

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *God of mercy, lead us on your path of goodness. Enlighten our minds so that we may come to know your truth and guide our footsteps in the way of righteousness. Be with us as we gather to break open your holy Word. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading and the Gospel are connected in that both speak of a 'yes' and a 'no' to God. In both readings, an initial 'yes' is later reversed into a 'no' and an initial 'no' into a 'yes.'

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Ezekiel 18:25-28

The historical context for this reading is Ezekiel addressing his fellow Israelites who are in exile in Babylon. They believe that they are being punished for the sins of their ancestors. This is why the reading begins with the statement: "*The Lord's way is not fair!*" The overall focus of Chapter 18 of Ezekiel is personal responsibility. The prophet wants the exiles to know that they will *not* be held responsible for their parents' sins, only for their own sins. Hence, the virtuous who sin and sinners who repent will receive consequences connected to their actions. This is also the message in the Gospel that Jesus is seeking to teach people. Our 'yes' and 'no' to him will have consequences.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 25

This psalm speaks beautifully of God's compassion for the sinner who turns to him. The note of conversion—as the Psalmist sees his own sins in the light of God's goodness—makes this psalm a suitable accompaniment to the change of heart mentioned in the first and third readings.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:1-11

While in prison, Paul hears from his visitors about the bickering and division amongst his beloved Philippians. From the deepest recesses of his heart, he appeals to them to change their destructive ways. Because they have been baptized into Christ, they are called to live in fellowship characterized by love, humility, mutual respect, altruism and unity. Paul holds Jesus up for his readers as their model for this transformation process. Look at Jesus; even though he is God, he is

willing to surrender his equality with God in order to become fully human. He is willing to forgo his innocence to take on the sins of humanity. Because of his willingness to change, God fills him with his glory. In placing before them the self-emptying of Christ, Paul is suggesting to the Philippians a radical de-centering of their lives—from self-absorption to self-giving.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
Matt 21:28-32**

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 21:28-32

Today's Gospel is the first of three consecutive parables in Matthew on the theme of judgment and how each person is responsible for his/her choices.

Today's judgment parable is about two sons' response to a command by their father to go out and work in his vineyard. The *first son* initially says 'no' to his father but afterwards complies. The *second son*, on the other hand, says 'yes, sir' at first, but then ignores his father's command.

The *first son* represents sinners (tax collectors, prostitutes, etc.) who initially said 'no' to God, but are now saying 'yes' to Jesus. The second son personifies Jesus' audience, the religious

leaders of the Jewish people and recipients of God's revelation. They and their ancestors at one time said 'yes' to God, but are now saying 'no' to him by their rejection of Jesus. The first group, in cooperation with the grace of God, is able to turn around and open their hearts to Jesus. The latter group refuses to have a change of mind and heart, and is therefore shut out of the Kingdom.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. The second reading is challenging in its radical call. Which: "same mind, same love, united in heart" etc. do you find most challenging and why?
3. As you reflect on your life, do you identify with either of the brothers in today's parable? If so, share why.
4. If someone complained to you that God isn't fair, how would you respond?
5. What can distract us from saying a whole-hearted 'yes' to God?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking

*Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you.
When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how some-thing(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Dear Jesus, your Mother's life was one big 'yes' to God. Help me to be more aware of how I say 'yes' and 'no' to you as I move through our day.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Try to be aware of how often you say 'yes' and 'no' to God and to people as you go through your day and week.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: Let us now take a few moments to add any other prayers of petition and intercession that we may have: prayers for our own needs, for family members, for our larger world.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Jesus,
during your life on earth,
your life was one big 'yes'
to your Father.*

*Help us to turn our 'no's'
to you into yes,
one yes at a time.*

This we pray.

Amen.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Lord Jesus, we gather in your name to share our lives and your Word. We thank you for this opportunity. Breathe your Spirit on us so that we may know the message you have for each of us today. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings present an image of Israel as a vineyard where God, the Divine Planter and Cultivator, has sown his seed. But Israel has failed miserably to produce a good harvest. In the second reading, Paul exhorts the Philippians to avoid anxiety, to be prayerful, and to constantly seek to do what is honorable, good and true.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 5:1-7

Isaiah 'sings of his friend' who has a vineyard. His friend (God) does everything he could for his vineyard (Israel) to produce good fruit. Instead, all it yields are sour grapes. Because the vineyard fails to respond to God's gracious care, it will become what it has been without his favor, namely, a wilderness. As we shall see, today's Gospel also echoes this theme of unfruitfulness.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 80

The theme of the vineyard is continued in this psalm. The psalmist petitions God to watch his vineyard.

SECOND READING: Philippians 4:6-9

Paul addresses the "worry warts" in the Philippian community. In times of worry and anxiety, they are exhorted to turn to God in prayer and place their trust in him. In doing

so, they will come to know the "peace that surpasses all understanding." Then Paul exhorts his readers to live lives patterned after Christ. Christian thinking and behavior will open them to the kind of peace that only God can give.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt 21:33-43

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 21:33-43

Another of the judgment parables immediately follows last week's story of the two sons. These two parables are a call to conversion for both the Pharisees and the Chief Priests. In the parable, Jesus invites his audience to assess the characters in the story, and then applies the lesson of the story directly to his defiant audience. In passing judgment on the characters in the story, the religious leaders unwittingly pass judgment on themselves. Instead of welcoming Jesus as God's messenger, they, like the tenants, plan to kill him. Jesus tells the parable *not* to condemn the religious leaders, but to call them to conversion. If they repent of their sins, they too, like the Gentiles, will be part of God's kingdom.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. In the second reading, Paul says: "*Have no anxiety at all....*" Easier said than done. What helps you to deal with anxiety?
3. Also in the second reading, Paul says: "*Keep doing what you have learned.*" Can you name one or two lessons you have learned in the course of your life?
4. We may throw ourselves into many things—e.g., children, relationships, parish, business, gardening— but in the end, all our efforts could produce "sour grapes." What helps you to deal with poor results from a lot of effort?
5. How can we resist God's call to ongoing conversion?

6. Name one thing that today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how some-thing(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, many things in life can cause us to be anxious. When I become anxious, teach me how to place my trust in you.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Be aware of what causes you to be anxious and how you deal with it. Be conscious of how God may be calling you to some form of conversion and how you may be resisting it.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what or for whom do we need to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Loving and gracious God,
help us to put aside all anxiety
and put our trust in you
so that we can experience
the peace that passes all understanding.
This we pray through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

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

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading and the Gospel uses banquet imagery to speak of God's heavenly blessings. In the second reading, Paul shares with us how he has learned to live with abundance and with poverty.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 5:1-7

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

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

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 23

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

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

This concludes our month-long series of readings from Philippians. While Paul is incarcerated, some of the Philippians send him gifts to help him endure the hardships of prison life. While grateful for the gifts, Paul shares that through his missionary journeys, he has learned to be content with both famine and feast. Eating well or going hungry cannot compare with the strength Paul experiences in surrendering his life to Christ. He learns what Mary, the sister of Martha, had also come to know: "Only one thing is necessary," namely, belonging to and being possessed by Christ. With Christ, Paul can say: "*My food is to do the will of him who sent me*" (Jn

4:34). Paul concludes by exhorting his readers to place their trust in the “magnificent riches of God.”

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 22:1-14

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 22:1-14

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

There is one troubling verse in the Gospel which reads: “*The King was enraged and sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.*” What are we to make of this verse, assuming that the King in the story represents God? Scholars tell us that the destruction of the city by the King is a reference to the Roman emperor’s

destruction of Jerusalem about 70 AD, before Matthew wrote his Gospel. It would seem that Matthew interpreted this violent event as God’s punishment of the Jews for their rejection of Jesus. But such an interpretation does not square with Jesus’ love for *all* people—Jew and Gentile alike. As stated above, the main point of the parable is *not* about what God is like, but about the *negative response* of the religious leaders and all those invited to Jesus’ call to enter the Kingdom that he is inaugurating.

The final piece about the ‘*wedding garment*’ underlines the importance of not only saying ‘yes’ to Christ, but also *living* according to his values. It is one thing to present oneself for Baptism; it is another thing to *live daily* the Christian way of life. We must “clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience” (Colossians 3:12). While all are invited to the banquet of God’s Kingdom, not all will respond.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Paul speaks about living with abundance and with very little. What has been your experience in life? Have you had an experience of both abundance and very little?
3. What does living out your baptism mean to you?

4. The image of a banquet is one of the most common images used in the Bible to describe the Kingdom of God or heaven. Why do you think this is so? What makes a banquet a suitable image of heaven?

5. Do you believe everyone is invited to have a place in God's Kingdom? What do you think constitutes a refusal or 'no' to Jesus' invitation?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how some-thing(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, you call us to sit at your table. Help me to act in all things as one of your children.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: As you move through the week, try to be aware to what extent your words and actions are a Christian response to those you interact with.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what or for whom do we need to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Lord Jesus,
you invite us to the banquet
of your love.
Help us to respond to your
Invitation with our hearts adorned
with love of God and neighbor.*

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

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

Response to last week's Word: Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading and the Gospel speaks of the Lordship of God over human powers. The second reading warmly thanks the Thessalonians for the way they have grown in faith, hope and charity.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

God addresses the king in a formal statement, like a royal decree, empowering him to undertake some tasks. What makes this decree extraordinary is that it is addressed to a pagan king, Cyrus, who unknowingly is anointed by God to defeat the enemies of Israel and return the exiles to their homeland.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 96

This psalm celebrates God as the King of Israel.

SECOND READING: 1Thessalonians 1:1-5

For the next five weeks, the second reading will be from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. The tone of the book is warm, tender and positive. Paul obviously has great affection for this particular Christian community. In these opening verses, Paul

warmly thanks God for the way the Thessalonians are growing in faith, hope and charity. He reminds them that their conversion is due to the power of the Holy Spirit working through him.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt 22:15-21

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 22:15-21

Today's Gospel is the first of four clashes (often called 'entrapment' stories) between Jesus and various representatives of Judaism. In today's Gospel or entrapment story, the Pharisees and the Herodians ask Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" The question is put to Jesus to see whether he would declare himself on the side of the Pharisees who oppose paying taxes to the Romans, or on the side of the Herodians who collaborate with the Romans. If Jesus conceded to the payment of taxes to Caesar, he would lose the esteem of ordinary Jews who very much resent the payment of taxes to the Romans. On the other hand, if he opposed it, he could be accused of instigating rebellion against the Romans.

Jesus, aware of the malicious intent of the Pharisees and the Herodians to trick him, and knowing full well that they are not really interested in God or in taxes, asks for a coin: "*Show me the coin that pays the census tax.*" The fact that there is such a coin shows that they have accepted Roman rule, revealing their hypocrisy. Jesus duly declares that if the coin has Caesar's image on it, then it belongs to Caesar and they should give it to Caesar. But Jesus adds something they did not expect. While they (and we) are obliged to pay taxes, Jesus tells them (and us) that they (and we) are to "*give to God what belongs to God.*" In essence, Jesus is telling them (and us) that there is a kingdom much greater and more important than Caesar's. Since God made *all* things (which bear his image), *everything* belongs to God.

Patricia Sanchez writes: "*Everywhere we go we belong to God for we bear his imprint. We belong to God, not just in church but in our homes, our work places and in the voting*

booth and we must bring God's values to all of these places."

(Used with permission *The Word We Celebrate: Commentary on the Sunday lectionary Years A, B, C*, by Patricia Sanchez, Sheed & Ward publisher (9-1-89.)

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. In the first reading, Cyrus was unaware that he was carrying out God's will when he made it possible for the Jews to return to their homeland. Can you think of a leader or someone else who is not a believer but is unknowingly carrying out God's will?
3. How easy – or hard – is it for you to give thanks to God always and why?
4. When you vote in the upcoming election, what issues take center stage for you? How does your Catholic faith inform your vote? (No need to get into a political debate. Just share the issues that are important to you and why.)
5. When it comes to political and some religious issues, our country is very divided. What if anything can be done to bring us together for the sake of the common good?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on*

Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how some-thing(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Loving and caring God, we bear your imprint. Help me to remember this as I go about my daily work and as I vote this November.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: As you prepare to vote this November, prayerfully look on all the issues and not just one issue.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what or for whom do we need to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

God Our Father

We ask that you give us grace to persevere

Through whatever trials and upheavals

Come into our lives.

Help us to live in the awareness that

your Son is with us

And continues to draw us more deeply into

Communion with you

Through the working of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

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

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first reading and Gospel stress the integral connection between love of God and love of neighbor. In the second reading, Paul praises the Thessalonians for being a model Christian community

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Exodus 22:20-26

This reading from Exodus illustrates that there is an integral connection between love of God and love of neighbor. It especially underlines the call of the men in Israel to care for three groups of vulnerable people: women, orphans and aliens. In those times, women depend on their fathers, husbands, and sons to care for them. If they lose their father or their husband, and have no sons, they are often reduced to begging for a living. Orphans are children with no legal male guardians. Aliens are those who are passing through the land and those without relatives.

Today's reading is a strong exhortation to the men of Israel to care especially for the disadvantaged. Failure to do so would bring down God's wrath. The words "*I will kill you with the sword*" are not to be taken literally. Rather, they are intended to convey how

abominable it is in God's eyes to fail to care for the most vulnerable in their midst. Love of God and love of neighbor, especially the needy, are intimately connected.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 18

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

SECOND READING: Thessalonians 1:5-10

Thessalonica is a thriving crossroad city in the Roman Empire. As a result of Paul's anointed preaching, a dynamic Christian community is established and nurtured. In fact, this small Christian community becomes a wonderful example for many others, a model for all believers in Macedonia and Achaia. Their "lived faith" sounds forth to all around them. People everywhere can

see by their lifestyle how they have embraced Jesus and his teachings.

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
Matt 22:34-40**

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 22:34-40

Having failed to trap Jesus on the question of paying taxes, the Pharisees try it again. This time they have an expert in the law raise the question frequently asked of rabbis in those days: “*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*” Jesus’ answer combines two quotations from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. From Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus takes these words: “*You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.*” From Leviticus 19:18, Jesus adds: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Jesus and the Pharisees do not dispute the importance of the law. Their disagreement has to do with *emphasis*. The Pharisees, who tend to be legalistic, underscore *compliance to the law*. In contrast, Jesus places emphasis on love. Also, the Great Commandment *joins together* love of God and neighbor—something that has not been previously done. In one of his epistles, John remarks: “*How can you say you love God whom you do not see when*

you do not love your neighbor whom you can see” (1Jn 4:20).

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. The first reading is clear about treatment of aliens, widows and orphans and yet this is a huge political and social justice issue in our country today. Discuss ideas of what can and should be done to avert God’s wrath.

3. When it comes to civil law or church law, do you tend to be a strict follower of the law? Explain.

4. Jesus was constantly challenging the traditional beliefs and interpretations of the law as seen by the scribes and Pharisees. Would you say you are usually open to new ideas or new insights—or resistant?

5. The Great Commandment includes ‘love of self.’ What is the difference between selfish love and true love of self? What does the latter mean?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how some-thing(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, your Great Commandment is the fulfillment of the whole Law and the heart of Christianity. Show me concrete ways that I can live this Commandment more fully.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: As you move through this week, be aware of how you are—or are not—living the Great Commandment to love God, neighbor and self.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For whom and for what do we need to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Love is our origin.

Love is our constant calling.

Love is our final fulfillment in heaven.

*Father, you have given us Jesus
to show us how to walk the way of love.*

*In and through your Holy Spirit,
your love has been poured into our hearts.
Help us to remember that life here on earth
is all about growing in love of you, others
and self.*

Amen.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

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

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

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

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

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

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

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 131

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

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

In contrast to the priests in Malachi's time and the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' time, Paul proves himself to be an authentic teacher

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

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matthew 23:1-2

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel
Then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 23: 1-2

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

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

into their own hearts and see to what extent the spirit of the Pharisee lies within.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. Paul showed great affection for his communities and yet he often chastised them for their failings. As parents, teachers, leaders, managers, etc., what suggestions do you have for balancing these two roles?
3. Are there forms of Phariseeism present in today's Church? If so, how do they manifest themselves? How might a spirit of Phariseeism manifest itself in us?
4. What qualities in leaders turn you off the most? What qualities attract you the most?
5. To whom is it easy for you to offer service? To whom might you offer it to begrudgingly?
6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, please help me to have a servant's heart, humble and sincere.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

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

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

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

God, Our Father,

Give us pure spirit so we can see you,

A humble spirit so we can hear you,

A loving spirit so we can serve you,

A believing spirit so we can live with you.

Amen,

SOLEMNITY OF ALL SAINTS A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Holy God, we praise you today for setting before us the witness of so many holy men and women who have gone before us in the faith, and who have modeled for us the ways of Jesus. As we break open your Word, may your Holy Spirit be with us to guide us in our sharing. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: As early as the fourth century, the saints were remembered during the celebration of the Eucharist. At first, it was the martyrs, then the confessors (holy men and women who were not martyred but who lived a life that imitated Christ). Today, we remember all those throughout history who have allowed the face of God to be seen in them. In the first reading, we have a vision of the victorious followers of Christ rejoicing in his presence. In the second reading, John speaks of us as children of God destined to see him one day as he is. The Gospel introduces us to the Beatitudes which are the essential qualities for all seeking to live holy lives.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Revelations 7:2-4, 9-14

The Book of Revelation was written to give hope to the early Christians who were experiencing terrible persecution under the Emperor Domitian (81-96 AD). Today's reading contains excerpts from two visions portraying in vivid imagery the salvation of the just.

In the first vision, John has a glimpse of the last terrible days when a final assault on the earth is brought on by every evil power. But before this terror and devastation happens, the faithful will be marked with the seal of God to protect them and bring them home safely to heaven.

The figure 144,000 is symbolic and by no means implies that only 144,000 persons will be saved.

The second vision takes place in heaven. It begins by mentioning "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and tongue." (This speaks to the universality of God's people.) These people standing now before the throne of God are martyrs and those who have remained faithful to God during a time of great persecution and trial. Their salvation comes from God who enabled them to remain faithful during a time of great trial. This vision is intended to give hope to all those currently going through a time of

great trial and persecution. It is as if John is saying: “You remain faithful and you too will stand before the Lamb on the throne of God.”

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 24

The psalm has strong liturgical features, probably in celebration of the Ark’s coming to Jerusalem and God’s enthronement in the temple.

SECOND READING: 1John 3:1-3

John probes the mystery of God’s love revealed in and through Jesus Christ: “Beloved, see what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called children of God.” It is amazing to realize that we are God’s children: “Yet so we are.” Our challenge is to become who we are through Baptism.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt 5:1-12

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 5:1-12

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) is considered the heart of Jesus’ teaching. The Beatitudes (today’s Gospel) are considered to be the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. They list the qualities Christ wishes to see in

his followers, qualities exemplified in the lives of the saints. Reflecting on the Beatitudes, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes.

The beatitudes are the badges of a disciple of Jesus. The things they stand for are very beautiful – things such as peace, goodness, joy, love, gentleness, compassion, mercy, integrity.... A person who lives according to the beatitudes is already living in the kingdom of heaven. Eternal life will merely be the full blossoming of a plant that is green with life.

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FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.
2. How would you describe a holy person?
3. Holy people live the *Beatitudes*. Yet when we are asked to describe holiness, few of us would say that it involves living the *Beatitudes*. Why is this?
4. Which of the *Beatitudes* do you feel most drawn to? Which *Beatitude* is for you the most difficult?
5. Who is your favorite saint? Why?
6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Glorious Lord, you have placed the saints before us as examples of how to live a good holy life. Help me to be more serious about my call to live a holy life.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: As you move through this week, be aware of how you are—or are not—living the Great Commandment to love God, neighbor and self.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For whom and for what do we need to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Jesus, help me to spread
your fragrance everywhere I go:
flood my soul with your spirit and life;
penetrate and possess my whole being
so utterly that all my life may only be
a radiance of yours;
shine through me and be so in me
that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me,
but only Jesus!*

Amen.

- St. John Henry Newman

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

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

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

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

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Wisdom 6:12-16

The Book of Wisdom is one of the seven books of the Old Testament and only found in Catholic Bibles. It was written about 100 BC.

Today's reading describes how accessible wisdom is to all who seek her.

"She is readily perceived by those who love her, and is found by those who seek her."

For the Wisdom author, true wisdom is right relationship with God. Those who find wisdom will be free of worry. They will not worry over the coming of the Lord because they live in a spirit of vigilance. Those who do not seek wisdom will remain foolish and be filled with worry about many things.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 63

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

SECOND READING: 1Thessalonians 4:13-18

The Thessalonians apparently believe that those who had died before the return of Christ have perished forever. Paul reminds them that the Resurrection of Christ is only a beginning, that all the baptized will be raised up as Christ was. That is why Paul can refer to the dead as having merely "fallen asleep." Mourners for the dead should temper their grief with hope.

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

**PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:
Matt 25:1-13**

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 25:1-13

Scholars tell us that many of Jesus’ parables have two or more levels of meaning to them. The first level is the *intended* meaning for the *original* audience. In the original audience, the wise ones are those who hear and embrace the message of Jesus. The *foolish* ones are those who close their hearts to his message.

At the *second level*, the intended audience is Matthew’s own community (living some 40+ years later). His fellow Jews, who choose not to receive Jesus (the bride-groom) or the Church, are the *foolish and unprepared bridesmaids*. But others, mainly Gentiles, accept the message of Jesus as preached by the early Christians. These are regarded as wise.

At a *third level*, the parable is used by Matthew to teach a lesson to *all* believers about *vigilance*. Here the wise ones are those believers who keep their lamps trimmed in preparing to meet Jesus by daily hearing and keeping his Word. The ‘foolish’ ones are those who hear Jesus’ message but do not act on it, just like the man who builds his house on sand and has nothing to fall back on in time of crisis. The Gospel ends with a warning for all readers: since no one knows the day or hour of Jesus’ return, all would be wise to maintain an attitude of continuous preparedness.

Some of us may criticize those who had oil for failing to share with those who had no oil. Scholars point out that the parable is *not* about compassionate giving to those without. It is a call to personal readiness for the Lord’s return. “*Stay awake for you do not know the day nor the hour.*” In addition, there are some things that we cannot share, especially when others have closed minds and show no interest in hearing from us.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. What verse, idea or image in the readings spoke to you most? Why?

3. What is your definition or description of wisdom? How can we grow in wisdom?

4. How differently would you live your life if you knew that you had only six months to live?

5. What can help us to remain vigilant for the Lord's comings into our lives?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how some-thing(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, in today's Gospel, you ask us to be vigilant to your comings into our lives; deepen my desire for this virtue.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

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

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For whom and for what do we need to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Jesus, Wisdom of God,
place in our hearts a deep desire
to grow in your heavenly wisdom.*

*Help us to never forget
that you are always ready and willing
to share with us your Wisdom.*

Amen.

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

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

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, the author describes all that a good wife embodies. Amongst other things, she uses her talents to bless others. In the second reading, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to be watchful and ready for when the Lord comes at the end of the age, which no one knows when. In the Gospel, we are urged to put our God-given talents to use for the good of mankind and the greater glory of God.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm, and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

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

This reading paints a picture of an ideal or worthy wife. Today's Gospel defines the woman as one who uses her talents well in contrast to the servant who buries his talents. Also, in the context of Wisdom literature (which the Book of Proverbs is), the industrious woman is a personification of Wisdom.

Wisdom literature extols the blessings of wisdom as a great prize, worth more than gold, more than a long life or power. Wisdom imparts to all who befriend her that all they need to be successful in the world, is their relationship with God and their family. The wise woman "is a value beyond pearls, her

children rise up to praise her (not in today's reading); she reaches out to the poor."

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 128

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

**SECOND READING:
1Thessalonians 5:1-6**

Paul continues to respond to questions about Jesus' return. He tells the Thessalonians that having no knowledge of the day nor the hour, they should be in constant vigilance and live always as children of the light.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 25:14-30

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

A participant reads the Gospel, then all pause to reflect.

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 25:14-30

This Gospel is addressed to Jesus's disciples who are compared to servants entrusted with certain talents which are to be used well to promote Jesus' mission.

It is important to note that the mean and very demanding master in the story does not represent God. Having said that, we can say that in telling this story, Jesus is saying to his disciples (and to us) that the time of waiting for his return is not to be a time of passive waiting or non-engagement out of fear of failure. Waiting for Jesus' return is "a time of opportunity, of active engagement and creative growth" (Diane Bergant). In his first letter, St. Peter reminds us: "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace" (4:10). This parable is teaching the disciples (and us) to not let the fear of failure and fear of unacceptability prevent us from using the gifts we have received.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from

commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. Name some of the talents or gifts God has given you. What gifts or talents have you developed? What gifts or talents still wait to be developed?

3. What gifts or talents have you shared in the past? Or do you currently share those gifts or talents with your Church or wider community?

4. Are you hiding a gift that you should be using to benefit others?

5. Is there a 'stepping up to the plate' that you have not done out of fear of failure? Can you name a time you 'stepped up to the plate' even though you had a fear of failure?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING

Having listened to God's Word and listened to others reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how some-thing(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Father, Giver of all good gifts, thank you for the gifts you have given us. Help me to see if there is a gift I am not using and to begin to use it to bless others. In Jesus name, I pray.*

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: Spend time thinking about a talent you have that has not been developed or is developed but has not been used to bless others.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For whom and for what do we need to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Heavenly Father,
thank you for blessing your Church
family with a multitude of gifts.
Thank you for the gifts you
have given me.
Help us all to be good stewards
of your blessings.
Amen.*

THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST THE KING A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

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

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: On December 1, 1925, Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical *Quas Primas* (Latin for “in the first”) establishing the Solemnity of Christ the King—which we celebrate this coming weekend—on the last Sunday of each Liturgical Year. In the 1920's, Mussolini and fascism were on the rise, the decadence of the Roaring Twenties was off and running. In response to the rise of fascism and the decadence in the culture, Pope Pius XI wanted people to look to Christ as the King of the Universe. The Pope wanted people to see Christ the King as the answer to all the chaos currently going on in the world.

Today's first reading images God as a Good Shepherd caring for his sheep. The Gospel images Jesus as Judge of the nations and individuals. In the second reading, Paul tells us Christ will reign as universal King, having overcome all hostile forces, including death.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the First Reading, the Psalm and the Second Reading, pausing briefly after each one.

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

The historical context for the Book of Ezekiel is the Babylonian exile. After the fall of Jerusalem, those still alive are taken into exile in Babylon.

*“By the rivers of Babylon
we sat mourning and weeping.”* (Ps 137:1)

During their time in exile, the people have no shepherds, no leaders. Ezekiel, a prophet also in exile, tells his people that God is going to

step into the vacuum of leadership and become their Good Shepherd who will:

- seek out the lost sheep
- tend to his flock
- lead his flock to rich pastures
- bind up the wounds of the injured and sick
- and be a judge of bad shepherds.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 23

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

SECOND READING:

1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28

The context for this reading is an argument Paul is having with some Corinthians who do not believe in the resurrection of the body.

Paul asserts that Christ has been raised from the dead, and when he returns, all the faithful—living and dead—will be raised up. Then Christ will hand over the Kingdom to his Father. After that, all earthly powers and the forces of evil, including death, will be destroyed.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL:

Matt 25:31-46

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 25:31-46

Commenting on this Gospel, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the great Russian author, is also a Christian who took seriously the demands of the Great Sermon (Matthew

5-7) and attempted to live his life accordingly. One day, a beggar stopped him while he was out walking and asked him for alms. Tolstoy searched his pockets for a coin but, finding none, he said with regret, "Please don't be angry with me, my brother, but I have nothing with me; if I did, I would gladly give it to you." At that, the beggar's face brightened with joy. "You have given me more than I asked for," he said, "you have called me brother!" Tolstoy had not only grasped the intent of the Great Sermon but he had also penetrated the truth of today's Gospel. He regarded the poor man asking him for alms as a brother because he had understood and made his own the great commandment (Matthew 22:37). But he had also learned to see the face of Christ in the poor and, because of that insight, he met the criteria of judgment set forth for our consideration in this Matthean text.

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

sisters. The blessed are those who have ministered to the needs of the poor. In doing so, they have ministered to Christ himself.

(Used with permission *The Word We Celebrate: Commentary on the Sunday Lectionary Years A, B, C*, by Patricia Sanchez, -Sheed & Ward publisher (9-1-89).

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Share with the group or person next to you what spoke to you most in the Gospel. With this first question, try to refrain from commenting on what others said. Just share what spoke to you and then move on to the next person.

2. The first reading is a comforting image of the shepherd rescuing, healing, caring for his sheep until the line “the sleek and the strong I will destroy.” Discuss.

3. When and how is it hard for you to see the way you are treating others (especially those we find hard to love) is the way you are treating Christ?

4. Our non-Catholic brothers and sisters, especially the Evangelicals, say that if you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you will be saved. Matthew seems to offer another means of salvation: compassion for the least of our brothers and sisters. How do you believe we will be saved?

5. What can help us or hinder us from seeing Christ in the poor and homeless?

6. Name one thing today’s Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God’s Word and listened to others reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on*

Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how some-thing(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, you are present in the face of each person we encounter. Help me to be more aware of that presence.*

RESPONDING TO GOD’S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week’s readings. Suggestion: Take an inventory of what you have in your home and decide on three items that you can give to those in need.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: Especially pray for the agencies that serve the needs of the poor.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
we thank you as we come to the end
of another Liturgical Year
and for the blessings and graces
received this past year.
As we continue our earthly journey
towards your heavenly home,
help us to keep our eyes on you,
our Good Shepherd,
and help us to be always ready and willing
to help those in need.
Amen.*