

Reflecting On Sunday's Readings

April 2020

The following series is free, downloadable small-group materials based on each week's Mass readings and the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group's discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minutes format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.
2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, "What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?" or "What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?" As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction.
3. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. **Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.** (The booklet *A Facilitator's Guide*: is available from Emmaus Journey to provide additional practical training for leading lively and informative small-group discussions.)
4. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.
5. You can either read this week's Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, **so do not feel like you need to force a connection.** However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, "How do you see that this passage ties into the theme of the readings?"
6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.
7. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Second Reading and the Gospel Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.
8. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear Scripture read and taught. **We would appreciate knowing if you are using the *Reflecting on Sunday's Readings*, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail**

Sincerely,

Richard A. Cleveland, Info@emmausjourney.org

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PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION—April 5, 2020

Introduction: Passion Sunday introduces us to a week of intense reflection on the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God. What difference will it make in our lives two weeks, or two months, from now?

Pope John Paul II begins the encyclical *Mission of the Redeemer*, by reiterating a truth he set forth in his very first encyclical: “*The Church’s fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct man’s gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity toward the mystery of Christ.*” This statement presupposes that we, the Church, have sufficiently gazed upon and contemplated the mystery of Christ, ourselves, so that it has become a compelling force in our lives.

Pope John Paul II goes on to explain why we, and all of humanity, need to direct our gaze to him: “In him, and only in him, are we set free from all alienation and doubt, from slavery to the power of sin and death. Christ is truly ‘our peace’ (Eph 2:14); ‘the love of Christ impels us’ (2 Cor 5:14) giving meaning and joy to our life.” He further explains, “Indeed, all people are searching for it, albeit at times in a confused way, and have a right to know the value of this gift and to approach it freely.” In these two statements the Holy Father explains the benefits we personally will receive by coming to know the Savior more fully.

Hopefully during this Holy Week we will slow down our other activities and concentrate on grasping and understanding all that Jesus went through on our behalf. But what about the remaining fifty-one weeks, or for that matter, the remaining weeks of our lives? Should we not during this week, along with those being newly baptized, renew our baptismal vows to be lifelong disciples of Jesus?

Richard McBrien, in his classic work, *Catholicism*, explains, “*To become a disciple, therefore was to enter into a lifelong relationship with Jesus, . . . discipleship was not only a process of learning, but of shaping one’s whole life around the Master without reservation.*”

Many people gazed on Jesus’ death on the cross, some mocked, some cried, some were duly impressed, and a few dedicated their lives to believe and follow his instructions. Those few who committed their lives to knowing and following Christ, subsequently turned their world upside down with the Good News we celebrate this week.

During this coming week we will be faced with several important choices. The first very simply is; Will we longingly gaze on Jesus’ agony and death, and his resurrection for us, or will we only give him a cursory glance? The Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, Eucharistic Adoration, and a host of spiritual readings are all means we can use to longingly and continually reflect on his passion and resurrection. Will we?

Then, if we choose to gaze at length on our Savior’s passion, we will have another choice. Will we only briefly respond emotionally to all he has done for us, or will we dedicate our lives to believing and following him? This moving and motivating experience need not only take place once a year during Lent and Easter, but it can be a constant and recurring way of life. Philippians 2:5 the verse preceding this week’s second reading encourages us to let Christ’s mind be in us, in our mind. The ability to live the year controlled by Christ is dependent on this ongoing reflection of Christ’s humility and passion.

Perhaps there may be no better finale to this week than to dedicate ourselves to follow Jesus for a lifetime, and for the remainder of our life, by our actions and words, direct the gaze of others to him. If we do the latter it will make a difference in our lives not just for two days, two weeks, or even two months, but a difference that will last a lifetime.

First Reading — Isaiah 50:4-7

1. What attitudes do you see in this prophecy of Christ that we should embrace?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

Second Reading — Philippians 2:6-11

2. How did Jesus express humility through his life and death?
3. What do the expressions, “every knee shall bow” and “every tongue confess” really mean?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 26:14-27:66

4. How were you moved through this account of Jesus’ last days?
5. What are the three most profound truths of these passages?

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EASTER SUNDAY—April 12, 2020

Introduction: Easter, when disappointment was turned to delight, and delight was turned to destruction.

Surely Satan and the forces of evil must have thought they had won. And if the forces of evil could have danced, surely, they must have been dancing since the day that they thought they had killed the Son of God. Darkness seemed to have been reigning supreme from the time when Judas and an armed crowd, came under the cloak of darkness to arrest Jesus. Darkness provided the cover for their evil intentions and also for the shameful abandonment of Jesus by his disciples. Even Peter had to slink away into the darkness to hide his shame.

How Satan and the forces of evil must have rejoiced as “from noon onward there was darkness over the whole land,” until at last Jesus “gave up His spirit.” How they must have believed that this darkness was just a foretaste of the spiritual darkness which would rule the earth unabated by the Light of the World. But God had another plan and turned their delight to disappointment. Darkness instead of triumphing over Jesus simply provided a backdrop against which the dawning of the Light of the World could shine with increased glory.

While darkness still seemed to reign, Mary Magdalene and her companions, and later Peter and John, came “while it was still dark” only to find an empty tomb. Disappointment upon disappointment, or so it seemed at first, but when they realized that the face cloth was separate from the other burial wrappings, a ray of hope and light, pierced the darkness, never to be extinguished again. It was a ray of hope and light which was to grow in brilliance as Christ’s resurrection became known and understood. Praise God, disappointment is turned to delight!

“The New Testament writers speak as if Christ’s achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the ‘first fruits’, the ‘pioneer of life.’ He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened.”¹

Wherever or whenever you are experiencing darkness of the soul, Jesus is there, a Light shining in darkness. He can turn our disappointment to delight. The resurrection not only holds the promise of eternal life, but also the promise that Satan and the forces of evil will not prevail in our lives. In Christ, you are a new creation, and can experience the joy of living as a new creation. Like the disciple in today’s Gospel reading, we must see and believe.

¹ C.S. Lewis, from *Miracles*.

First Reading — Acts 10:34, 37-43

1. How did God affirm the life and ministry of Jesus, according to this passage?

2. How do you feel about being a witness? How can this passage change your view?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23

Second Reading — Colossians 3:1-4

3. What does “your life is hidden with Christ in God” mean to you?

4. What have you found helpful to enable you to “think of what is above” during your daily life?

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THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER—April 19, 2020

Introduction: “To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others” is the first goal of *Go and Make Disciples*.¹ Hopefully your enthusiasm for your faith in Christ is riding high after having focused on his passion, death and resurrection. Now you are faced with the ever-present option, do you keep the fire of Christ burning in your heart or do you let the embers grow cold and ashen like an abandoned fire? Because God is a gracious God, the option is yours.

How can a person maintain enthusiasm for Christ, and the things of Christ? It seems that when we look at the first century Christians, who turned their world upside down with their enthusiasm, several things stand out. We see in the first reading that they were “devoted” to Jesus and to pleasing him. The word “devoted” means to give ourselves over to something, purposefully, and ardently. Lukewarmish-ness wasn’t an issue to these early believers because they knew they might be called on to die for their faith. Unlike Thomas, who would only believe when he could see and feel Jesus’ wounds, early believers loved Jesus, even though having not physically seen him. And though they did not see, still they believed. Was it easier for them, than for us? No! It still took faith and commitment. And like the early Christians, when we reaffirm our love and faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit will respond to our receptivity, and like a breath from heaven that blows on the embers of our faith, he will reignite our enthusiasm.

Sometimes, in *good* times, it seems easy to be a Christian, but what about the difficult times, the times of trials and testing of which the second reading speaks, and the psalmist during his times of “falling” found that the “Lord helped me.” Many of the early Christians experienced very difficult times, even times of persecution, and they found that the Lord’s help and strength often came in the form of Christian community and companionship. Consequently, they availed themselves of the opportunities to be with others who were alive with faith. They were devoted to Jesus *in the midst* of community and communion. If we were to take a brilliantly glowing coal from a roaring, hot fire, and set it off by itself, in a short period of time the formerly glowing coal would become ashen and cold. Similarly, when we withdraw ourselves from the warmth and glow of others who are alive in Christ, we will also grow cold in a short period of time. God provides community for us through other believers, and we need this life-giving presence of Jesus’ body to maintain our enthusiasm. Accordingly, the rest of Christ’s body needs us, for it is in relationship with other believers that both the Living Word and the written Word are more fully made known to us.

“But God has put this Word into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation.”²

The option is yours! What will you do differently this year to keep the fires of your faith enthusiastically aflame?

¹ Published by the National Council of Catholic Bishops.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*.

First Reading — Acts 2:42-47

1. How can a person who isn’t in a religious vocation “devote” themselves to the teachings, communal life, breaking bread, and praying?

2. What do you think attracted others to put their trust in Jesus for salvation, and unite with these early Christians?

Responsorial Reading — Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24

Second Reading — 1 Peter 1:3-9

3. Salvation is described as being “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.” Explain each of these terms in your own words.

Gospel Reading — John 20:19-31

4. How do you feel when you hear someone express doubt regarding Christ? What do you think causes doubt and fear to arise in our lives?

5. What is Jesus’ message for our fears and doubt?

6. What does the phrase “that you *may* come to believe” imply to you?

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER—April 26, 2020

Introduction: How do you feel when you meet someone for the second time, and they don't recognize you or know who you are? Do you feel somewhat diminished? Do you not wonder whether this relational disconnect is a reflection of your unimportance, their lack of understanding of your value, or is it just a case of bad memory? Jesus also went unrecognized by many, but he was not lessened by their failure to recognize him. In some cases, people like the Israelites Peter spoke to in the first reading, didn't recognize Jesus as being from God, or as being the Messiah and Savior. Others, like the disciples in today's Gospel reading, caught up in their own woundedness, also failed to recognize him as they moved through their daily life.

It is difficult to imagine that the disciples could be in the actual presence of the resurrected Savior, conversing with him, yet unable to recognize him. But is it really so hard to believe? We too are often in the actual presence of Jesus and fail to recognize him. When we are with other believers, in whom Jesus lives, he is there, really there. When we read or hear the Scriptures, he is there, really there. When we unite with others around the Eucharist, Christ is present, really present. Sadly, we often fail to recognize him.

Like the disciples' experience on the road to Emmaus, there is no recognition unless the Lord opens our understanding and reveals himself. It was in the Scriptures and in the breaking of the bread that Jesus revealed himself to the disciples. These are the means he still chooses to show himself to us. We find throughout sacred Scripture pleas such as: "Speak Lord your servant listens." "Grant me understanding, that I may know your testimonies." "Incline my heart to the words of your mouth." Thoughts and prayers similar to these should be the continual response of our heart and lips. It is unfortunate, if we participate in spiritual activities without experiencing the Lord's presence. He is what our life is really all about.

Speaking of the need for the Lord to reveal himself, St. Thomas à Kempis says: "The Prophets can preach the word, but they cannot bestow the Spirit. They speak most eloquently, but if You are silent, they cannot fire the heart. They instruct in the letter, but You open the understanding. They set forth the mysteries, but You reveal the meaning of all secrets. They teach your commandments, but You help us to observe them. They point the way, but You grant us strength to follow it. Their action is external; You instruct and enlighten the heart. They water the seed; You make it fruitful. They proclaim the words, but You impart understanding to the mind.

"Therefore, let not Moses speak to me, but You, O Lord my God, the Everlasting Truth, . . ." ¹

The plaintive words of the disciples, "we had hoped," stand out in sharp contrast to the psalmist's exultation that "because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." Our spiritual future can be characterized by a hopeless, dull disappointment or by a vibrant experience of fulfillment. God is ever ready to open our eyes through the Scriptures and through the Eucharist, but we must be willing to seek him there. We do that by reading and meditating on sacred Scripture and by seeking his presence in the Eucharist. If we do either with only token commitment, we cannot expect anything other than a token recognition of his presence.

¹ *Introduction to the Devout Life.*

First Reading — Acts 2:14, 22-33

1. What convincing support does Peter offer to prove Jesus is the Messiah?

Responsorial Psalm — Psalms 16:1-2, 5, 7-11

Second Reading — 1 Peter 1:17-21

2. What is the motivation that would empower us to conduct our lives with reverence?

