



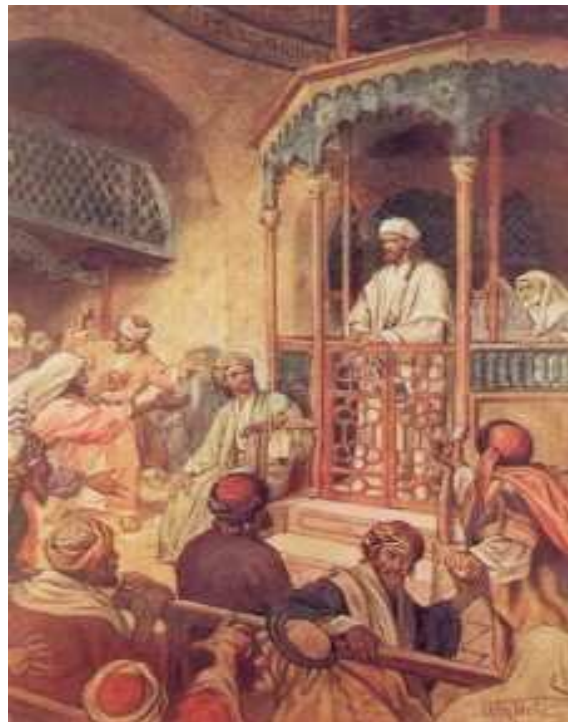
Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time C



Jesus in the Synagogue. HOLE, WILLIAM: The Life of Jesus of Nazareth. Public Domain. 1908

SIGN OF THE CROSS

OPENING PRAYER

- Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.
- Option 2.

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.

I trust in you: strengthen my trust.

I love you: let me love you more and more.

I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.

I worship you as my first beginning.

I long for you as my last end.

I praise you as my constant helper.

And I call you as my loving protector.

I want to do what you ask of me:

In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.

Let me love you Lord as my God.

And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.

A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

LITURGICAL CONTEXT

We are still in the early weeks of the liturgical year. The liturgy foreshadows Easter--the cross and resurrection that lies ahead. We are invited to reflect upon the cost of discipleship--the cost Jesus paid for his prophetic ministry--the price all prophets pay. Servants of the Lord can expect trials and tribulations.

- Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, then surface insights in the wider group. (@five to seven minutes)
- What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

[If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.]

First Reading. Jeremiah 1, 4-5. 17-19

God chose Jeremiah to be a prophet before he was born--from his mother's womb.

Today's reading reminds us that we are all similarly chosen by God. God chooses each of us from our mother's womb to be his own. We, like the people to whom Jeremiah was prophesying, either accept God's calling or we reject it.

Jeremiah was a prophet for thirty-nine years. He was, however, an unpopular prophet since he spoke a word the people did not want to hear. The people did not want to be challenged. One of the marvelous legacies of Jeremiah is the example of his life and the life of all prophets. He unabashedly shared the suffering he endured in the service of God's Word. Such is the life of a prophet. Such is our life since we are all baptized into Christ's Prophetic ministry.

- Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.
- Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two.
- After four or five minutes the catechist invites participants to finish the following sentence in the wider group. "What Jeremiah teaches us about suffering is..."
- Have you ever suffered for trying to right a wrong or challenge the actions of another person or institution?
- Have you ever been similarly challenged?
- What does your experience have in common with Jeremiah? What does Jeremiah teach us about such suffering?

Second Reading 1 Corinthians 12: 31-13:13

Paul chastised some members of his beloved Corinthian community who were engaging in grandiose, self-righteous behavior. They believed that they possessed a special knowledge (gnosis), thus setting themselves apart from the rest of the community. They saw themselves as the spiritual elite. Paul reminded them that spiritual gifts were intended to uplift the community. They were not for the personal glorification of individual members. Such gifts without love are meaningless, and idolatrous.

- Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example. (@five minutes)
- Have you ever met someone who displayed self-righteous, "holier than thou" behavior?
- What was your response?
- What does such behavior evoke in people?
- What does such behavior cause?

- What are the implications for your life?

Gospel: Luke 4: 21-30

Jesus proclaims the Scriptures in the synagogue and is resisted by his neighbors.

Just who does this home-town boy think he is? Such is the sentiment of Jesus' neighbors from Nazareth. They heard that Jesus had been praised by crowds of people for the amazing miracles he performed. Yet these people who knew him as the carpenter's son flocked to him out of curiosity and the hope that he might perform his magic for them. Things deteriorated quickly, however, when he did not succumb to their manipulation. The religious elite tested him and failed. Jesus challenged them.

This scene recalls one of Jesus' constant themes. Those who should have seen what God was doing through Christ--who should have recognized the Messianic reign of God--missed it even though it was right under their proverbial noses.

Today's Gospel is a proclamation of Jesus' universal saving mission to the world evidenced in his ministry of preaching, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation. The religious elite rejected Jesus because he was a threat to their power and control over the people. Jesus, like Jeremiah is a prophet who eventually will pay the ultimate price. The paradox cannot be missed. Jesus announces a year of favor that is acceptable to the Lord and he himself is considered unacceptable by the very ones who should have rejoiced over the fulfillment of Israel's history. The Gospel is dripping with irony!

(For a more thorough treatment of these readings refer to Word and Worship Workbook, Year C, Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time by Mary Birmingham, Paulist Press.)

- Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group.
- Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ ten-twelve minutes)
- What are some ways that we, like the religious elite, reject the Christ who comes to us "right under our proverbial noses?" Have you ever missed what God was doing in your life?
- In what way do Christians today ignore or reject Jesus' universal message of salvation (that his healing, reconciling, message is for the entire world)?
- What does Jesus' teach us today about how to be a prophet in our own world? What can we learn from him that would make us better disciples/prophets?

- Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question (@ three minutes)

IMPLICATIONS

- What one thing are you willing to do this week to be a better disciple/prophet in your world? Is there something that needs to change in your life?

CLOSING PRAYER

- Option 1. Celebrate a minor rite – an exorcism or blessing for catechumens: RCIA 90-97
- Option 2. Pray the Prayer of Pope Clement
- Option 3. Other suitable, but brief prayer. (Perhaps pray the Prayer of St. Francis.)

APPENDIX

#1. First reading: As a leader in ministry we are sometimes faced with making pastoral decisions that effect people's lives. I was faced with such a decision. I judged a person not ready to continue to the next level in a specific process. I felt that her commitment to the process was not what it should have been. This woman was so angry with me that she threatened to leave the parish.

Another woman challenged me; she was the voice of Jeremiah. She told me what was happening in this woman's life and that I needed to take a second look at the situation. The three of us met and I ultimately asked forgiveness of the woman. As it turns out she became one of the most committed people in the group. I was humbled and I learned a powerful lesson. Jeremiah's message challenges me to listen to the prophets that surround me and to be open to hearing their voice.

#2. Second Reading: Many years ago a woman in my parish approached me and told me that I was not holy enough since I did not participate in her prayer group. She further included the parish staff in her indictment. My first reaction was anger. Who did this woman think she was to judge my heart and my prayer? My second reaction was to ask myself if there was something I needed to hear. My rational self dismissed her ranting as more in a long line of similar ranting directed toward unsuspecting victims. Many people's experience of this woman was negative. Love was certainly not her most finely tuned virtue!

However rationally I dismissed her, her charge nevertheless had lasting subliminal effects on my prayer life. It took years for me to realize that my concern over a less-than-adequate relationship with God stemmed from that event. Echoes of "you are not holy enough for God" remained with me for years to come. Such behavior is destructive and we have no idea how it might harm another person. St. Paul is right: love is the only antidote!

3.

I have a child with severe mental illness. I have often said that when I enter the pearly gates, should that beatific vision be mine to share one day, my first words to God will be, "Just what were you thinking?!" So many times throughout this ten year sojourn I felt my prayers were ignored as my son made very little progress over those years. Yet sadly I, like the Nazarenes missed what God was doing right under my stubborn nose! I wanted healing for my child. What mother wouldn't? Didn't Jesus promise, "What father would give his child a stone when asked for bread?" I felt I was given not just one stone--but a boat load of them.

Yet God was giving me bread and I failed to recognize its taste, texture or smell. What God wanted was my trust. What God wanted me to recognize was Emmanuel--God with us. God wanted me to realize the Bread of Presence--God was with us. God was with my very sick child. God was asking that we pray the prayer of the centurion: "say but the word and my child will be healed." Looking back, my child was healed; not the healing I wanted, but spiritual healing that would sustain him during his darkest hours.

I too was healed even though it was not the healing I wanted. I rejected what God was doing. Like the Nazarene's I wanted an absolute sign of God's omnipotence over this disease--I wanted complete and total healing. Was I, like the Nazarenes manipulating God into action? Probably.

Just how, then, did this healing manifest itself? The fruits of the struggle can be found in the love, commitment and common purpose my husband and I share. We both have carried this cross together. This horrid disease which most often destroys families strengthened ours. This disease that robs its victim of life and liberty has propelled us to learn what unconditional love truly means. When I say I am loved unconditionally by God I now know the implications of that love---Jesus carried his cross for us---we carry the cross for our child. There are times when it is ugly beyond comprehension. The road to Calvary was no less ugly.

CONNECTING THE LITURGY WITH THE DOCTRINES OF THE CHURCH

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from the celebration of the liturgy for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C:

- Cross of Jesus Christ
- Incarnation
- Miracles
- Sacraments
- Salvation/Soteriology
- Catholic Social Teaching

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the index of doctrinal topics and create your own connecting statement.

The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST

Every liturgy of the Church is an invitation to participate in the cross of Jesus Christ. The sacrifice of Calvary is re-presented on every altar at every Eucharistic liturgy. Both Jeremiah and Jesus in today's readings remind us of the cost of discipleship and living the prophetic life. We are all called to endure suffering for the sake of the Gospel and to join our suffering to the suffering of Christ thus participating in the ongoing redemption of the world. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on the Cross of Jesus Christ.

INCARNATION

While most often the INCARNATION is a topic for the Christmas season, we are in the early days of the new year and Christmas is still in our shadow. If it was not addressed during the Christmas season now would be a good time. Jesus' universal message of salvation, his healing, reconciling mission is made possible only because God sent his Son to save the world. Without the INCARNATION his saving mission would not be possible. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on the mystery of the INCARNATION of Christ and the implications for our lives today.

MIRACLES

The people of Nazareth want Jesus to perform miracles for them--not out of faith in him as the Christ, but out of a warped sense of curiosity--they wanted to benefit from his extraordinary powers. Jesus, however refuses to be manipulated. Today's liturgy invites a reflection on the role of MIRACLES in Christian life--what we believe about them, their intended purpose, etc. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on what the Church teaches us about MIRACLES.

SACRAMENTS

Today's liturgy explores the mystery of suffering for the sake of the Gospel, the healing, reconciling and saving mission of Christ. No where is Jesus' mission more evident than in the sacraments of the Church. Sacraments continue his salvific mission for every generation. Jesus' healing ministry continues in the sacraments of the Church. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on the SACRAMENTS of the Church.

SALVATION/SOTERIOLOGY

Today's liturgy is a proclamation of the saving mission of Christ. Jesus' announcement of the fulfillment of God's universal healing and reconciling mission to the world is fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Today's doctrinal extended session will focus on what the Church teaches about SALVATION.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Today's liturgy is a proclamation of the saving, healing and reconciling mission of Christ. Jesus' ministry of healing and compassion is a dominant thread in his ministry to the world. The Church continues to invite us to follow his example. Catholic Social Teaching seeks to promote the compassionate ministry of Christ and to embrace the dignity and full potential of every human person. Today's doctrinal session will focus on Catholic social teaching.