteous** man will **love** the person who offers wisdom, and will become wiser and more educated. How do **you** respond to those who offer wisdom to you?

Bottom Line: **Real** wisdom comes only to those who fear the **Lord**. And what is **real** wisdom? To **know the Lord**, the God who **created** the heavens and the earth, who loved us so **much** that He sent His only Son to die for us because of **our** iniquity.

Alternate Old Testament Lesson: Joshua 24: 1-2a and 14-18

As the scene opens on today's reading, we find that **Joshua**, after leading the Children of Israel in a successful campaign to conquer the Promised Land under God's direction and involvement, and after having some years of **retirement**, realizes that the time of his death is **imminent**. He therefore calls all the leaders and officials to come to him and present themselves before God. He then proceeds to give them his **last** advice and warnings by **challenging** them to serve only **God** in the future. Why? Because the people, after experiencing deliverance from Egypt and being gifted the Promised Land by God, were **still** worshipping not only the **idols** that they brought with them from **Egypt** but also the idols that they still had from the days of **Abraham's** family on the other side of the Euphrates River! Think about that! Despite what God has done for them over those 600 or so years, they are **still** carrying around their idols.

Joshua states that he and his family will serve the **Lord**. And of course the people claim that they **too** will serve the Lord. Not included in our reading for today, but pertinent to the lesson: Joshua died shortly after this meeting concluded. And with his death, the book of **Judges** begins, where the people **repeatedly** lapse into **apostasy** and have to be **punished** by God through invading nations that enslave them for years before they come to their **senses** and are **delivered** through the leadership of a judge whom God had appointed. And the cycle repeats itself **many** times. Talk about **not** learning from history!

Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 5: 6-21

As we continue reading from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesian Christians, we find him encouraging his readers to exercise **discernment** in every way, including **not** listening to or associating with or participating with people who want us to join them in their **worldly** pleasures. That is to say, we should not be **foolish** but **wise**, by understanding what **God's** will is for us. Instead of becoming **drunk with the wine of worldly pleasures**, we should instead allow ourselves to be **filled with the Holy Spirit**, so that our **speech** and our **deeds** will reflect the **love of God** in us. In addition, we should give thanks to God for **everything**, and we should **respect and honor** others as we would Jesus Himself.

Gospel Lesson: John 6: 51-69

In today's reading, we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue in **Capernaum**. Just a few verses earlier, we find Jesus referring to Himself as the **Bread of Life**. Now He states that He is the **Living Bread from heaven**, that whoever eats of his **flesh** and drinks of his **blood** will have everlasting life. Jesus then refers to the bread from heaven, the **manna**, that the Children of Israel ate in the desert, and points out that they **still** died even though they ate it. But eating of **Jesus'** flesh and drinking **his** blood would result in people who do **that**, to live forever. The response of Jesus' listeners is not too surprising. After all, they assumed that he was talking about eating his body and drinking his blood **literally, i.e.**, cannibalism (also, recall that God **forbade** the eating of blood when he allowed Noah and his descendants to now eat meat—see **Genesis 9:4**). As a consequence, many of Jesus' listeners took **offense** at what he said, and left. Left for **what?** Left to go back to their **old** way of life, which did **not** involve obedience to God (**See Deuteronomy 31:12 and Malachi 1:6-14**).

But what **was** Jesus saying? Remember that Jesus loved to **illustrate spiritual truths** by means of everyday happenings. So Jesus was saying that if they ate of His flesh (that is to say, **believed in Him**) and drank His blood (that is to say, **accepted** His upcoming **sacrifice on the cross** for the sins of the world), God would give them **eternal life**. (Remember also St. Paul's commentary on the Lord's supper in **1 Corinthians 11:23-26**, and the relationship between bread and Christ's body, and wine and His blood.) And when Jesus states that it is the **Spirit** who gives life, He is saying that **real life** does not come with **understanding**, but with **faith** in the words of Jesus. This truth does not escape the disciples, because when Jesus asks them whether **they** are going to leave also, Peter responds that they have no other place to **go**, since **Jesus** has the words of eternal life, and since He is the Messiah.

Sunday on 21 - 27 August (Proper 16)

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 29: 11-19

Isaiah was God's messenger for over 50 years to the people of the **Southern Kingdom**, or **Judah**, surrounding the time in 720 B.C. that the **Northern Kingdom** was conquered and **dispersed** throughout **Assyria**. This should have been a **strong** message to the **Southern Kingdom**, but sadly it fell on deaf ears. The messages of **need for repentance** from their rebellious ways, followed by God's grace toward them and the **restoration** of their glory, marks the major themes of Isaiah.

Just before our reading for today begins, Isaiah is commenting about the **vision** that he has just seen, that of Jerusalem (probably meaning all of Judah) being **attacked** by foreign nations as a means of God exercising **discipline** upon a **rebellious** nation. But then God indicates that in an **instant** He can destroy these foreign nations when Judah turns back to Him. Unfortunately, the people of Judah have **blinded** themselves and have become **drunk with their idolatries**, so that they are too blind and **drunk** with their **pleasures** to appreciate what God is saying to them through His prophets.

So as our reading begins, we find Isaiah **echoing** these last thoughts, that the people have **blinded themselves** to God. God then comments that when the people of Judah come to the **temple** to worship, their mouth and lips **say the words**, but the people's **hearts are far from God**. In fact, the people **sin** and think that since they did it **privately** or in the dark, nobody—not even **God**—has seen them. But God says that **such** men's wisdom will perish, and men's **discernment** will be darkened as God demands of these men an **accounting** (remember God's questioning of Job, back in the Old Testament reading that we heard in June?).

Still, God says that **restoration** is just a few moments in time after repentance: the desert can be turned into a **fruitful** field, the deaf can **hear**, the blind can **see**, and there will be **joy** in the Holy One of Israel, an obvious prophecy of the work of the Promised Messiah and His message of the **Kingdom of God**.

Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 5: 22-33

As St. Paul continues to teach the Ephesian Christians on the ways of God, he turns his attention to the **relationship** of husband and wife. He starts out by saying that, in the same way that God expects the church to **submit** (to be compliant with, or obedient) to **Him**, so He expects the **wife** to submit to her **husband** in **everything**. Similarly, God expects husbands to **love** their wives as Christ loved the church and gave of Himself so that it would be holy and without sin. And what **kind** of love is this? St. Paul tells us in **Romans 5:8—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us**, meaning that while we were an **abomination** in God's sight, Christ still died for us. In other words, God has set **incredibly** high the **bar** by which a husband is to measure his **love** for his wife. And a wife should **respect** her husband for what he **can** give her. St. Paul concludes this discussion with a repeat admonition: each husband should love his wife **as himself**, and the wife should **respect** (honor, hold in esteem, show consideration for, refrain from interfering with) her husband.

Gospel Lesson: Mark 7: 1-13

As our reading opens for today, we find Jesus in **another encounter** with the **scribes and Pharisees**. In this case, they are accusing Jesus' disciples of eating with **unwashed hands**. Now, this is not the type of washing we do today, where we scrub vigorously with anti-bacterial soap to ensure that our hands are free from bacteria and viruses that we may have picked up in our daily wanderings. No, this is rather a **ceremonial** washing, a **sprinkling** of water on the hands, a tradition made up by some religious leader in the past, which was made into a **rule**. But the rule was also extended to cups, pots, other copper vessels, and even dining couches, which were to be **baptized** similarly.

Jesus **declines** to address their accusation. Instead, he points out that **they** go through all these ceremonial **motions** to indicate that they are **pure** in God's sight, yet it is all a **show**, because they really are **not** worshipping the true God. Then he accuses them of disobeying **God's** command by coming up with their **own** rule. They came up with a tradition that ensured that money would come into the temple (e.g., **their** pockets—see **2 Kings 12:4-8**) by saying that a man did not have to support his **needy** parents if instead he gave the money to the church. Jesus points out that this is a clear violation of the **commandment** to honor your father and mother (**Exodus 20:12**), and excuses the contempt of parents that was punishable by death (**Exodus 21:17**). Even St. Paul commented on this behavior in **1 Timothy 5:8—But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.** In other words, God wants us to have particular **compassion** for the poor and feeble, especially if they are our **own** parents or family.

Sunday on 28 August - 3 September (Proper 17)

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2 and 6-9

The Children of Israel are on the **Plains of Moab**, just **east** of the Jordan River, opposite of Jericho. Having been **forbidden** by God to lead the Children of Israel into the Promised Land because of his recent **disobedience** to God, **Moses** is taking this opportunity to rehearse in the ears of the entire congregation the **history of the past forty years**, all of which clearly demonstrate God's **love and provision** for them.

As our reading for today begins, Moses admonishes the Children of Israel carefully to listen to **all** of God's **rules, statutes, and commandments** that he is reviewing for them. By **keeping** them, Moses states, people from **other** nations will observe how **wise and discerning** they are, and will give glory to **God**. In addition, their possessing the land is conditioned on their **doing** them. Then Moses delivers a warning: **do not forget** what your eyes have seen for these past 40 years, and be diligent to **teach** these history lessons to your children and grandchildren.

Wisdom and discernment! It seems as if we heard these same words two weeks ago when we read a portion of King Solomon's **Proverbs**. And who remembers the bottom line then? *(pause)* **That's right! The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.**

Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 6: 10-20

As St. Paul finishes his letter to the Ephesian Christians, he reminds them that they are in a **war** (just like one of our hymns starts out with, **Onward, Christian Soldiers!**) But this is not a war fought with guns, knives, grenades, or rockets, but rather with the **sword of the Spirit** (which is the **Word of God**), and with the armor that God provides. But **who** are we **fighting**? Our **foes** are not **earthly** forces or human beings, but they are an army of **spiritual beings**, deposed angels (in other words, **demons**) who are arrayed as an **organized** army in the heavenlies above us, still trying to disrupt if not destroy God's plan for His creatures. **Is this science fiction or is this reality?** We have only to read the book of **Daniel, chapter 10**, to recognize that these creatures are real, they are being fought by God's angels, and we have a **role** to play in this battle. We cannot be **idle by-standers** as **Satan** battles for the hearts of nations and

people. We cannot assume that Christ has done everything for us, so that now all we have to do is **coast** to heaven. That is certainly **not** what the early New Testament church experienced, so **we** should not expect anything different. We have to learn from early church history. And we need to remember that **God's chosen people** (that would be **us** today) were chosen not for **privilege** but for **responsibility** (See 1 Peter 2:9). The **real reality** is **not** what we **can** see, but what we **cannot** see!

St. Paul then goes on to describe the **armor** that we are to use daily: **truth, righteousness, readiness to speak** the gospel of peace, **faith, salvation, and immersion** in the word of God, along with **prayer** and **intercession**. He advises us to keep **alert** spiritually, persevere in the **faith**, and intercede for **all** the saints to have **boldness** in the **sharing** of our faith. His words of advice bear **particular** importance to us in this day and age.

Gospel Lesson: Mark 7: 14-23

Our reading today continues the story from last week, where Jesus is confronted by the **scribes and Pharisees** because of his disciples **not washing their hands ceremonially** before eating. Jesus, as we recall, ignored their accusation and dealt instead with their **hypocrisy**. But now, in today's reading, he explains to the people the **purpose** of the ceremonial cleansing that God had instituted through Moses: It was a **physical action** reflecting a **spiritual** purpose, that the person was cleansing his/her **heart** before God. The scribes and Pharisees had **forgotten** about that little detail. But then Jesus explains further: what one eats does not **spiritually** defile a person. In effect, then, Jesus **cancelled** all of the Old Testament rules regarding clean and unclean foods. So what **was** the purpose of the **original** rules? Again, it was a **physical** representation of what was being done **spiritually**. Certain foods had been declared unclean, just as certain **behaviors, life styles, and ways of worship** were declared unclean. The Children of Israel were **not** to take into their hearts and minds the **attitudes, behaviors, and worship** of the heathen peoples around them. As Jesus then goes on to explain, we are not **defiled** (i.e., we are not sinning) by what we eat, but by **what comes out of our heart**: evil of all kinds, including **thoughts** for sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, or foolishness. As Jesus pointed out elsewhere (**Matthew 5:27**), you do not have to actually **commit** the deed to have sinned; merely **entertaining the thought** constitutes the sin.