



A Word for Sunday

Father Albert Shamon

EDITOR'S NOTE: Father Shamon regularly sends his columns to us several weeks in advance. Unfortunately, the column for this Sunday, December 1, was misfiled in our office and was printed in our November 21 issue in place of the correct column for Sunday, Nov. 24. Below is the correct column for this Sunday, December 1. We apologize for the error.

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 21:25-28, 34-36; (R1) Jeremiah 33:14-16; (R2) 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2.

Next Sunday, the First of Advent, starts the Church year and Cycle C. As you know, the Church uses a three-year cycle for the Sunday readings (Cycle A, Cycle B, and Cycle C). In Cycle A, the gospel readings are taken predominantly from St. Matthew's gospel; in Cycle B, from Mark's; and in Cycle C, from St. Luke's. Any year divisible by three (1986, for example) is Cycle C, so the gospels this coming year will be mainly from St. Luke.

Bible study groups ought to focus on St. Luke this year. A good book to read on St. Luke would be the historical novel "Dear and Glorious Physician" by Taylor Caldwell.

When one is going on a vacation, the first thought is where, yet it's the last place arrived at. So at the beginning of the Church year, the first thing thought of is the last thing: the coming of Christ in power and glory.

It is terribly important to begin at the end, for only when we know where we are going can we make the plans that will get us there. So the Lucan gospel tells us we are heading toward an end of this world. That Christ will come again is absolutely certain; how He will come is up for grabs, but when He will come is absolutely uncertain. It is like that with death: we know it will come, but we do not know how or when it will come.

It is significant that the Church asks us to reflect not on our coming death, but on Christ's coming. The apostles — in Acts, as well as the epistles of Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude and Revelations — all exhort us to focus on the great event of the Lord's coming and to be ready for it. As the whole includes its parts, so the final coming includes death. If one is ready for the Lord's coming, one shall be ready for death.

Death at its best is a gloomy thing that happens to each alone. Christ's coming, which will be amid a vast throng, is the beginning of a life of glory for His own. Death bears some trace of the curse and

is generally accompanied by pain and sorrows. The Lord's coming, on the contrary, is a thought full of joy — "Stand up straight and raise your heads, for your ransom is near at hand."

That the Lord's coming may be that for us, Jesus admonished two things: be on guard and pray constantly.

"Be on guard" is a military term that evokes the picture of a sentry marching back and forth at his post. He is aware of his awesome responsibility. He looks about with bold and anxious scrutiny; the slightest sound arouses him. He is, not just awake; he is alert — on guard!

Suppose, however, that a sentry mistook the direction of the danger and was surprised from behind. It has been known to happen. Be on guard, yes. But focus on where the true danger lies. Don't be surprised!

Lest one be surprised, Jesus pointed out for us where the true danger to eternal salvation lies: "Be on guard," He said, "lest your spirits become bloated with indulgence and drunkenness and worldly cares." There you have it — the awful trinity of destruction.

The member of this grouping that most affected me was "worldly cares." I can understand how a pampered body can beget a slack soul. I can understand how excessive drink can animalize a person. But worldly cares! Caring seems so innocuous, almost a duty. Herein lies the danger. Jesus put worldly cares in very bad company. Excessive cares for things here and now can crowd out concern for the things hereafter. Like Martha, we can be busy about many things and neglect the one important thing. And we can get this way when we depend totally on our own human resources and efforts. Worldly cares spring from an evil root: lack of trust in God.

To be on guard, we must first train ourselves never to undertake anything without first turning to God in prayer. Then we must commit all our cares to Him. "Cast all your cares on him because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5/7).

Lastly, we must pray constantly. When a sentinel spots an enemy party advancing, he does not attempt to confront them himself. Rather, he informs his commander about the enemy's approach and leaves the rest up to a higher authority. By the same token, being on guard means spotting the danger and then telling God of it in prayer.

On the Right Side

Father Paul J. Cuddy



Why Youth Leave the Church

Recently, I received the following letter:

"You invited readers' responses to the question of why so many youth leave the Church. Having worked a great deal with Catholic youth, I have often been challenged with the statement, 'I'm leaving the Church because I don't get anything out of Mass any more.'

"I can't cast that first stone because sometimes I ruminate about the plight of baby seals after seeing the fur coat on the woman to my right, and I have even counted gum wads on the kneeler during a sermon. But I gently remind these people that the one purpose of going to Mass can be to thank God and praise Him, not for the 'gimmies.' I further point out that I can't understand why, if one believes in the Holy Eucharist, one can walk away feeling he 'got nothing out of it.'

"What worries me most about youth is their admitted lack of a prayer life. While I do fail in many ways, I also pray daily. I pray in my car on the way to work — sometimes for forgiveness for what I'm thinking about other drivers! I pray in the washroom and at the sink. (These are probably not 'thank you' prayers!) Sometimes I pray just by saying, 'Hey, God, I'm having a rotten day. How about help?'

"I came close to leaving the Church in my early twenties, and I don't even know why. I did pray daily about this — and never left.

"My parents set the example for me. When I was little, Mom would always stop at church for a one-minute visit every time we passed by. She taught me always to say a prayer every time I heard an ambulance or fire truck. My parents taught me the beauty of prayer, not so much by words as by example..."

Comment: Over the years, many parents have written to express their grief at their children's abandonment of the Church, either to join some sect, or just to drop the faith. Most are hurt and wonder, "What did I do wrong?" In most cases, these parents provided sufficient opportunities, but their children are adults and have to make their own

choices.

This interesting letter brings up two comforting images: 1) a simple form of prayer that reminds one of Zero Mostel in *Fiddler on the Roof*, with the character's beautiful, intimate discussions with God; and, 2) a sense of humor, which is a sign of balance, when distractions in prayer include thinking of the baby seals in the coat of the woman next to you, or counting gum wads during a dull sermon.

The letter reveals a warm sense of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. In one of his cassette tapes, Archbishop Sheen told of an all-night vigil before the Blessed Sacrament in the famous Sacred Heart Basilica on Montmartre in Paris. Liturgical and architectural changes in the past years have effectively downplayed devotion to the Divine Presence in the Eucharist. Our Lord is relegated to an isolated spot, with a few chairs for adorers, an atmosphere hardly conducive to spending an hour in the Divine Presence.

I enjoyed the writer's comment about praying for forgiveness "for what I'm thinking about other drivers." At the precarious intertwining of roads at the Can of Worms in Rochester, my emotions become so violent toward the "worst road hogs that I think of all the swear words I have learned during my life, directed mentally toward these invidious drivers. It occurs to me later that I have rarely prayed for them. *Mea maxima culpa!*

Recently I heard of a Catholic who hasn't exactly left the Church, but does go to a Bible church, "because the people there are so friendly and so welcoming." He knows his religion well enough that he has said to Bible parishioners, "The Catholic Church has been in existence from the beginning. You are latecomers."

This is good history, but for some, the welcoming of a cordial people has a stronger pull than the truths of the Church and the holiness of the Mass and Holy Communion.

What would you suggest for youth troubled about their religion?

The Bible Corner

Cindy Cottone



Giving Thanks

The Pilgrims came to America for religious freedom. It was not an easy course they chose. First, there was a long ocean journey to a land they knew little about. When they finally arrived, it was winter. They were cold, hungry and probably more than a little homesick for their old country. But in spite of everything, the Pilgrims prepared a feast to thank God for leading them safely to this new, strange land.

The first Thanksgiving was observed by 55 English settlers and 90 friendly Indians who came to investigate the delicious aroma of turkeys roasting over a fire. With their usual good manners, the English invited the Indians to stay for dinner, and an American tradition had begun!

The idea of a Thanksgiving festival began long before the first American Thanksgiving in 1621. In early biblical times, the Jews escaped from Egypt, where they had been forced to work as Pharaoh's slaves. For many years after that, they had no permanent home, but lived in makeshift huts in the wilderness.

These huts were made out of branches. When the Jews reached the promised land 40 years later, farmers built these huts again to live in during the harvest season. These huts were now built to remind them that God had kept His promise and given them this new land.

Today, Jewish people celebrate both the release of their ancestors from Egypt and the harvest season. Every fall, Sukkot is celebrated for eight days. During this season, people come to synagogue in thanksgiving to God. Outside, a symbolic branch house commemorates this feast.

Another traditional way of giving thanks to God in biblical times was the tithing. A tithe was a tenth of one's income and was given back to God as a form of gratitude. The tithe didn't have to be just money, but could be livestock or a part of the harvest. Since God was seen as the source of all blessings, it just made sense to give a portion of the bounty back to Him. Today, many people still tithe.

God certainly does not need our

blessings, but He does want us to give for a special reason. This act of giving back in thanksgiving does something to the heart of the giver. It opens the person's heart to a generous God who knows what someone needs before it is even asked for.

Perhaps the most difficult time to give thanks to God is during the hard times. But this is the most important time, as well. Not only should we not complain, but we should keep right on thanking God despite our circumstances. The thanksgiving becomes a prayer of faith that Jesus is our best friend and will never let us down.

St. Paul was someone who knew all about thanking God in the midst of troubles. In the early days of the Christian Church, Paul traveled throughout the Near Eastern countries. He helped start many new churches. After a time, he would leave these new churches and go on to other areas to preach the gospel.

Paul did not have an easy life. He was shipwrecked and put into prison more than once. This new Church had many enemies who didn't want it to succeed. To Paul, these new Christians were a big family united in its belief in Jesus Christ.

Paul wanted to encourage these new churches, so after he left them, he wrote them letters. These letters are called Epistles. The letters to the Romans, Corinthians and Thessalonians are just a few found in the New Testament of the Bible. Some of these letters were written

by Paul during the time when he was unjustly imprisoned. Paul started off his letters by thanking God for these new Christians. Even when it looked as though all was lost, Paul still thanked God, because he knew he could never lose his best friend, Jesus. In one of his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul tells the people, "Give thanks whatever happens. This is what God wants for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

The Church has survived for nearly 2,000 years. And, like the Pilgrims, we can always give thanks for our own religious freedom.

For discussion:

1) What things besides money can we tithe in thanksgiving to God?

2) What were the letters called that Paul wrote to the early Christians?

3) If you were going to write a letter to your family, what things could you thank them for?

For further reading:

1) Read the beginning of Paul's letters to the Romans, Corinthians and Thessalonians. Notice how he thanks God for these early Christians. These letters are found in the New Testament.

2) "Thanksgiving Feast and Festival," compiled by Mildred Luckhardt (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966). Available at the public library.

3) "The House on the Roof" by David Adler (New York: Bonim Books, 1976). Available at the public library. A humorous account of an old man's unique celebration of Sukkot.