

Provisions as We Become A New Creation

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Fourth Week of Easter 2021



Sunday, April 25: *"He is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone."* (Acts 4:4-12)

It's obvious that Peter is calling the elders in front of him "the builders" who rejected Jesus. In Psalm 118, the speaker is standing before the temple, *"comparing himself in his former abject state to the stone at first considered unfit by the (temple) builders but then made the chief cornerstone for the grand edifice."* (Robert Alter) It poses a question, "Who are the builders today?" The ones that reject those who challenge the status quo or their power? Too often, we look to government and church leaders as the ones who get to call the shots—who is in, who is out.

But I am the builder of *my* life. I will stand before God alone and as I am. Is Jesus my foundational cornerstone? Or, like many cornerstones today, just for show?

Today's Provision: Look at your foundation. Many people feel as if we are walking on shaky ground now. I think it is true that we are living in an historic time, a time of choice, and that in itself is unsettling. If you are feeling "shaky" these days, take a look at your foundation. Are there gaps and cracks that need to be filled and fortified? Has your life "settled" in such way that the structure is uneven or unbalanced? (This can happen in all aspects of life, not just spirituality.) See if you can devote a few hours or even a day to praying with these images. Remember Peter tells us we are "living stones," part of a spiritual house in God's Kingdom (1 Pt 2: 4). Let's look to see where things need some shoring up.

Monday, April 26: *"I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers..."* (Jn 10:1-10)

Yesterday, we talked about builders and who the builders are now. Today, we take on the thieves and robbers! There are several interpretations of this verse, but first, it's important to know Jesus is NOT referring here to the prophets; indeed, it was often the sheep who did heed the words of the prophets, what we hear referred to as "the remnant of Israel." Some scholars say Jesus means the false messiahs who have preceded him during these years of Roman occupation (we can go back to the words of Gamaliel in Acts 5:36-37 for a few examples). Other analyses suggest Jesus is actually calling the assembled elders -- who just threw out the man born blind -- thieves who rob people of their place in the community. All very interesting. But again, it encourages us to ask, "Who are the thieves and robbers today?" Who are the ones trying to lead the sheep astray?

Today's provision: Guard your "property." Well this is a touchy subject. We know unfortunately that, in some cases, the words thieves and robbers are not metaphorical. Some so-called pastors and "shepherds" live in the lap of luxury at the expense of their flocks; even worse, others have robbed lambs and sheep of their innocence. If anyone says to you that money or any other form of "currency" will buy closer access to Jesus or a place in heaven, turn on your heels and run. Your soul is your most precious possession, most so than your mortal being. Guard it with the same fervor you would guard your life – because that's what it is.

Tuesday, April 27: *It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.* (Acts 11:19-26)

In *The Book of Joy*, the delightful work by the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama talks about labels. He describes himself without labels other than being one of seven billion humans on the planet today. *"I always emphasize that when I meet people, we are all the same human beings...Then you see, no barrier."* (pg.130)

We rely on labels all the time. We hear in this passage, the new sect of Judaism becomes known as "Christians" and for different people, that elicits different responses: "Oh, those (crazy) (blessed) men and women sharing everything and living in community and following the teachings of that (crazy) (blessed) man, Jesus!" The line, the barrier that separates one from another is cast-- it's no surprise that wars occur! And of course, it doesn't take long for disputes to occur within the Christian community as well, a fact that has grown and expanded to the present day, when there are an estimated 40,000+ different Christian denominations in the world! What does being a Christian really mean? While the Scripture we read may be the same, the values we hold and the lives we live could not be more different.

Today's Provision: What does being a Christian mean to you? This not a simple question. For some, it means proclaiming Jesus as savior, and being rewarded with riches in this life for that proclamation; for others, it means literally living like Jesus lived – becoming poor, serving those poorer, and even sacrificing their lives in some cases. For some, it is proselytizing with words and exhortations; for others, it is through social justice work and action. If you've not spent much time on this question, use it for prayer. Move beyond a pat or textbook answer. What does being a Christian mean in your life?

Wednesday, April 28: *"And if anyone hears my words and does not observe them, I do not condemn him, for I did not come to condemn the world but to save the world. Whoever rejects me and does not accept my words has something to judge him: the word that I spoke, it will condemn him on the last day."* (Jn 12:44-50)

These are powerful words. Let's look at them closely and personally: If I hear Jesus' words — which I have — and I do not observe them — i.e., if I do not live by them -- Jesus will not judge me, even though the right to judge has been given to him by God. It makes me think that in reality, I will be called to judge myself. Anyone who has a conscience knows what that means, that stinging feeling when we realize we have missed the mark. But so often, we fail to understand and recognize what missing the mark means. We focus on sins of commission — breaking the rules — rather than sins of omission — failing to even try to live as Jesus lived.

Today's Provision: Imagine judgment. This is a tough prayer exercise. In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, one way he suggests to discern when faced with a decision is to imagine ourselves on our death bed: "How will I feel at the end of my life if I decide to take one option over the other?" (Decisions are always between two "goods;" evil is never an option). But discernment is not limited to big life decisions. We are wise to look at our everyday lives and how we might want to change some things, things that in and of themselves might be good, but stand in the way of the "Magis"—the better. (Note to self: This often means taking things off the list, not putting new ones on!) *"In the twilight of life, we will not be judged on our earthly possessions and human successes, but on how well we have loved."* (St. John of the Cross, adapted)

Thursday, April 29: In the Catholic tradition, today is Memorial of St. Catherine of Siena, so instead of a Scripture reflection, I share my most favorite of her prayers, *Rest in Prayer*:

*The sun hears the fields talking about effort
and the sun smiles and whispers to me,
"Why don't the fields just rest, for I am willing to do everything to help them grow?"
Rest, my dears, in prayer.*

Today's Provision: Seek Sabbath rest today. After our tough prayer exercise yesterday, I encourage you to rest in God's love and mercy. Words like "judgment" and "condemnation" weigh heavy of us, but our burden is made easy in the light of God's compassionate embrace. *"Do not let your hearts be troubled."* (Jn 14:1-6, tomorrow's gospel). Rest.

Friday, April 30: *"By condemning Jesus, they fulfilled the oracles of the prophets read sabbath after sabbath."* (Acts 13: 26-33)

The Jews have heard the word of God sabbath after sabbath, year after year. Most could recite verbatim the words of the prophets. But as Paul points out, they fail to see the prophecies fulfilled in Jesus.

We go to church, sabbath after sabbath, year after year. We may read Scripture daily. Some of us can recite Jesus' very words. What might we be missing?

Today's Provision: Listen. I use this provision a lot...well...because it is so important. I've suggested that you consider a new Scripture translation as a way to hear God's word with new ears. But listening for God goes beyond reading Scripture. It is taking what we read and applying it in our lives by listening: to the needs of others (without assuming we know their need); to the sounds of God's creation (both in nature and in the cries of Mother Earth); in solitude and quiet (not talking *at* God, but being attuned to tiny, whispering sounds). Listen for God's voice today.

Saturday, May 1: *"The Jews...stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them. They shook the dust from their feet and went to Iconium. The disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 13:44-52)

We hear the Jewish elders in Pisidia are not too happy with Paul and Barnabas and all the ruckus they are causing. (BTW, fun fact: it is somewhere between Paphos and Pisidia that Saul becomes known as Paul!) They are driven from the town and shake the dust from their feet "in protest against them." Then we hear they are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. I'd say they are pretty good at letting things go!

Today's Provision: Let go. A few thoughts for us: we are not to judge others and their decisions, but we are called to make good decisions for ourselves. This "shaking off the dust from our feet" speaks more of our willingness to let go when our actions and words do not persuade another. What happens between God and a person is just that—between them and God. While we may have a vested interest, or as parents, might need to keep our children safe and on the right path, when it comes to an adult and their personal relationship with God, there are times when we must let go.

The disciples are not filled with joy and the Holy Spirit to spite the town that just expelled them. They are filled with joy in that they have done what they were called to do, and they recognize it is the Spirit who will take it from here. Are there things you hold onto out of anger or spite? Are you unwilling to, as the saying goes, "let go and let God" and to do so without judgment? Pray for the gracious gift of joy *"because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."* (Gerard Manley Hopkins)