



# Bringing Home the Word

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time | November 5, 2017

## A Humble Challenge

By Janel Esker

**I**t takes a lot to shock us these days. Long gone are the television shows with married couples in twin beds. It's hard to find a non-G-rated movie without profanity. Halloween costumes are skimpier and more grotesque every year. What used to startle us is now commonplace.

The same, unfortunately, can often be said about Jesus' words in the Gospels. How many times have we heard him say, "The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted?" These words, in their first-century Mediterranean

context, were incredibly shocking. Jesus' contemporaries believed that prosperity and honor were signs of God's favor. To hear that God actually wanted us to humble ourselves upended all they believed. No wonder Jesus ended up in trouble with those in power.

But are Jesus' words simply the "same ole, same ole" for us? When was the last time we were startled by Jesus' challenge to humble ourselves? No, we don't have phylacteries to widen or tassels to lengthen. Yet certainly we've sought unnecessary recognition when we felt we weren't being credited for our work. We've cut off others in traffic or pushed our way to the front of a line because we felt our time was more important than everyone else's. Instead of deeply listening to a friend, we've drawn the conversation back to our accomplishments and needs.

Perhaps it's time to let Jesus' words sink in more deeply—to let them shock us. Saint Paul reminds us today, "You received not a human word but...the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe." Let's invite Jesus to shake us up and allow his word to work in our hearts.†

*Let Jesus' words  
sink in deeply.*

## A Word From Pope Francis

Let us all remember this: one cannot proclaim the gospel of Jesus without the tangible witness of one's life. Those who listen to us and observe us must be able to see in our actions what they hear from our lips, and so give glory to God! I am thinking now of some advice that St. Francis of Assisi gave his brothers: preach the Gospel and, if necessary, use words.

Preaching with  
your life, with  
your witness.

—Homily,  
April 14, 2013



## Sunday Readings

**Malachi 1:14b—2:2b, 8–10**

Why, then, do we break faith with each other, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?

**1 Thessalonians 2:7b–9, 13**

...You received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God.

**Matthew 23:1–12**

[Jesus said,] "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- As a parent, am I a priest in my family? Do I lead my children in prayer, teach them the faith, and set a good example of faith and love of God?
- Do I pray for priests and offer them support and help?



# Ways the Gospels Make Us Uncomfortable

By Kathy Coffey

**I**t may be a shift to read the Gospels and feel discomfort. While the words and actions

of Jesus enlighten, they're no escape hatch. Conflict, tension, and frustration still plague believers.

But we read the Gospels for one purpose: to know Jesus better—not for warm fuzzies, easy answers, or reinforcement of prejudices. Nor will we always encounter “Jesus, meek and mild.”

He who threatened the cozy assumptions of his contemporaries may have the same effect on us. If we rely on the wrong supports, like wealth (Luke 6:20, 24), prestige (Matthew 23:1–12), or religious rituals (Mark 2:27–28), he'll challenge us, too.

Jesus questioned many of the customs of his time—such as the subservient role of women and the authority of the Pharisees. “It is hard to believe [Jesus] was simply an early flower child who traipsed through the sunlit fields talking about lilies and love!” Nathan Mitchell writes in *Real Presence: The Work of Eucharist*. “Who would seek to arrest and execute such a sap?”

## The Perils of Storytelling

We may be uncomfortable with the Gospels' storytelling if we want just the facts. We might prefer a precise blueprint or spreadsheet to rambling, inconsistent stories. But if we compare the Bible to our own complex, difficult life stories, we grow more comfortable with its mixed genres.

We find links where the larger story of God intersects with our personal lives.

So we reflect not only on Jesus' and the Hebrews' experience in the desert, but also on our own desert times. Wandering in the wilderness brings valuable insights we don't learn in secure kitchens.

As much as we enjoy the intriguing connections, storytelling has its shortcomings. It's unscientific, subject to interpretation, and sometimes wildly inaccurate. Two people who attended the same party might tell radically different accounts.

So, too, each Gospel writer has a different emphasis. Even within the Gospel of John, there are inconsistencies: “Jesus was deeply *troubled*” (13:21), but in the next chapter Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be *troubled*” (14:1).

Those who enjoy stories listen beneath the words. Their primary interest is the meaning stories give our experiences. We don't read the Gospels primarily for scientific accuracy or historical fact but to follow Jesus better.

We read through the lens of a human author who will sometimes shade, condense, or exaggerate. Sometimes we may also need to read biblical interpretation, but most important is our response. There's an old saying: The Gospel gives the chapter headings; we write the texts in our lives.

## Too Good to Be True?

The Gospels have been misused to incite guilt. Some people may need that stern correction to luxuriating while

others starve. But many hard-working people are simply trying to survive, raise families, and do their jobs while being as generous as possible with their time and treasure. They certainly don't need another guilt trip!

What we may find harder than guilt is the Gospels' insistence on how splendid we are. Jesus walked among the diseased, smelly, and sweaty, and assured them that even in poverty, mourning, or persecution, they were blessed. Mired in our own problems, do we struggle with *good* news?

Admittedly, the central message is hard to absorb. We, limited and flawed, are made in his divine image. Throughout the Gospels, the message recurs: You are not a slave. You are a friend and adopted child with an eternal inheritance—not condemned to futility or the finality of death.

The implications could be uncomfortable. God chose us for a unique purpose and equips us to get it done. So, no whining or stalling—get on with it! †



Lord, I am grateful for your life of humble service. Give me a humble, willing heart to serve the needs of your people.

*From Grateful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time, Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney*

## WEEKDAY READINGS

November 6-11

Mon. Weekday:  
Rom 11:29–36 / Lk 14:12–14

Tue. Weekday:  
Rom 12:5–16b / Lk 14:15–24

Wed. Weekday:  
Rom 13:8–10 / Lk 14:25–33

Thu. Dedication of the Lateran Basilica:  
Ez 47:1–2, 8–9, 12 / 1 Cor 3:9c–11, 16–17 / Jn 2:13–22

Fri. St. Leo the Great:  
Rom 15:14–21 / Lk 16:1–8

Sat. St. Martin of Tours:  
Rom 16:3–9, 16, 22–27 / Lk 16:9–15

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