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## THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF MAY 2019

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### OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, mighty God, you are the true ruler of all the world. Every nation and authority must bow before you. Teach world leaders true humility, that they may serve you and seek the common good before personal ambition. Through Christ our Risen Lord. *Amen.*

**May 5** | LECTIONARY 48C  
THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

## YES, I WILL BOW DOWN

### FIRST READING

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 5:27-32,  
40B-41

**"We must obey God rather than men."**

I don't want to be humble any more than you do. Humility is a trait too close to humiliation for our comfort. A serving of humble pie can make us feel like we're choking. We know too well the pain of losing face, and the struggle not to let them see us bent or bowed by adversity.

Still, when it comes to our relationship with the sovereign God of the universe, a little humility is just what's called for. God doesn't expect us to grovel—after all, chutzpah was invented by folks like Abraham and Moses who dickered and argued with God, demanding what they needed from the relationship. We learn from the psalms that it's okay to yell at God, to accuse God of not being a good friend, to insist that God show up and do more to alleviate human suffering. God's shoulders are wide enough to assume the cross. God can take our honesty, too. Because of all this, we can freely take a knee and bow our heads in the divine Presence. God is worthier than all the

other powers we so frequently worship.

» *Who or what earns your respect? What does reverence mean to you and how do you show it?*

### SECOND READING

REVELATION 5:11-14

**The four living creatures answered, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshipped.**

Worship is a word that sounds out of place in ordinary contexts. God is deserving of worship, and everything else gets a lesser form of devotion from us. We say we adore a sports legend or an exotic brand of chocolate, but we don't mean such a person or thing has our ultimate allegiance. Essayist Charles Lamb noted that if Shakespeare should come into a room, we would rise; but if Jesus Christ should come in, we would kneel.

Perhaps today we might rise for presidents, popes, and pop stars. Some of these at times are indistinguishable from each other! By contrast, we kneel

and bow down for very little in the 21st century. Is it that we've lost the art of reverence—or that we've been betrayed too many times by what seemed holy but turned out to be a spiritual forgery?

Cynicism is the enemy of awe. It makes it hard for us to bow our heads or remove our hats in the presence of what is greater than ourselves. The spirit of worship may be hard to recapture, but we need it now more than ever.

» *Where are you most comfortable on your knees—and where are you most uneasy?*

### GOSPEL

JOHN 21:1-19

**"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."**

Being asked to declare your affection is challenging enough. Being asked to repeat it three times can make you feel like the person you love is calling you a liar. But when you've denied your allegiance to someone three times over, it's not surprising they'd want to

hear three affirmations to cancel out the betrayals. So Peter must confirm his loyalty to Jesus again and again.

I'm quite sure Jesus needs to hear my declarations of love three times over daily. I'm a traitor to love at least that often. I'm stubborn when I should relent, selfish when I could be generous, monologuing

when I might be listening. How often are my prayers no more than laundry lists of what I want and what I need? How rarely do I sit quietly and ask God what the divine will might expect of me? I wouldn't like to have a friend who treats me the way I treat God, always demanding, only coming around when I need a favor. So

maybe I should say it too: *Please know that I love you, Lord, even when I don't go out of my way to show it.*

» *How do I treat the people I love? What might I change to be a better lover?*

# May 12

## FIDELITY 101

LECTIONARY 51C

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER/GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

### FIRST READING

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 13:14, 43-52

**Paul and Barnabas urged them to remain faithful to the grace of God.**

First-century preachers: what was their experience like? They went from town to town bringing a gospel that angered many Jewish citizens and confused many Greeks. Despite the challenges, some folks heard something they could embrace and entered the community of faith. Now all the apostles had to do was to prod these new believers not to dash after the next big thing.

Twenty-first century preachers: what's their experience like? They mostly stay in one place and re-present the gospel week after week to folks who are already baptized. These folks yawn, check their phones, and can hardly be bothered to pick up the songbook or add their "Amen" to the end of a prayer. Which crowd is more difficult to face? Which requires more courage?

Our salute this Good Shepherd Sunday is to all the faithful preachers who, in season and out of season, get up there every week and offer us the good news. Every once in a while, even sleepy believers like me might pay attention and be transformed.

» *How would you evaluate the level of commitment of your regular preacher(s)? How would you evaluate your own commitment as a hearer of the Word?*

### SECOND READING

REVELATION 7:9, 14B-17

**"For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them."**

At the center of Wall Street is a raging, snorting bull. At the center of Washington is a powerful assembly of strategists and dealmakers playing chess with our global future. At the center of Hollywood is the glittering matinee idol of the moment. And at the center of the universe is...a Lamb.

A Lamb? We might well be startled at this revelation from John. Of all the beings we might expect to find at the core of heaven, a baby sheep is probably not on the top one hundred. Lambs are soft, tender, meek, vulnerable. A lamb wouldn't stand a chance on Wall Street or in Washington. Lambs get torn to pieces in Hollywood. Is the emblem of a Lamb of God, frankly, reasonable?

If a crucified man is at the heart of your religion, then a Lamb of God is precisely what you should expect. If God is love, and love is sacrificial and self-surrendering, then a gentle lamb is the best representation of what's at the center of Christian reality. The question remains: is this the God we want? Is this the God we're following?

» *Lambs are ancient animals of sacrifice. What does a self-sacrificing God expect of us?*

### GOSPEL

JOHN 10:27-30

**"My sheep hear my voice; I know then, and they follow me."**

In our technological age, the gospel's use of farm imagery can leave some of us feeling out of the loop. We don't conceive of ourselves as sheep, which has a faintly insulting ring to it. Nor can we entirely relate to a saving power who self-identifies as a Lamb. What substitutions would we recommend: is God more like iCloud or Amazon? Would we prefer to be storm troopers rather than sheep?

My prediction is that sheep will outrun any present Internet reality. We may be stuck with them, for the sake of our sacred story. Imagine yourself as any sort of follower that makes sense to you. Me, I'd like to be a dolphin before God, leaping and celebrating my freedom in the ocean of divine love. Dolphins are also deeply loyal, communally oriented, and pretty smart. Do they, like the sheep Jesus talks about, hear the voice of their Lord and do what is required of them? From what I've seen, many animals are far better at attending to the call of God than I am most days.

» *Choose a metaphor—animal, vegetable, mineral—to describe your relationship to God. How is it apt, and how does it falter?*

# WHEN HEAVEN AND EARTH ARE ONE

## FIRST READING

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 14:21-27

**"It is necessary to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."**

Nothing good comes easy. From starting a business to writing a book, from regaining your health after an illness to giving birth, sweat and guts and perseverance will take you to the goal you've set your heart on. Arriving into the reality we call the reign of God

## SECOND READING

REVELATION 21:1-5A

**"Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race."**

We've spent this Easter season marveling at—and being mystified by—the revelations of John of Patmos. He sees heaven and earth pass away, and new realities with the same names take their place. How do we feel about that? As much suffering as there is on this planet, I love the earth we have now.

## GOSPEL

JOHN 13:31-33A, 34-35

**"As I have loved you, so you also should love one another."**

Here's a tiny detail to notice in this story from the Last Supper. Jesus issues the love commandment *after* Judas leaves the room. The spirit of self-interest must depart before the command of love can be heard and take root in the community of faith. So long as we're concerned with defending

our wealth, saving our skins, having our way, love has nowhere to go in us. We can say we love our families, our Church, our country, but if self-interest is in the room, we're

possessed by that spirit and nothing more.

Is self-interest really such a bad thing? Why not seek to be Number One and to love ourselves before anything else? Certainly self-loathing is unproductive, and self-regard is healthy and necessary. But a world of self-interested people looks like—honestly, it looks like the world we have right now, full of grasping, greedy people seeking dominance over others. It's a world where fear is institutionalized, injustice inevitable, and violence a virtue. The love command is not a suggestion. It's the only way to the kingdom coming.

» ***When you love someone, what happens to self-interest?***

WE CAN SAY WE LOVE OUR FAMILIES, OUR CHURCH, OUR COUNTRY, **BUT IF SELF-INTEREST IS IN THE ROOM, WE'RE POSSESSED BY THAT SPIRIT AND NOTHING MORE.**

can hardly be less rigorous. If we want it, we have to make sacrifices and dig deep into ourselves to enter this realm.

What is this kingdom Jesus invites us into? It's not a future place like heaven, or a worldly territory to be won in battle. The kingdom is more like a state of mind or condition of the heart that enables us to see as God sees, and desire what God desires. It's a realm of justice and peace, compassion and welcome for all. It's the way God intended the world to be from the start. It's where history is heading and eternity has already arrived. Prayer and fasting are keys to unlocking the outer door of this kingdom. Then comes the long trek across years and shared sorrows until we learn, like Dorothy of Oz, that the reign of God has always been one decision away.

» ***What are you willing to offer in return for entrance into the kingdom?***

I'd be glad to banish the violence, the diseases, the cruelties and prejudices and loneliness. But I don't want to lose trees, songbirds, canyons, beefsteak tomatoes, and friendship. When "all things are made new," can we still keep the good stuff?

If you sit down and read the entire Book of Revelation (and please do it with a good Catholic commentary!), you discover that the end of the world, as we call it, is not envisioned as total annihilation and destruction. Consider it a purge of every evil element, leaving a sizeable remnant, actually a majority of creation, in place. Revelation is not a forecast so much as a promise. In the end, God's will is done on earth—as it is in heaven.

» ***Make a list of what must end before God's will is done. How can you banish these elements from your own life first?***

## FEARLESS

### FIRST READING

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 15:1-2, 22-29

**"Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved."**

After a lifetime of hanging around religious-minded people, you learn that someone always has a new requirement for your personal salvation they'd like to peddle. If you just say this prayer nine days in a row—if you just wear this blessed object—if you read this book, go on this retreat, refrain from this practice, fight this moral scourge....

Meanwhile, Church teaching tries to make it as simple as possible: get baptized, and boom, you're in. Even then, theologians have woven a safety net under those who don't get baptized, offering mystical solutions like baptism of desire, anonymous Christianity, and, when all else fails, recognizing that it's up to God to judge who's in and who's out, not us.

Religion is a method of seeking God, giving us a language to talk about the ineffable, and rituals to confirm what we can't otherwise hold in our hands and touch. It's not intended to be a system of faultfinding and a tribunal to condemn those who don't make the cut. Count on it: God is always so much bigger than our hearts.

» *Fear is generally the opposition to love. In what areas has fear revealed that your God is too small?*

### SECOND READING

REVELATION 21:10-14, 22-23

**I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty.**

John Lennon got into a lot of trouble for suggesting we might "imagine" a world without religion. Before Lennon imagined it, John of Patmos revealed it. In the coming kingdom, John perceived, there will be no need for houses of worship, which are, after all, places meant for sacred encounters. In the realm of God, sacred encounter is all there is. So if we're counting on getting to daily Mass in heaven, we're missing the point.

Mass is the premiere place for such encounters now, let me hasten to say. Sacramental moments are grace-filled, and so is the hour of private contemplation. We make use of rituals like these now, because we humans operate best in situations that are hands-on. These rituals enable us to recognize the sacred presence elsewhere: in mountain lakes, a dancer's exquisite pose, hungry children, grave injustices that cry for redress. In fact, if we do our rituals right, pretty soon it will be impossible not to have sacred encounters wherever we are. Then we'll know we've arrived in the kingdom at last.

» *Name ten places where you've encountered the divine today. Now name ten more.*

### GOSPEL

JOHN 14:23-29

**"Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid."**

Jesus brings peace and never fear. Isn't it strange, then, that religion has so often been a carrier of fear and anxiety for so many? Obviously it's not Jesus who's producing the fear. Self-righteous people who speak in his name are the hosts for this infection.

When I was a younger person, I remember episodes where I did wrong and knew it. In those times, I was convinced God would not love me anymore because I was too far from perfection, which is what God finds loveable and beautiful. Just imagine if that were true! God would not love most of creation, most of human history, if perfection were all that could be loved. Thank God it's not true. God loves us even in our brokenness and failure, even in our sinfulness.

Is it possible to live beyond fear, in our journey with God? Can we stop treating God like a referee who's making calls on every move we make? God is more like the friend who helps us to parallel park by standing on the curb: a little this way, that's enough, okay you're there.

» *Who or what has given you valuable guidance along the way? How do you share what you know?*

### LET US PRAY...

Lord God, we seek the arrival from ahead of us, the kingdom coming, the satisfaction of our heart's desire. Help us to remember that our hearts will be restless until they rest in you. *Amen.*