

# Abbey Letter



no. 241

Easter 2010

# Saved by the Life of Jesus

Once upon a time there was a powerful king who owned all the land in the world. In the beginning, the king had given his servants everything they needed to tend the land so that it would bear fruit. But the servants failed to produce as much as they should have, so that even from the beginning, all of them were in debt to the king. These debts could not possibly have been paid even if all of the servants put their hearts and souls into farming the land. The servants became discouraged and farmed less and less while their debts grew and grew. The king was dismayed over this growing debt and the growing failure of all his servants to give him the produce and the honor that was his due. Since it was clear that the servants would never be able to pay what they owed the king, the king decided that the only way to restore justice was to do away with all his servants. When the king told his son what he had resolved to do, the king's son, who loved the servants, suggested that since he owed no debt, he could give his life for all of the servants and the debt would be paid. The king didn't want to lose his son, but he didn't want to lose all of his servants either, so finally he agreed to his son's suggestion and ordered his servants to put his son to death. Thus the debt was paid and all the servants lived happily ever after.

Does this story disturb you? It disturbs me. What disturbs me most about this story is that the king cannot or will not forgive the debt and will *only* be satisfied if somebody pays the debt, even if it is the king's innocent son who pays it. If we take this story to be a parable about God and our redemption in Christ, we have a troubling portrait of God who, in effect, requires that his son be a sacrifice to *him*.

The notion that God sent his son to die as a sacrifice to him attempted to solve a problem in a teaching in the early church that suggested that the devil had gained the "rights" over humanity because of our fall into sin, and God came to our rescue by bargaining with the devil to redeem us. In this scheme, God gave his Son in exchange for us, but the injustice of killing God's Son caused the devil to forfeit his "rights" over humanity. An analogy commonly used was that the man Jesus was the bait to tempt the devil and Jesus' divinity was the hook that caught the devil. The humor of this model of redemption is refreshing compared to the dour situation of Jesus being a sacrifice to his own Father, but the notion that God had to bargain with the devil is a big problem. Unfortunately, taking the devil out of the equation left only the king and his son so that all the bargaining was between the king (God) and the king's son (Jesus). Recently, some theologians have complained that this theological model portrays God as a child abuser. If God is the greatest good of all, then surely we can come up with a better model of redemption than this.

I once had a theology professor who explained how theologians such as St. Augustine thought that God had gotten into a pickle over what he called "God's dilemma over sin." God had to do something about the mess humanity had fallen into, but God couldn't just forgive the sin outright because that would be unjust. But Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son (better called the Parable of the Prodigal Father) cuts the Gordian knot of this dilemma with a decisive stroke. The father forgives his wayward

*Fr. Jude, Abbot Andrew, and Br. Martin wash the feet of guests on Maundy Thursday*



son when his son is only trying to get a better meal than he got when he was feeding the pigs. Presumably, the older, obedient son would agree with theologians who posit this divine dilemma over sin. On the contrary, Jesus forgave the paralytic his sins before healing him, and Jesus inaugurated his teaching ministry at Capernaum by declaring “the year of the Lord’s favor.” The Jubilee, as it was called in Leviticus, was a fresh start for all when all debts are forgiven. This makes it highly unlikely that God required Jesus’ blood in order to forgive us our sins.

Jesus’ parable of the evil workers in the vineyard also gives us a very different picture than the story of the king who sent his son as a sacrifice to himself. Here, the death of

the owner's son was in no way willed by the owner; it was willed by the workers. In this grim parable, Jesus is warning us that we will enact the same violence against him unless we repent. In the Gospel narratives of Jesus' death, neither God nor the devil killed Jesus. Human beings did it, and we know the names of some of them. Jesus' death in these narratives is not portrayed as a divine necessity, but a *human* necessity for people like Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, and the rest of us.

If God does not really need Jesus' blood in order to redeem us, if Jesus' death is *not* the vehicle of our redemption, then what is? The answer is: Jesus' *Life*. If all we had were Jesus' death, then the most we would have would be the inspiration that the self-sacrifice of an innocent person gives us and the lesson this judicial murder teaches us about our propensity to scapegoating violence. But chances are we wouldn't even have that if Jesus' death was the end of the story. Jesus' death left his few remaining followers scattered and demoralized. It was his risen life that reunited them with Jesus so that they could tell the story that has come down to us, and his risen life unites us to him as well.

The theologian Raymund Schwager, in discussing the parable of the evil workers, notes that Jesus did not fulfill the threat implied by the rhetorical question that ends the parable. Jesus did not tear Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas to pieces. What Jesus did was continue to do the same thing he was doing when he was killed, which was to gather all of us together to a new way of living, free of the collective violence that killed Jesus and countless victims, before and since. By gathering Paul into the nascent church, Jesus made it clear that he believed what he preached about loving his enemies. The parable of the two brothers and their prodigal father also makes it clear that God responds with love and forgiveness to those who stray.

Suggesting that the Resurrection is the vehicle of our redemption doesn't deny the significance of Jesus' death, but the Gospel record and the apostolic preaching in Acts suggest that Jesus' death says a lot more about human beings than it does about God. Jesus' death makes it clear that if humans choose to respond to God's call with violence, then God will suffer that violence. Jesus said that he came to give life and to give it abundantly. That means Jesus did not come to die; he came to give life, and Jesus' death could not stop him from doing that. We can speak of Jesus' death on the cross as part of God's plan, as Peter does in his first sermon, but Peter links this plan to God's foreknowledge, which is very different from God's will. Peter says that it is we humans who crucified and killed Christ "by the hands of those outside the law." God didn't do it. What *did* God do? "God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power."

The story of Jesus' Resurrection has not come to an end. The story spills out of the New Testament into our lives with its challenge to let God gather us into the abundant life God offers us. We may think God is being soft by making this offer even to the worst of criminals, but God's magnanimous offer of abundant life poses a huge challenge to us because it exposes the element of death in many of the things we do and think. We will find out very quickly that we will have to die to all of that before we can receive God's Joy to the full. In the house of the Prodigal Father, there is room for neither a wasted lifestyle nor self-righteous sulking. Jesus did not end this parable about the two brothers. Like the Gospel, it flows out of the pages into our lives, leaving it for us to decide if we will accept the invitation to dwell forever in the Prodigal Father's House.

— Abbot Andrew

## NOTES

Abbot Mark Serna, O. S. B. (former abbot of Portsmouth Abbey in Portsmouth, Rhode Island), and our bishop visitor the Rt. Rev. Arthur Williams (retired suffragan bishop of Ohio) were here January 24th through 28th to conduct a formal visitation. The visitators had confidential discussions with all members of the community, as well as access to all financial records of the monastery. Abbot Mark and Bishop Williams then presented a charge to the community, pointing out its strengths and weaknesses and suggesting ways to improve both.

Fr. Jude underwent triple bypass heart surgery at the end of October and is recovering nicely at home.

Abbot Andrew's schedule takes him several places this spring. From February 5th through 8th, he attended this year's abbots' workshop at Prince of Peace Abbey in Oceanside, California. He led a silent Lenten retreat at the DeKoven Center in Racine, Wisconsin March 5th through 7th structured around a Benedictine rhythm of prayer. From April 20th through 25th he will be attending a meeting of CAROA (The Conference

of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas) at the convent of St. John the Divine in Toronto. He then inaugurates a new speaker's series at the Center for Spirituality at St. John's Episcopal Church in Mount Pleasant, Michigan with two lectures April 26th and 27th on the challenges for Christian Spirituality today.

Br. Abraham is scheduled to present a Lenten class on the Benedictine vows of stability, conversion, and obedience for the Diocese of Ft. Worth (Episcopal Church) on February 20th at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Ft. Worth.

Our website now has an archive of sermons preached by the monks. More will be added as time passes. Our website also has many other features, including articles from back issues of the *Abbey Letter*, information about monastic life, the Summer Vocation Program, and monastic vocations, and contact links for the abbot, novice master, guest department, and publications office. Prayer requests and donations can also be made online, as well as calendar and book purchases. [saintgregorysthreerivers.org](http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org)



*Abbot Mark and Bishop Williams in the chapter room*

Books read in the monastic refectory during lunch and supper 2009

**Apocalypse Pretty Soon: Travels in End-Time America**

by Alex Heard

**Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln**

by Doris Kearns Goodwin

**Tantalus and the Pelican: Exploring Monastic Spirituality Today**

by Nicholas Buxton

**Of Sugar and Snow: A History of Ice Cream Making**

by Jeri Quinzio

**Touched By God: Ten Monastic Journeys**

edited by Laurentia Johns, O.S.B.

**Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect With Others**

by Marco Iacoboni

**A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop**

by Rembert G. Weakland, O. S. B.

**Monopoly: The World's Most Famous Game & How It Got That Way**

by Philip E. Orbanes

**The Labour of Obedience: The Benedictines of Pershore, Nashdom, and Elmore: A History**

by Petà Dunstan



CONTACTING THE ABBEY

**Mailing address –**

St. Gregory's Abbey  
56500 Abbey Road  
Three Rivers, MI 49093

**Telephone –**

269-244-5893

9:30am - 11:15am or 2:30pm - 4:15pm Eastern Time Monday through Saturday

(please do not telephone at other times or on Sundays or holidays)

**E-mail –**

**Guest reservations and information –**  
guestmaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org

**Mailing list –**

office@saintgregorysthreerivers.org

**Abbot Andrew –**

abbot@saintgregorysthreerivers.org

**Information about becoming a monk or participating in the July Program –**

novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org

**Books and calendars may be ordered, prayers requested, and donations made at our website –**

www.saintgregorysthreerivers.org

# Come & See

Find out what it's like to be  
a Benedictine monk.

**Worship & Pray    Work & Learn**

with the monks at St. Gregory's Abbey –  
a monastery within the Episcopal  
Church at Three Rivers, Michigan

if you are male, 18 to 45, and can stay for at least two weeks  
in July. The only charge is \$25 for registration.

*For more information and an application form, write:*

July Program Director  
St. Gregory's Abbey  
56500 Abbey Road  
Three Rivers, Michigan 49093-9595  
[novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org](mailto:novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org)



[saintgregorysthreerivers.org](http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org)

مجلس  
العلماء  
الاسلاميين  
بمصر  
الاسلامية  
بمصر  
الاسلامية

مجلس  
العلماء  
الاسلاميين  
بمصر  
الاسلامية  
بمصر  
الاسلامية

مجلس  
العلماء  
الاسلاميين  
بمصر  
الاسلامية  
بمصر  
الاسلامية



Saint Gregory's Abbey is the home of a community of men living under the Rule of Saint Benedict within the Episcopal Church. The center of the monastery's life is the Abbey Church, where God is worshiped in the daily round of Eucharist, Divine Office, and private prayer. Also offered to God are the monks' daily manual work, study and correspondence, ministry to guests, and occasional outside engagements.

The continuing existence of Saint Gregory's is made possible by the support of those who believe that the contemplative vocation within the Church finds valid expression there.

The monks ask your prayers and will be grateful for your offerings.

<http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org/donate.html> to donate online

Donations may be mailed to:  
Saint Gregory's Abbey  
56500 Abbey Road  
Three Rivers, MI 49093-9595