

**The 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 20, 2010
12 Noon Liturgy**

“The Invisible Gorilla” is the topic of today’s homily. It’s the second time I’ve preached about the gorilla in as many weeks. It seemed appropriate both times. You be the judge!

The invisible gorilla is the title of a new book by two cognitive scientists. The full title is: *The Invisible Gorilla: and other ways our intuitions deceive us.* Psychologists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simmons are the authors.

The title comes from a now rather famous psychological experiment in 1999 that became a big hit on the Internet a while back. (The video is available on YouTube or there is a link on our own website from my homily last week or [click here.](#))

In the experiment, subjects are shown a short video of two teams passing basketballs to each other. One team wears black shirts and the other white. The subjects are asked to simply count the number of passes the white team receives. The tape lasts about a minute. In the middle of the tape a young woman clothed in a full gorilla costume from head to toe walks calmly into

the middle of the frame, pounds her chest a bit, and walks off. She is present for a full seven seconds.

After the video is finished, the experimenters ask a few questions. They ask first, of course, how many passes the white team receives. The answer is 15—even though the correct answer is quite irrelevant to the real purpose here. They are then asked if they saw anything unusual during the video. Almost half say no. Did you see *anyone* unusual? Again, almost half answer no. Fully half of all subjects do not see the gorilla. At all! They literally do not see the gorilla. When shown the tape again, they can't believe they missed it. They think it's a second, doctored tape that later added a gorilla.

The experiment has been replicated thousands of times on all different kinds of people: college students, and both men and women adults. The experiment has been controlled for IQ, vision problems, race, ethnicity, and just about every other conceivable variable. Always, in all experiments, on several continents, with a variety of language groups: only about half see the gorilla.

The experiment illustrates brilliantly how the brain perceives only in a certain way. There are pockets of

“in-attentional blindness” or selective inattention that we all experience. That is, we simply don’t see some things that we are not expecting in our line of sight. We can all look, but not see. Half of us at any given time only see what we’ve been looking for, namely how many white passes were there? Who expects a gorilla in the game? So we don’t just not pay attention; we don’t see it! Literally! It’s a brain issue, not a sight issue.

The experiment holds true for other senses as well, like hearing, tasting and smelling. It seems there is lots of scientific proof that our brains really do not like multi-tasking. Sorry about that gang! Each time we ask our brains to multi-task, each and every task loses efficiency. This experiment has been used to confirm just how dangerous driving with cell phones really is—even with a hands-free gadget. But that’s a story for another day.

So, some of you are quietly asking, where’s the homily here? In today’s gospel Jesus, at prayer, asks his friends: “Who do people say I am?” They say: some think you are Elijah, some think you are John the Baptist, some say one of the other prophets

returned. The people “see” what they are expecting. There is no gorilla.

The Jesus asks Peter: “Who do you say I am?” And Peter, speaking for the small group of disciples gathered, answers: “You are the Messiah, the Christ of God.” They, too, “see” what they hoped for, what they expected and longed for. Again there is no gorilla.

But then Jesus ups the ante and answers the question himself. The Christ-Messiah is not at all what they actually expect. Christ will suffer, be tortured, and put to death. And everyone else who follows him will have to do the same: *take up* the cross, not just endure it. This time, there is a gorilla in the frame, a suffering Messiah, and no one seems to see it.

Half of us can only see what we are expecting—and we are not expecting this, not suffering and a cross and death. If the gorilla experiment is correct, we can only really see what we expect. Zechariah seems to have had a clear premonition of the gorilla. He sees the “one whom they have pierced,” and he sees the people weeping bitterly at his fate.

What does Paul see in the light of the *risen* Christ? He sees no basketball game at all now. He sees *only* the gorilla. St. Paul sees a baptized throng of lovers in a single body, Christ, the Church. There is no nationality, no Jew or Greek. There is no gender differentiation, no male or female. There are no slaves or free persons. There is no exclusion at all. There is only one single gorilla that takes up the whole frame of the video. It is Christ Jesus: all in all, with no beginning and no end. Only gorilla for eternity!

The next time we're watching the basketball game of life, what do we *expect* to see? What do we miss? Where are we simply over-tiring our brains? Spiritually multi-tasking maybe. Can we *expect* more from each other, our church, and ourselves? And maybe in the process actually become more--in ourselves, for each other, and in God?

A Thought: the next time you *pray*, watch for the invisible gorilla, and don't focus so much on the game. Basketball we always have with us. Gorillas are rare.