



Breaking Open the Word of Faith

Good News Reflections for the Sundays of January, 2012

by Terry A . Modica



Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother Of God

January 1, 2012

Read:

Numbers 6:22-27

Ps 67:2-3, 5-6, 8

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21



Reflect:

Today we have a very special opportunity to consecrate the new year to the Mother of Christ, opening ourselves to her protection and help, and asking God to make this a year of many blessings.

In the first reading, God teaches Moses how to pass blessings onto others. Today's responsorial psalm includes a request for God to bless us. The second reading describes the greatest blessing we've received: our adoption by God the Father, who has made available to us every blessing under the heavens and in heaven.

The people who heard the testimony of the shepherds in the Gospel reading were amazed. How often are you amazed by the Lord? Awe comes from recognizing the presence of Jesus in everything we see, do, hear, etc. With Jesus, we're even blessed in situations that feel like curses, because he is with us.

To experience this, we have to keep our eyes on Jesus at all times. Look past the problems: There is the victorious Jesus already working on your behalf! He was born for your sake and gave up his life for you; of course he is also doing everything else that will provide God's goodness to you!

Look past your emotional reactions to hardships: There is the peace of Christ! It's available when you decide to trust in the love and the wisdom of Christ.

Look past the person who is sinning against you: There is Jesus comforting you! He is trying to kiss your wounds and heal your heart. He speaks to you through scripture, through Holy Mass, through perhaps a counselor, and many other ways. This is available when you choose to forgive.

In every situation, keep your eyes on Jesus so that you can see his hand reaching toward you, offering to bless you.

When Mary looked at the shepherds, did she see scruffy, stinky strangers? Of course not. She saw numerous blessings. Look at the scruffy people in your own life – through Mary's eyes. How many blessings do you see?

Mary the Mother of God our Savior wants to show you the countless blessings that come from knowing her Son: blessings that await you as you follow Jesus, and blessings you already have because Jesus is at your side right now.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† Count your blessings. Make a list of everything that's good in your life, including past blessings that give you warm, happy memories. The Lord has done great things for you. How does this reassure you today?

† What will you do this year to become more aware of God's blessings?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Name the blessings of the Christmas Season.

† In what ways has Mary revealed Jesus to you?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

Epiphany of the Lord

January 8 (or 6), 2012

Read:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-13

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Reflect:

The Season of Christmas ends with a celebration of the adoration of magi from the East who had sought and found Christ the newborn king.

The Greek word "magi" meant oriental scientists. Also called astrologers, their worship of Jesus does not validate astrology, which assigns power over us to stars and planets; rather, it validates that Jesus was born to bring salvation to all, Gentiles as well as Jews. Their arrival at the manger demonstrates that Jesus was born for the sake of all who recognize that only God should have power over us. Jesus was born to free us from sin and all other forces that control us.

The magi also demonstrate that gift-giving is a normal part of worship. Their gift of gold honored Jesus as king. Their gift of incense honored Jesus as God. And their gift of myrrh honored the gift that Jesus would eventually give to us: his death. He was born to sacrifice his life for us. He took to the cross our sins, and then his resurrection destroyed the power of sin and the power of demons who tempt us to sin.

The gifts of the magi become gifts that we all give to Jesus: Gold represents our righteousness, which Christ's kingship over our lives makes possible so that we become more and more saintly each day. Incense represents our prayers going up to God – prayers that involve giving God the gift of our trust. And myrrh is the gift of suffering for Christ: the sacrifices we make for the sake of his ongoing mission of transforming our world.

The word "epiphany" means a moment of discovery, a revelation that changes our lives. Did the magi have an epiphany about Jesus when they came into



his presence? Did they realize that they were looking at the Savior of the world? Did they want this little baby to save them from their own sins? We can safely assume that they never forgot about their trip to Bethlehem. Surely they kept their ears open for news about him as the years passed. Probably they heard about the King of the Jews who was crucified.

We know became very saintly Christians; their relics still exist and have been venerated since very early times.

What about you and me? Will we remember Jesus in a new way this year? Will our worship of him transform us? Will the power of sin be defeated by our faith in Christ as we face temptations?

Hopefully, we have been changed this Advent and Christmas Season by a new rebirth of Jesus into our lives and – through our lives – out into the world.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† What's the gold you're giving to Jesus? What is your incense? What is your myrrh?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Describe an epiphany you have had during this past Advent and the Season of Christmas.

† How will you take this out to others so that they, too, experience Christ more completely?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

The Baptism of the Lord

January 8 (or 9), 2012

Read:

Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7 or Isaiah 55:1-11

Ps 29:1-4,9-10 or Isaiah 12:2-6

Acts 10:34-38 or 1 John 5:1-9

Mark 1:7-11



Reflect:

Why was Jesus baptized? He wasn't in need of repentance. Why, for that matter, did Jesus do anything at all? Not just to save us from our sins by dying on the cross! There is much more to it than that.

Jesus united himself to sinners. First he humbled himself to become one of us, a human being with the same needs. Then he surrendered himself to the baptismal water so that when we are baptized, he is there in the water with us, raising us up to a new life, the holy life, everlasting life.

Everything that Jesus did shows us by example who we are: what the Father created us to be like and how we are to live as children of God. When Jesus was baptized and the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the Father said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased," he showed us by example what happens at every person's baptism.

The Holy Spirit descended upon *you* and the Father said about *you*: "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased!"

Baptismal water is the womb of God from which we are reborn into his family and his ministry. When we bless ourselves with holy water fonts, making the sign of the cross, we renew our baptisms.

In the Jordan River, Jesus was reborn from ordinary life to a life of ministry. Baptism does that for us, too. Is there some repentance you need to do so that you can be reborn more fully into what the Father created you to do – your divine purpose, the ministry he has called you to do?

Let us begin the season of Ordinary time with a renewal of our baptismal purification and commitment,

so that we may be renewed as followers of Christ in holiness and in ministry.

"Dear God, I am a sinner. I sometimes fail to put You first in my life. Forgive me. Change me. Renew me. To demonstrate that I mean it, that I truly want You to be Lord of my life completely, I will do a special act, just as Jesus put his life fully into the Father's hands by surrendering to

John's baptism and allowing his own rebirth. The act that I choose to do is _____. Amen!"

And God the Father says of you: "This is my beloved son/daughter; with him/her I am well pleased!"

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† What do you know about your baptism? When was it? Where? Who was there? Was there a party?

† Think beyond the obvious: Who of the saints and angels were there? What kind of party did they celebrate over your baptism – and why?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Share with your group what you know about the people and place and celebration of your baptism. How did this Sacrament affect your life as the years went by? Why does this mean that the Father is pleased with you?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 15, 2012

Read:

1 Samuel 3:3b-10,19

Ps 40:2,4,7-10

1 Corinthians 6:13c-15a,17-20

John 1:35-42



Reflect:

Like Jesus did to Simon Peter in this Sunday's Gospel passage, he says to you and to each of us: "What are you looking for?" When you pray, and when you look at a crucifix, or when you see a picture of Jesus, *what* exactly are you looking for?

Jesus says: "Come and see!" Come and see what? His love? His healing power? His supernatural ability to answer our prayers? Whatever we're looking for, the reason we're seeking it is because we don't yet have it.

Jesus is the fulfillment of every promise by God the Father. Jesus is the fullness of love, the provider of mercy, the divine healer, the perfect mediator of all our prayers and concerns, and everything else we truly need. So, why does it feel like something is still missing? Why do our lives feel incomplete? Why do our prayers seem unanswered?

The answer is revealed in what happened after Peter began to follow Jesus. We read about it in Samuel's response to God's invitation. We proclaim it in the Responsorial Psalm: "Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will."

Peter was privileged to witness first-hand the wondrous miracles of Jesus. He personally experienced God's love through the gentle eyes of Jesus, the tone of kindness in his voice, and the forgiveness that was visible in his smile.

Yet with all of this, Peter did not really find all that he was looking for – remember how easily he felt afraid or confused or uncertain – until he was on the giving end of it. He didn't discover the fullness of Jesus

until Jesus was no longer present in the flesh and Peter accepted the call to continue Christ's earthly ministry.

The same is true for us who have never seen Jesus' actual eyes or heard his actual voice. We find what we're seeking when we give it to others. Why? Because then we discover that we really had it all along! This is the miracle of "Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will."

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† What do you need from Jesus that he doesn't seem to be providing yet?

† At the core of your prayer requests, what is it you're really seeking?

† How can you find it by doing the will of God? Contemplate this question until you figure out something to *do*. Then do it and see what happens.

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† Describe a time when you gave away what you thought you didn't have. Perhaps it was money or something even more valuable, such as time. Perhaps it was patience or hope or love itself. How were you doing the will of God?

† What happened to your own needs afterward?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 22, 2012

Read:

Jonah 3:1-5,10

Ps 25:4-9

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20



Reflect:

This Sunday's Gospel reading is a call to surrender ourselves fully to God. "Now is the time of fulfillment" – not just 2000 years ago, not at the Second Coming of Christ, but right now in your life where you need Jesus the most.

"The kingdom of God is at hand" – what you need from the Lord is right here, at hand, ready for you.

"Repent, and believe in the gospel" means "Come follow Me and learn from Me to become like Me." For the first disciples, it meant dropping whatever they were doing to spend so much time with Jesus that their whole lives were forever affected.

And this is what it means for you and for me: We have to put aside our own agendas and overly busy schedules to spend more time following Jesus wherever he leads us.

In the modern world, we have become more dependent on our technological devices than on Jesus. Many of us cannot even go on vacation without remaining accessible to their employers via the cell phone. Somehow, we need to find a way to take a stand against this. It's one of the social justice teachings of the Church: We are actually called by God to rebel against working on Sundays and other days of rest. Why? Because we need to spend that time with Jesus quietly being restored and re-energized.

Unfortunately, Jesus doesn't walk through the door and circle dates on our calendar and write "Rest with Jesus" on it so that we can plan ahead. We have to follow his lead at a moment's notice – every moment. To experience the kingdom of God on the earthly side of heaven, we have to be willing to drop every-

thing to follow Jesus into unfamiliar places at unexpected times. We have to learn to follow his lead even in situations where his way is the surprising way.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

† What's on your to-do list? What keeps you busy?

† What are your goals for the future? What are you dreaming of?

† If Jesus has a different plan for your day or for your life, how easily could you switch over to new ideas and plans?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

† What are some of the nets you've abandoned in the past in order to follow Jesus?

† How difficult was that to do?

† Are you happy about it now? Why?

† How was this an experience of the kingdom of God on earth?

Comments/Prayer Requests:

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 29, 2012

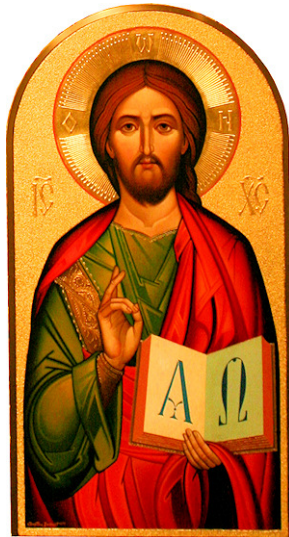
Read:

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Ps 95:1-2,6-9

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Mark 1:21-28



Reflect:

This Sunday's Gospel reading illustrates the authority of Jesus. If we truly accept and understand his authority over our lives, we can rejoice in the Lord even when life hands us hardships.

Why? Because we know that Christ's authority is supreme, which means that everything we've placed under his authority will produce good fruits. Even bad situations will be transformed into blessings. Tragedies will be changed into triumphs. Sorrows will be transfigured into joy. Frustrations will lay the groundwork for new growth, new knowledge, and a greater ability to minister to others.

However, if we reject Christ's authority by acting as if we're the ones in charge, deciding for ourselves how to end a problem or how and when to escape from a hardship, our problems will only get worse. This is called "moral relativism." Pope Benedict often speaks up against it: He defines relativism as "allowing oneself to be carried about with every wind of 'doctrine'..." (April 19, 2005).

The path to joy has been forged by the footsteps of Jesus. To benefit from his authority over evil and over human sufferings, we have to follow his example and obey his teachings. This means choosing to trust him, realizing that his ways are the best ways even when they're unpleasant ways. It means that we're willing to reach resurrection glory by going through the cross with Jesus.

There are no successful shortcuts to the triumphant victory that awaits us. There is no easy way to overcome evil. If this were not true, Jesus wouldn't have needed to die on a cross.

The good news – the reason why we can rejoice – is that the most loving, most powerful, most wise One in the universe is using his supreme authority on our behalf. The question is: Will we submit to it?

Questions for Personal Reflection:

- † In what ways are you still rejecting Christ's authority by trying to do things your own way?
- † Which Church teachings have you been rejecting because you've decided to live by your own rules?
- † Are you willing to ask the Holy Spirit to change your mind on these matters and teach you the value of Christ's ways?

Questions for Faith Sharing:

- † In what ways do Christians often reject Christ's authority in favor of defining their own rules?
- † Why? What are the apparent risks to living completely under Christ's strict authority?
- † How can we replace these risks with a sense of safety?

Comments/Prayer Requests: