

Today we begin an exciting adventure, a voyage, a quest, yes, even an odyssey through the masterpiece we know as the *Acts of the Apostles*. Basically, the liturgy takes us into the early years of the Church's growth and expansion. It is not called 'Acts' for nothing! Luke's narrative is exciting and thrilling, a kind of white-knuckle ride as the embryo church fights to both establish itself and proclaim the gospel. Our hope is that over the coming weeks we may all grow in our love, appreciation and understanding of the incredible challenges and opportunities these first believers faced. The saints whose story is told in these holy pages were the true pioneers of the Christian faith – we stand on their shoulders.

So a little background. The Hebrew word 'Messiah' and the Greek word 'Christ' both mean 'anointed'. The term originally referred to the king of Israel as God's anointed. When the Davidic kingdom was destroyed, the Jews expected that God would restore it through a descendant of David, one anointed, as he was, by God's Spirit. For Luke, Jesus was the Lord's anointed: he was the Messiah, the Christ.

Fresh from his experience of being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter preaches boldly, explaining how Jesus' passion and death fulfilled Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28-32). While the Jewish people understood Psalm 16:8-11 to refer to David, Peter reinterprets it in the light of Jesus' resurrection from the dead: 'Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You... will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand' (NIV).

Jesus is Lord. This is the message of the gospel. He is the Messiah. He conquered sin and death. He is the Victor. In this Year of Faith we can recover a new sense of excitement and conviction that Jesus is Lord and appreciate that we could not proclaim, believe and embrace this wonderful truth without the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Lord, through reading the Acts of the Apostles during the holy season of Eastertide give me a fresh sense of the urgency to witness to my faith and to be an evangelist.

Acts 2:14, 22-33 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5, 7-11
Matthew 28:8-15

How many times have you been cut to the heart as you listened to a sermon or homily at Mass? How many times have you been moved so profoundly by the words of the preacher that they transformed your life? How often have you looked on in awe as the bishop, priest or deacon unpacked the life-giving wisdom of the gospel? Truth be told, not many and maybe even never! Well, we should pray for our bishops, priests and deacons because they follow in the footsteps of Peter, and when he preached, Luke tells us, the people were cut to the heart (v. 37). It is this 'cutting to the heart' which is needed today because such preaching and teaching transforms lives.

The great saint John Vianney took the preaching of the gospel in his Sunday homily so seriously that he stayed up all night committing it to memory and getting to know it inside out. In seminary he had struggled with his studies, but his lack of natural ability, rather than working against him, created in him a firm resolve to give this part of his ministry his utmost. He must have done something right in this regard, as Ars, once a failing backwater parish, became a centre of renewal not just for his diocese but for the whole of France.

So, back to Peter. What did he preach that so cut his hearers to the heart? He simply presented the gospel message. Of course, Peter was articulate and spoke with great authority and conviction, but fundamentally he simply shared with his hearers that Jesus is both Lord and Christ. St Francis de Sales, himself a powerful preacher, said once, 'The test of a preacher is that his congregation goes away saying, not, "What a lovely sermon" but "I will do something".' And this is precisely what happened to Peter's congregation: they cried out, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' (v. 37).

The Church's message, then through Peter and now through the teaching of the Church, remains the same: we are called to repent, to turn away from sin and turn back to God. The Spirit is always at work in our hearts, moving us to draw near to God in humble repentance and contrition.

'To him who still remains in this world no repentance is too late. The approach to God's mercy is open, and the access is easy to those who seek and apprehend the truth.' (St Cyprian)

Acts 2:36-41 • Psalm 32(33):4-5, 18-20, 22
John 20:11-18

Luke draws our attention twice to the fact that the gate to the temple was called 'Beautiful' (vv. 2, 10). How fitting that, in this Year of Faith, we enter through the beautiful doorway of faith, in order to be renewed and refreshed by the beauty, truth and goodness of our faith.

A young man, full of faith, hope and love in the gospel message, walked into a church one weekday morning. He wanted to hear Mass and a 10 o'clock Mass was about to begin. This particular young man was earnest and eager to read the Scriptures and pray. His faith was simple, straightforward and, in a way, pure. He was uplifted by the reading of Acts 3:1-10, capturing as it does the dynamic faith of Peter. The young man thought to himself, 'How true it is that we can't give people silver or gold or material possessions but we can give them the treasure of Jesus Christ, as Peter did.'

That morning the priest decided to give a homily. The young man was grateful: often when he attended a Mass during the week, the homily was passed over. The priest began by saying that the miracles contained in the Acts of the Apostles were a special gift to the Church, 'a kind of kick-start,

to get her on her way', but explained that we should not expect God to intervene in this way today.

Miracles, in his view, were only for the early Church and we should seek them no more. This didn't sit easily with the young man but he listened to what the priest was saying. The priest then went on to say that learned biblical scholars – far cleverer than himself, he was at pains to point out – disputed if the miracles had occurred at all. This definitely didn't sit very easily with the young man. He resisted this particular emphasis, concluding that 'Father must be having an off day, because clearly the Church does believe in miracles.'

And of course, thank God, the Church does indeed believe in miracles and encourages us to pray for them, expect them and implore God for them. What is true, however, is that Peter's faith was bold, courageous and expectant, while our faith often falls short. Nevertheless, towards this beautiful goal we strive.

Lord, I believe in miracles and the power of your Word. I believe that the gospel is the greatest treasure that we can share with others.

Acts 3:1-10 • Psalm 104(105):1-9
Luke 24:13-35

One of the most striking things about reading the *Acts of the Apostles* is the transformation in the disciples, especially, it has to be said, Peter. It is as if we are seeing a completely different person. The Peter we used to know was emotional, all over the place; he was impulsive, aggressive and at times positively violent (like the time he sliced off the ear of the high priest's servant – John 18:10).

And, I guess, that is the point: we are seeing a completely different person. The post-Pentecost Peter is a different kind of human being from the pre-Pentecost human being. Well, clearly he is the same human being with the same body, the same DNA and the same brain, but he has become a new creation and is displaying a new kind of humanity.

One of the signs of this is his bold, clear and uncompromising proclamation of the gospel message. The overarching message of the gospel, proclaimed by Peter in the power of the Holy Spirit, is that 'God...glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him' (v. 13), and that 'The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree' (5:30).

This message is also proclaimed to us. We too have rejected Jesus and daily continue to do so in our thoughts and actions. But God sent Jesus to save us. What is the remedy? What is the way of salvation? The Church has always taught that baptism is the sacrament of conversion. In baptism we were born again, our sins were forgiven and we received the Holy Spirit. However, the Church also teaches of the need for a second conversion which is ongoing and part of the path of renewal and reform which the Spirit invites us to tread.

Peter urged the people to repent and turn to Jesus so that they would know the refreshment of the Spirit (v. 19). We also are urged to know the joy and blessing of repentance. We do this primarily in and through the sacrament of reconciliation but also by cultivating an attitude of repentance. Such an attitude does not make us introspective or overly negative – on the contrary, repentance is the way into the joy-filled life.

Cleanse me, O Lord, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Acts 3:11-26 • Psalm 8:2, 5-9
Luke 24:35-48

Peter and John had just spent a night in prison. They must have been tired, weary and disorientated. Now they were hauled in front of the Sanhedrin, the highest religious and legal council in Jerusalem.

The Sanhedrin fulfilled the same kind of role as the religious leaders in the 'Spanish Inquisition' – their role was to govern, rule and stamp out heresy. The apostles were teaching that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead and that those who believe in him would also rise from the dead. As devout Jews Peter and John would have been raised to respect and revere the Sanhedrin. As ordinary men they would doubtless have found such a gathering intimidating and not a little overwhelming. Imagine being called to stand before a convocation of all the bishops in your country but not only them, the House of Commons as well! This sets the stage, doesn't it, and gives some understanding of the pressure and stress the apostles were under.

Peter would also have known that among this gathering of rulers, elders and scribes were those who had, a couple of months earlier, condemned Jesus to death. For Peter, standing before these powerful religious men must have

been a daunting and frightening experience. What, then, helped him to face his accusers and speak so clearly about Jesus? The answer lies in the indwelling Holy Spirit he received at Pentecost. He was able to speak because he was filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 8).

Before his death Jesus had warned his disciples that they would be brought before councils and synagogues to witness to him. He taught them not to worry what they should say but to speak 'whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit' (Mark 13:11). That promise was fulfilled in Peter and can also be fulfilled in us. We can often find it difficult to speak about Jesus or share our faith because we fear rejection or hostility. Yet all we need to do is ask the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and courage to proclaim his word.

Lord, you are the cornerstone of my life. Give me the courage and wisdom to proclaim the gospel with conviction but also with love and respect.

Acts 4:1-12 • Psalm 117(118):1-2, 4, 22-27
John 21:1-14

Peter and John had few if any credentials. Fishermen were two a penny in first-century Palestine. They were hard-working, ordinary and unschooled men, who earned their living by the sweat of their brow. They fished with nets – tough, hard, laborious work. Yet, despite having no connections with the influential priestly families, despite having never studied with the great rabbis, they acted with a power and authority which posed a real threat and concern for the religious authorities. We know it was the Spirit who transformed these cowardly, weak and disloyal men (remember Peter like Judas betrayed the Lord) – but what a transformation! Peter came back through the doorway of repentance and, after receiving the Spirit, truly became the rock upon which the Church was built.

The important thing to understand about Peter and these first apostles was that it was impossible to silence them. As Peter himself said: 'we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard' (v. 20). In order to silence them the authorities ultimately had to kill them. The gospel message and the love of God burnt in their hearts.

When we were baptized we were filled with the same Spirit. Yet the fact is that many of us were baptized as babies and have no memory of the occasion whatsoever. In order to fuel the fire of the grace of our baptism we need to co-operate with the Spirit and listen to his voice. He works in us to help us understand that we are called no longer to live for ourselves but for him who died for us. In not living for ourselves we choose to live for others, but in living for others we give too little if we do not give God.

For Peter faith was about proclamation, about witnessing to the gospel. We have reduced evangelization to a sort of social work or positive witness which can often be no more than simply being good, kind and courteous people. No doubt Peter was good, kind and polite, and while this may have won some souls for the kingdom, his primary mission was proclamation. We have lost sight of the need for the initial proclamation of the gospel and this is what we need to recover in the current Year of Faith.

Lord, burn a love of your gospel in my heart. Teach me to share my faith with joy and conviction. Teach me to share with others the promises of Christ.

Acts 4:13-21 • Psalm 117(118):1, 14-21
Mark 16:9-15

Jesus knew and loved Thomas in all his unbelief – just as he loves everyone, even those who don't believe in him. Thomas is a kind of modern patron saint – we too can be sceptical and cynical and often demand proof and evidence. This is not a bad thing because God has given us a mind to think and reason. However, faith is truly a gift, intended to work together with reason, in harmony. The Lord appeared to Thomas to lead him from unbelief to faith. He said to him: 'do not be faithless, but believing' (v. 27). Through seeing the risen Lord, Thomas came to a profound faith. His confession of faith should be on the lips of every believer: 'My Lord and my God.'

However, the truth is that our faith is tested and tried. Often we struggle with doubts. We doubt that God loves us. We cannot trust that God has a plan for our lives and will take care of us. We are not convinced that God has the power to change certain areas of our lives, especially those with which we have struggled for years. We, like Thomas, need Jesus to lead us from doubt to faith, from unbelief to belief.

Paul wrote: 'So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of

Christ' (Rom. 10:17). We tend to understand a scripture like this to mean that the gospel is preached by a bishop, priest or deacon, but actually we must first learn to preach the gospel to ourselves. We must learn, if you like, to be the bearer of the good news to ourselves and to the situations and challenges we face. We need to let the gospel enter us and change us.

What truths do we need to proclaim to ourselves? Try this simple approach today. The truth of the gospel is that God is love and that God loves you. Make this prayer during your day: 'Lord, I know you love me and died for me. Give me a deeper knowledge and understanding of your divine mercy.' Try and praise God during your day, praying: 'Praise you, Lord Jesus. You are the Holy One and you are worthy of glory and honour and praise.'

Lord, lead me from the ignorance of unbelief into the joy of a living faith, and protect me from the temptation to doubt your love for me.

*Acts 5:12-16 • Psalm 117(118):2-4, 22-24
Revelation 1:9-13, 17-19 • John 20:19-31*

The Annunciation of the Lord, which we celebrate today, is a very significant and holy feast-day. Why is this? Because it marks the arrival of our salvation. From the very beginning God chose a people through whom he would reveal his plan to save and redeem the human race. Israel was that people, and we will always owe the Jewish nation a great debt because through them the Saviour was revealed and in the fullness of time made known.

Seven hundred years before the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, the prophet Isaiah predicted the birth of a child who would be called Immanuel, 'God with us' (Isa. 7:10-14). The significance of the prophecy in the context of the time is not certain. The Hebrew word translated 'virgin' in our Bibles is '*almah*' which actually means 'young woman of marriageable age'. The Greek translation uses the word *parthenos* which does mean 'virgin'. Christians have always understood this text as a prophecy of the birth of Christ. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, leads us to understand that the birth of the Saviour was a promise fulfilled in the virgin Mary of Nazareth.

The title 'God with us' sums up the essence and the wonder of the incarnation. The truth that God became man is fundamental to our faith. Perhaps it is something we take for granted and accept without expecting to enter its mystery more deeply. We understand readily enough the idea of 'Eucharistic awe and wonder' but, of course, a preliminary to this is awe and wonder in the incarnation. We should never cease to marvel that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...'

Judaism and Islam find the truth of the incarnation, the idea that the all-holy and powerful Creator would humble himself and take on human form, utterly repellent. Yet this is the lynchpin of Christian revelation, the cornerstone of our faith. How grateful our hearts should be to Mary, the Mother of God, who became obedient, even unto the death of Jesus on the cross. How grateful our hearts should be to Jesus, who became obedient, even unto death on the cross.

'The Word of God became man that you also may learn from a man how a man becomes God.' (St Clement of Alexandria)

*Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10 • Psalm 39(40):7-11
Hebrews 10:4-10 • Luke 1:26-38*

G.K. Chesterton famously said: 'It is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, it is more a case of it not having been tried.' Luke's window into the early Church is both radical and challenging.

It is easy to read today's reading and think: 'Well, it was easier for them then. They had so little and therefore pooling their possessions and resources would have been mutually beneficial – we just couldn't do that today, it wouldn't work.' The problem with this analysis is that it lets us off the hook too easily. Many are content to conclude that the early Church was a kind of spiritual explosion, with special gifts and graces to set the Church on its way, but that nowadays we have to be more realistic and sensible.

Of course, many do live in common – this is really what marriage is all about. Clergy and sisters who live in religious communities also know something of a shared lifestyle with resources held in common. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the generosity and lavish giving of the first believers is striking and puts us to shame. The point to be made, however, is that it is the Spirit who

turns our selfish hearts into cheerful and giving hearts.

In this Year of Faith we are encouraged to 'intensify our charitable giving' (*Porta fidei* 14) and to reach out to our brothers and sisters in their need. Many of us can suffer from a kind of 'compassion fatigue' because we are asked to give to so many good causes and we only have a limited amount to give from our disposable income. Yet, if we think about it we realize that the goods of the earth that we enjoy are not our own. They are gifts from God, of which we are simply stewards. St Cyprian of Carthage said, 'For whatever is of God is common property, nor is anyone to be excluded from his generosity and his gifts. God wishes for every human being to have an equal share in his goodness and abundance... Those on earth who share what they have with their fellow human beings, and who are free and just in their gifts to all, become like God the Father.'

Lord God, you love a cheerful giver: teach me to give with goodness and generosity in my heart. May we who have received many graces and blessings in turn give to others from this wellspring.

Acts 4:32-37 • Psalm 91(93):1-2, 5

John 3:7-15

Jealousy, like its more subtle counterpart envy, is an ugly vice. There is a way in which religious or ecclesiastical jealousy is even uglier still. The religious authorities were filled with jealousy towards the apostles, as Luke's account makes abundantly clear: 'Then the high priest and all his associates... were filled with jealousy' (v. 17 NIV). And they made what is always a terrible mistake when in the throes of jealousy: they acted on it and had the apostles thrown into jail.

Ecclesiastical jealousy has reared its ugly head ever since the days of the early Church. The truth of the matter is that those who give way to it are insecure in their knowledge of God's love for them. Jealousy is a form of rage, rooted in the mistaken belief that God loves others more than he loves us. Of course, like all vices, it is rooted in a lie. God loves everybody equally and has no favourites.

Many saints have been on the receiving end of this kind of jealousy. St John Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, is a prime example. His own curate was filled with jealousy towards him and tried to make his life difficult. In addition, his brother priests, jealous at the way the little parish of Ars was

growing, petitioned the bishop to forbid him to preach because he was so ignorant (he had just scraped through seminary and always struggled academically). Amazingly, and this is of course why John Vianney is a saint, he prayed for his accusers and agreed with them wholeheartedly in their assessment of him – he too thought he was ignorant and that the bishop should stop him preaching. The bishop had none of it! Wise shepherd that he was, he recognized the jealousy of his clergy and encouraged him in his preaching.

If you are prone to jealousy, come to the Lord in repentance and ask the Spirit to set you free. God wants us to be secure in the knowledge of his love and not to give in to the temptation to feel jealous of others. Rather we can rejoice in the message of new life and thank God for raising up many talented and able people to proclaim the gospel.

Lord, make me jealous but jealous for you and your will. Protect and preserve me from jealous thoughts which rob me of peace and lead me far from you. I repent and seek your forgiveness, O Lord.

Acts 5:17-26 • Psalm 33(34):2-9

John 3:16-21

When Pope Benedict visited England in 2010, he had a meeting with all the Catholic bishops of England and Wales together with the entire House of Commons. Thankfully, this was a warm and congenial setting as he was their guest. However, imagine if it had been hostile, aggressive and even violent – that would have been an entirely different kettle of fish, as they say. But this was exactly the setting in which Peter and the other apostles were forced to appear and in which they faced a rough and brutal cross-examination.

Called to account for his actions before the highest religious and legal court in Jerusalem, Peter gave witness to what we can call divine courage (see 1 Cor. 16:13). It is naive to think that he wasn't afraid, because courage doesn't mean the absence of fear but the conquering of it. Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak, but it is also what it takes to sit and listen. Peter displayed the former; the Sanhedrin did not display the latter. They had made their minds up about Peter and his message: they wanted to silence him. These were dangerous times, and dangerous and desperate measures were taken to deal with dissidents. Because this is how

the Sanhedrin saw Peter – as a revolutionary with madcap ideas about resurrection, eternal life and Jesus of Nazareth.

In essence what we encounter in today's reading is the explosion that occurs when two diametrically opposed forces collide. The high priest was clear about his view: 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us' (v. 28). And Peter was equally clear about his: 'We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him' (vv. 29-32). This is always the tension though, isn't it? The forces which do not want us to witness to the gospel versus our desire to proclaim the message of eternal life.

Lord, give me the courage to witness, whatever the cost, to the truth of the gospel.

Acts 5:27-33 • Psalm 33(34):2, 9, 17-20
John 3:31-36

Gamaliel was one of the most learned Pharisees of his day, a descendant of the great rabbi Hillel, and Saul, who will soon make his appearance in the story of Acts, studied under him. Gamaliel clearly belonged to that classic school of caution which takes the approach 'if in doubt do nothing', or 'wait and see', or 'hedge your bets'. It was his view that if this outbreak of enthusiasm was from God it would last.

In that sense he was right, of course. However, his attitude was worldly-wise as it falls short of the God-given ability to discern the movement and action of God in his time. For a man of God, and for all his learning and education, Gamaliel was well and truly a man of the world. We must resist the temptation to think that Gamaliel was a man of reason and grace. Far from it – he had the apostles flogged after all. It can be dangerous and suspect to speculate what was in Gamaliel's mind: however, it is likely that he discerned in the apostles a spirit that he had never encountered before. For what he encountered was men who were willing to stand up for their faith whatever the cost.

In a remarkable observation Luke records that far from being dejected or defeated by their cross-examination and flogging the apostles rejoiced, considering it an honour and privilege to be considered worthy to suffer for Christ. No wonder that Luke went on to record: 'Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah' (v. 42 NIV).

What are the implications of today's reading for us? What is clear about the entire Acts of the Apostles is that the Christian faith is to be given away, proclaimed and witnessed to. Pope Paul VI, a man with a great vision for evangelization, said that the very reason the Church exists is to evangelize. We resist and refute the spirit of Gamaliel: we do not belong to those who 'wait and see' and 'if in doubt do nothing'. We commit ourselves to evangelizing, to giving witness to our faith, certainly by our life and actions but also by clearly presenting the gospel message with love and boldness.

Lord, enkindle in my heart the kerygma, the gospel message: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

Acts 5:34-42 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14
John 6:1-15

Atheists and those who are actively opposed to the Christian faith complain that the Gospels and the *Acts of the Apostles* are not historical witness but propaganda. The problem with this theory or argument is classically presented in today's first reading. The four writers of the Gospels and Acts never gloss over the 'dirty laundry', as it were, of examples where people fall far short of the gospel ideal. They always 'tell it as it is' and never shy away from bringing us face to face with human frailty in the Church.

In the Gospels we have the betrayal of Peter, the treachery of Judas, the slowness of comprehension of the disciples and their cowardly reaction when Jesus was arrested. In Acts we have the new believers at each other's throats over the distribution of bread, as a result of the Grecian widows being overlooked in preference to the Hebraic widows. Remember, this was a world without the NHS or Social Services and one in which widows especially had to throw themselves on the mercy of others. Clearly, if Luke was simply recording propaganda he would have omitted this kind of detail.

The point is that every parish or gathering of God's people has its fair share of complaining, moaning and not very edifying behaviour. People often say, 'The reason I am not a Christian or don't go to church is that it's full of hypocrites.' The retort to that is quite simple: 'Well, one more won't make much difference!' The church is made up of sinners, and sinners do what sinners do best – we sin. It would appear that the bread distribution problem was solved by the appointment of deacons. We do not know how these good men sorted the problem but sort it they did. What is striking about them and their appointment is that they were recognized for being 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom' (v. 3).

Through baptism we have received the same Holy Spirit and we too can be filled with the Spirit and wisdom. God knows we need the Holy Spirit and wisdom! We need these gifts especially to ensure that our homes and parishes are imbued by the gentle action of the Spirit and the application of a practical wisdom.

Lord, give me a spirit of wisdom and love so that I can be an instrument of peace, first in my home and then in my parish.

*Acts 6:1-7 • Psalm 32(33):1-5, 18-19
John 6:16-21*

Do you believe in the resurrection of the body? Every time we say the Creed we are asserting that we do. Today we encounter a risen body, the first fruits of Christ's resurrection from the dead. The risen Lord moves among his disciples, initially hidden from them (v. 4) and then cooking and sharing breakfast with them. Our faith is firmly rooted in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. We believe it, proclaim it and live by it. The entire Christian faith is based on this most profound truth that death could not hold Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the only human being that death could have power over.

The joy of our faith is that we share in this wonderful blessing. Many of us have seen a corpse – perhaps the body of a loved one. It is always and without fail a traumatic experience in which one knows immediately that the person we loved so dearly has gone – the body is simply a shell because the soul has left the body. We do not think too much about these things, and more is the pity. Many today think of being spiritual as having little to do with the body – as if true spirituality is more to do with the soul and the spirit. But this is not Christian teaching.

Jesus came to save and redeem us body and soul. As Paul so eloquently put it: 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he... will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you' (Rom. 8:11).

How confident are you in the resurrection, both Jesus' and your own? Tertullian, the second-century theologian, said: 'The confidence of Christians is the resurrection of the dead; believing this we live.' We say a hearty and healthy 'Amen' to this truth. Of course, there is great mystery surrounding the resurrection of the dead. We do not know what kind of body it will be. Most of us don't like our bodies very much, which is a great pity for they are God's gift to us. The problem with the body is that it is subject to corruption, death and decay. However, we live in the hope that God will raise us up body and soul on the last day.

Lord, you are the Resurrection and the Life. Teach me to take hold of the truth that death is not the end but the beginning.

*Acts 5:27-32, 40-41 • Psalm 29(30):2-6, 11-13
Revelation 5:11-14 • John 21:1-19*

The early Church produced some amazing witnesses of faith. Stephen is one of them and he stands out in so many ways. Known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, he was chosen by the Twelve to deal with the distribution of bread problem that had arisen (6:1-7). What was interesting about this was that the apostles chose Stephen to serve practically so that they could devote more time to praying and reading the Scriptures (6:2). It will emerge that Stephen's grasp of the Word of God was second to none and he soon became the Church's first martyr.

Stephen is a classic New Testament example of one who conformed his life to Christ and so was conformed in his death. He was full of grace and power, and through him miracles, signs and wonders were performed (v. 8). He too incurred the wrath and hostility of the religious authorities and under cross-examination confounded his accusers. He is a wonderful example of the fulfilment of Jesus' promise that his disciples would be given words of wisdom to proclaim the gospel under interrogation (Matt. 10:19-20). Like Jesus Stephen was accused of blasphemy and false witnesses gave evidence against him. Like the Lord

on Mount Tabor Stephen's face and body were resplendent with the glory and light of God.

'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2:20): these words were spoken by the apostle Paul but they could equally have come from Stephen's mouth. To be conformed to Christ is not to grit our teeth or strive by our own strength but to turn to and rely on the Holy Spirit. St Augustine said: 'God created us without us but does not save us without us.' In other words, sanctification is not a passive process but rather an active and dynamic co-operation with God, who wants to form in us the character of Jesus. Jesus is the perfect human being, the model of the new humanity. The more we grow in holiness, the more like him we become. And this is precisely what happened to Stephen: Stephen lived no longer, but Christ lived in him.

Lord, when you call us, you call us to die to ourselves and rise to the new life, the life of the Spirit, which witnesses to the new creation, the new humanity.

Acts 6:8-15 • Psalm 118(119):23-30

John 6:22-29

God knows we need models, examples and heroes today. We need them especially for learning how to live the Christian life. But perhaps the bar is raised too high when we look at Stephen! He is also, more importantly, more than a model, example or hero: he is a martyr, and the first one at that. We do well to study his brief witness and learn from him. What qualities of character do we need in order to bear witness to Christ? For this is what a martyr is: a witness. Their witness, however, leads to death.

The first quality Stephen had in abundance was a knowledge of God's love. He eloquently and quite brilliantly showed his understanding of how God had worked in the history of Israel. He had obviously immersed his mind in the Hebrew Scriptures, praying and meditating on God's wonderful plan of salvation. We too can seek to deepen and nourish our faith through reading God's Word and becoming more familiar with the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures are pregnant with Christ, and the Spirit leads us to see how the Law, the Prophets, the Wisdom writers and the Psalms all have references to the coming of the Saviour.

Another quality manifested by Stephen was a close relationship with God in prayer. Even in the midst of his agony and trial he prayed: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit', and falling to his knees begged, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' As he lived, so he prayed. The challenge we face is to carve out time in our busy schedules to pray. Without this time of communion with the Lord our hearts can grow hard. Stephen's prayer life gave him a heavenly perspective, a heavenly vision. We can be reluctant or shy to develop this part of our interior life, but heaven is our goal and we should worry not about thinking too much about heaven, but not thinking enough about it. Stephen prayed: 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God' (v. 56).

Finally, Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit. How did this happen? How was he filled with the Spirit? By asking and beseeching the Lord to pour out his Spirit of grace, wisdom, understanding, love and power.

Send forth your Spirit, Lord. Make us willing to co-operate with his work in our lives, which is conforming us to Christ, day by day.

Acts 7:51-8:1 • Psalm 30(31):3-8, 17, 21

John 6:30-35

If you try and extinguish a fire, the danger is it will spread. This is precisely what happened with the early Church – it spread like wildfire. In fact, the more persecution was unleashed upon it, the more the Church grew and spread. It is hard for us to relate to this as we practise our faith in a culture which, although at odds with Christian faith, allows believers to worship in freedom, without interference or persecution. So how do we witness to Christ today?

The important thing to understand is that witness to Christ we must. Jesus' instruction to his disciples speaks to us as much as it did to the first believers: 'you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you: and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8). Philip took care of Samaria (v. 5); our territory is the ends of the earth.

So back to our question: how do we witness? There is a lot of confusion about evangelism, that is for sure. Those who are reluctant to share their faith point to St Francis who said: 'Preach the gospel – if necessary use words.' We are comfortable with the idea of being loving, caring and kind, witnessing

by our deeds as it were, but less comfortable with the words. We are probably, truth be told, also not comfortable with the idea of signs and miracles, which Philip witnessed to: 'For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many...were healed' (v. 8 NIV). There is quite simply a much lower sense of expectancy and confidence surrounding evangelism than many other areas of our faith. This is as true of the clergy as it is of their congregations. How many parish priests, for example, say at Mass on the first Sunday of the new year, 'This year we are going to strive to increase the parish by 10 per cent' or 'My goal is to have over 100 people received into the Church this Easter'?

Evangelism requires hard work – it always has. Jesus refers to evangelists as labourers in the harvest-field. The first person we need to evangelize is ourselves. The more we can witness to the joy, hope and love which comes from faith, the more attractive and compelling is our witness.

Lord, help me to witness to you and in so doing grow and mature in faith.

Acts 8:1-8 • Psalm 65(66):1-7

John 6:35-40

How does the Holy Spirit speak to you? Most of us would say that we experience the Spirit speak to us and guide us through our conscience or just a sense we have about something being right or wrong, good or bad. While the Spirit does indeed speak to us in both these ways, there is no escaping the truth (and why would we want to escape it?) that in the early Church the Spirit spoke very personally and directly to the apostles. Even down to giving road directions: 'Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza' (v. 26 NIV). How many times have you heard the Spirit give you specific road directions?!

Philip was being navigated by the Spirit towards the Ethiopian eunuch: 'Go to that chariot and stay near it' (v. 28 NIV). God knew that the Ethiopian was doing the right thing and asking all the right questions. He was reading from the prophet Isaiah and understood correctly that he needed help in understanding what he was reading. He was, in fact, reading Isaiah 53 about the Suffering Servant and wanted to know if the prophet was talking about himself or someone else (v. 34). What an

amazing opportunity for Philip to witness to his faith.

Should we expect to be able to co-operate and work with the Spirit in this way? We can feel daunted by the thought of witnessing about our faith. We don't like the idea of being too forceful or too pushy, etc. Of course, who does? We don't want to force anything on anybody, but everybody has the right to hear the gospel. St Thomas Aquinas said, 'To teach in order to lead others to faith is the task of every preacher and of each believer.'

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council taught: 'The true apostle is on the lookout for occasions to proclaim Christ by word...[I]n everyone's heart the apostles' words should find an echo: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16)' (*Apostolicam actuositatem* 6). We are not alone when we witness to our faith: the Holy Spirit is with us, urging, prompting and guiding us. The approach we take, while certainly loving and respectful, needs also to be creative and dynamic. Make no mistake, we are called to bear witness.

Lord, in this Year of Faith, teach me to proclaim my faith with boldness.

Acts 8:26-40 • Psalm 65(66):8-9, 16-17, 20

John 6:44-51

Do you have a conversion story? Can you share with others the reason you have come to faith? Some accounts are more dramatic than others. For some their conversion was powerful and surprising, involving a turning away from a destructive lifestyle to new life in Christ. For others the process was a more gradual turning to God.

The story of Paul's conversion is probably the most dramatic and well known in history. It is recounted no less than three times in the Acts of the Apostles (9:1-20; 22:3-21; 26:9-20). It is clearly a conversion we are to know well and be familiar with. God obviously had big plans for Saul of Tarsus, who was, as he explained to Ananias, 'a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel' (v. 15). God chose a man who was so zealous for his Jewish faith that he thought nothing of rounding up, throwing into jail and, when necessary, stoning to death those he saw as his enemies; a man who was set on destroying the Church. God's ways are not our ways, that is for sure.

For most of us, it is through the sacrament of baptism as babies that we undergo a conversion

and experience all the grace and blessing of being converted to Christ. Through baptism we are born again of the Spirit, our sins are forgiven, and we are justified and reconciled with God. However, the Church in her wisdom summons us to conversion throughout our lives. Consider this teaching from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: 'Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. This second conversion is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church. This endeavour of conversion is not just a human work. It is the movement of a "contrite heart", drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first' (para. 1428).

This Year of Faith is a wonderful opportunity for each of us to seek a deeper and more authentic conversion, leading us to respond to the loving mercy of God, who loved us first and sent his beloved Son to save and redeem us.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for leading each of us to faith in you. Increase our understanding of what you have done for our lives so that like Paul we may serve you wholeheartedly in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 9:1-20 • Psalm 116(117)

John 6:52-59

Do you believe in miracles? In one sense we all recognize that things happen in life which are beyond logical explanation. A coincidence or a stroke of good fortune or a chance meeting is identified as a 'miracle'. However, the miracles that we encounter in the New Testament are of a different order: they are true miracles. St Augustine said, 'Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature.'

We often think that the reports of miracles in the Gospels and Acts are for simpler, less sophisticated minds than ours. It is sometimes suggested that the writers used them as a kind of literary device to encourage faith. This is, of course nonsense – a miracle is either a miracle or it is not. Peter's healing of Aeneas and raising from the dead of Dorcas reveal God's direct and personal intervention in a powerful and dramatic way. What could be more powerful than healing someone who is a paralytic or raising a corpse back to life?

Such miracles are amazing. Yet in the view of St Augustine, to whom we referred earlier, there is no greater miracle than a changed heart. He said, 'I never have any difficulty believing in miracles,

since I experienced the miracle of a change in my own heart.' In our own case, often the real issue is not believing in miracles, but actually expecting them and praying for them. It is our sense of hope and expectancy which is the problem. As G.K. Chesterton said, 'If a man is a fool for believing in a Creator, then he is a fool for believing in a miracle, but not otherwise.' In other words, by believing in God we believe in miracles because God who is all-powerful performs miracles.

It is interesting that the word used for miracles in the New Testament is *erga*, meaning 'works', which suggests that Jesus' miracles were natural and necessary outcomes of his life and an expression of what he himself was – the Word made flesh. Of course miracles happen. For our part we must pray for them and ask God to intervene in our lives and in the world in a powerful and dramatic way. The purpose of miracles is to move people to faith – they are simply signs pointing to the reality and power of God.

Lord, I believe in miracles and pray that your grace and power would be manifest through them.

Acts 9:31-42 • Psalm 115(116):12-17

John 6:60-69

If you are a Christian you really have got to get your mind around sheep! The reason for this is because the Bible, and especially the New Testament, often refers to us as sheep. The French poet Jean de La Fontaine reflected amusingly, 'A certain fox, it is said, wanted to become a wolf! Ah! Who can say why no wolf has ever craved the life of a sheep!'

The downside about sheep is that they need guiding, leading and feeding. They are easy prey to predators such as wolves and foxes, and are prone to stray and wander into danger. There is also no getting away from the unpalatable truth that sheep are not known for being especially intelligent animals. For example, in *Animal Farm* George Orwell had pigs as the leaders since they are known for being a more intelligent class of animal. Sheep do what sheep do best and that is follow. On the plus side, and probably the greatest strength of sheep, is that they quickly learn to recognize the voice of the shepherd. You get the picture!

We are the sheep and the Lord Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd leads us to eternal life, for the goal and purpose of our pilgrimage is to be united with the Lord forever and enjoy the

everlasting blessings and graces of sharing in God's divine life. Christians can be wrongly criticized for having their heads so far up in the clouds that they are of no earthly good. Actually, the problem tends to be that we don't have our heads high enough up in the clouds. We don't tend to think or pray very much about heaven or the gift of eternal life and this is a mistake. Jesus said: 'For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day' (John 6:40). Paul put it so beautifully when he said: 'Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses' (1 Tim. 6:12).

Lord, you have set eternity in our hearts and you call us to a life beyond the grave, where we can behold your glory and, through the merits of your Son, enjoy the bliss of eternal communion with you.

*Acts 13:14, 43-52 • Psalm 99(100):1-3, 5
Revelation 7:9, 14-17 • John 10:27-30*

Social, cultural and religious traditions run deep in us all. In Acts 11 tension has arisen between Jewish and Gentile believers. From our standpoint we may find it hard to appreciate the significance of what happened, but the way this particular trouble spot unfolded made the difference between the Christian faith being, in effect, a narrow and rather blinkered Jewish sect and the world religion it is today!

This incident highlights the danger of blinkered thinking and of not being able to 'think in the Spirit'. The bottom line was that the Jewish believers did not really think that Gentile believers could be fully Christian unless they were circumcised. In other words, they had created two classes of Christian based upon their understanding of the importance of circumcision.

Basically what happened, thank God, was that Peter underwent a kind of conversion experience. In a vision from the Holy Spirit he saw that nothing that God had created was unclean (a reference to the Jewish regulations about eating) and that in Christ there was neither Jew nor Gentile since they had been baptized into one body. It is sobering to realize that the rock upon which the Church was built

could become so confused, but the Holy Spirit, thank God, prevailed.

The primary sacrament which unites us to each other, and other Christians, is the grace of baptism. In baptism each of us received the ministry of priest, prophet and king. The sacrament of ordination is a great blessing, but those blessed to partake in it are called to be our servants, not our masters.

The division, therefore, between lay people and clergy is a division of labour or ministry, not one of value and esteem, because in Christ we are baptized into the same body and each is created in the image of God. Rooting out and identifying our own prejudices and shadows requires courage and grace.

Lord Jesus, set me free from all kinds of prejudice, and help me value, love and esteem my brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.

*Acts 11:1-18 • Psalm 41(42):2-3; 42(43):3-4
John 10:1-10*

Today we celebrate the feast of St George, patron saint of England (275–303 AD). Tradition has it that St George was a soldier who may have been martyred at Lydda in Palestine under the persecution unleashed by the Roman Emperor Diocletian. We actually know very little about him, but what we do know is that his witness to Christ made such an impression that he was widely venerated from the earliest times. Because of his military background and his martyrdom an apocryphal tradition or legend grew up around this great warrior for Christ that he had slain a dragon as a maiden looked on. The dragon was Satan, of course, and there is a way in which St George is a kind of patron saint of the spiritual battle or conflict.

Today this spiritual battle is fought in every European country in which the Christian faith once flourished. Moral relativism, secularization and a virulent militant atheism are the new enemies of faith. Christians, rather like St George, are called to rise up and fight these dragons of unbelief and violent disregard for the roots upon which England and every European country was built.

The story of the early Church demonstrates that persecution causes the Church to grow not shrink. And just as in the early Church Barnabas and Paul shone as leaders and men of God, so too God is calling us to stand up for our faith, defend the gospel and bear witness to him. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch (v. 26) and we are proud to be called Christians today.

What does it mean, however, for us to be Christians? It means that we must bear witness to two things: the first is to the new creation we have become in Christ and the second is to the gospel message. This twofold witness has never failed to attract people to Christ. It is the gospel of love lived and preached which will bring about the new evangelization of England and Europe, and for this we pray to the Father.

Father, I pray that a new wave of evangelization would be poured out upon the ancient continent of Europe. Renew her, refresh her and blow a new wind of the Spirit in her sail, so that she may once again be a beacon for the light of the gospel.

Acts 11:19-26 • Psalm 86(87):1-7 • John 10:22-30

Proper of Saints: Revelation 12:10-12 • Psalm 125(126) • 1 Peter 4:12-19
John 15:18-21 (or John 15:1-8)

Do you see the glass half empty or half full? Why? Because for every Christian the glass is not just half full, it is overrunning and overflowing. We are to be a people full of hope, with a heightened sense of confidence, boldness and expectancy that with God all things are possible.

Sadly, we find that cynicism and a certain lack of expectation can prevail and even overwhelm us at times. Cynicism is sophisticated despair rooted in disappointment and an absence of hope. Thank God, we find the very opposite in the early Church. There we see an irrepressible joy, undying enthusiasm, vital growth and exciting expansion, as well as new and diverse ministries, gifts and fruits of the Spirit in abundance. We also discover a Church completely and absolutely reliant upon the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the Mover, the Animator, the Power, the Force behind the Church – then and now. Do we trust in and rely on the Holy Spirit? If you are a reader at Mass, do you ask the Spirit to help you read? Maybe you have done this for a long time and think you are pretty good at it and don't need any help!

If you are a Eucharistic Minister, do you ask the Holy Spirit to help you perform this ministry? If you are a deacon, do you call upon the Spirit in serving in your parish? If you are a priest, do you seek out the inspiration and help of the Spirit in your ministry, in your preaching and teaching? The Spirit brings us knowledge and understanding of the ministry we perform and gives us a deeper sense of our calling and grace.

We take heart from the way the early Church relied on the Spirit and seek to inspire all that we do with the Spirit's grace and wisdom. St Thomas Aquinas said this of the Spirit: 'Love can be used either as an essential name of the divine nature or as a personal name of a divine person – then it is the proper name of the Holy Spirit, as Word is the proper name of the Son.'

Come, Holy Spirit, pour out your love in my heart and by your grace let this love of God and neighbour inspire all that I do. Teach me to live a life not in the power of my own strength but in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 12:24–13:5 • Psalm 66(67):2-8

John 12:44-50

Today we celebrate the feast-day of one of the Church's greatest sons and a member of a special group of men we call the Evangelists, who all wrote Gospels. Mark's Gospel is the shortest and punchiest version. Which Gospel was written first has vexed biblical scholars for many years, with many certain that Mark's brilliant account was first past the post. Others argue that Matthew got there first. But whilst at one stage in their lives these apostles might have argued for pride of place, after writing their Gospels they almost certainly did not! The wonderful thing about Mark's Gospel is that it is quite quick to read. Its sixteen chapters can be easily read in one sitting.

On Mark's feast-day in this Year of Faith we focus on verse 15 of the final chapter in his masterpiece which proclaims: 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.' In essence this was Mark's *raison d'être*. It is also our mission and the reason why the Church exists and indeed why your parish exists.

To be fair, we don't tend to live like this. Judging by the evidence, it seems that most priests, probably on their own admission, are ordained to maintain parishes rather

than to grow them. Of course, candidates come forward year after year for RCIA and instruction in the Catholic faith and we rejoice in this. But we all know that the Church is losing ground.

However, how about this for an idea? The parish priest buys a Gospel of Mark for every one of his parishioners and also publishes a little postcard inviting them to a talk in the parish called 'The Basic Gospel Message'. And how about if, instead of the parish priest organizing everything, he delegates this to a group of lay people who form a welcoming committee and even provide simple refreshments for those who attend? The only condition or requirement for those attending the evening's talk is that they read St Mark's Gospel (this can be done within an hour).

By using Mark's Gospel in this way we are probably using it in exactly the same way that the early Church did – as a tool for evangelism. Go on, give it a try! What have you to lose? Nothing. What have you to gain? Everything, including souls!

Lord, give me the heart of an evangelist and help me to spread my faith with courage, vigour and enthusiasm.

1 Peter 5:5-14 • Psalm 88(89):2-3, 6-7, 16-17
Mark 16:15-20

Paul was like a comet: he lit up the night sky of the world and illuminated it with the light of the gospel. Jesus is the perfect and ultimate evangelist, but Paul comes a close second! In human terms Paul is the evangelizer *par excellence*, and he shows us by word and by example how to set about this fundamental Christian task.

The notion that we, by our witness of life, win others over to Christ is a powerful and convincing one, and, for the sake of the point of this reflection, we could say it is a seductive and tempting one. Another great Paul, who was also an evangelist of the highest order, was Pope Paul VI. In his masterpiece, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, he discusses what we shall call 'witness of life' and asks us to picture a scene in which the witness of a small group of Christians in a community is striking by their love and service of one another.

He readily acknowledges that this is the first stage in the process of evangelization, which of course it is. Here is what Pope Paul VI says: 'Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that

inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization' (para. 21). However, he goes on to explain that, sooner or later, witness of life proves insufficient in proclaiming the gospel. Eventually we need to do what we find Paul doing in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles: sharing the good news, telling people about Jesus (para. 22).

The gospel is really the story of Jesus, his life, his miracles, his death, his resurrection and his teaching. There is no doubt, however, that evangelizing, according to the model laid down by the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, is challenging and invites us to be not only creative and expansive but also to study, read and apply our faith.

Lord, enkindle in my heart a desire to share with others the reason for my hope and to explain and unpack why Jesus came, and in doing this hold out the gospel of life.

Acts 13:26-33 • Psalm 2:6-11
John 14:1-6

The Jews are and will always be God's chosen people. We should be clear about this truth because it is an important part of our heritage as Christians. God's covenant with Israel is irrevocable and eternal. The Jewish people are our elder brothers in faith.

The problem with our elder brothers in faith, perhaps not unlike the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is that both in the first century and throughout history not only have they hardened their hearts to the gospel message but they have closed their eyes and ears. For them the Messiah, the promised Saviour of Israel, could not have come as Jesus came. For them the Saviour will come in power and glory, not in humility and shame. And it is this objection to Christ and the gospel that we encounter in today's reading. However, on this occasion we encounter not simply objection and resistance, but also jealousy (a very dangerous vice in people of faith and religion). Luke records: 'when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul, and reviled him' (v. 45).

There are clearly degrees of resistance to the gospel. God is patient, and we too need to be

patient. But in the end people's resistance can become too entrenched, too firmly set and, in one sense, insurmountable. This is what happened with the Jewish people. Paul, inspired and moved by the Spirit, basically said: 'Enough is enough! Let's move on and take the gospel to people who will hear and respond to it.' And this is precisely what happened: the mission to the Gentiles began.

We too must learn to keep in step with the Spirit when we discern that the time has come to move on and take the gospel to people who will hear and respond to it. No doubt Paul continued to pray for his Jewish brothers and sisters. No doubt he interceded for them and grieved over their resistance, but he handed them over to God's care. The Spirit is the One who works in people to lead them to Christ. We cannot force or compel them – we can only love them enough to witness to them.

Lord, I pray for those who have hardened their hearts against your gospel and the Spirit. May I always be prepared to take the gospel to those whose hearts have been prepared by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 13:44-52 • Psalm 97(98):1-4
John 14:7-14

There's a song by Luther Vandross called 'What the world needs now, is love, sweet love'. If you are familiar with it, having had your attention drawn to it, you may be tempted to start to sing or hum it – it's a catchy tune after all. The key lyric is: 'What the world needs now, is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of.' God knows, what the world needs now is love, sweet love, but the question is: what kind of love?

We invite you to ponder, reflect on and put into practice the vision of love unpacked by Pope Paul VI:

'Above all the gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine.

Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization.

The above questions will ask, whether they are people to whom Christ has never been proclaimed, or baptized people who do not practise, or people who live as nominal Christians but according to principles that are in no way Christian, or people who are seeking, and not without suffering, something or someone whom they sense but cannot name. Other questions will arise, deeper and more demanding ones, questions evoked by this witness which involves presence, sharing, solidarity, and which is an essential element, and generally the first one, in evangelization.' (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 21)

Lord, you gave us a new command to love but in truth it is not a new command but an ancient one, rooted in revelation. What is new, O Lord, is that we love as you first loved us.

Acts 14:21-27 • Psalm 144(145):8-13
Revelation 21:1-5 • John 13:31-35

When reading the New Testament it is important to note carefully the things which moved Jesus to give praise and thanks to his Father. We encounter one of these in today's Gospel reading: Jesus praised God and rejoiced because 'the gift of revelation' of the mystery of Christ was given not to the learned and the wise, but to the poor, the uneducated – those whom the Lord called 'little children' (v. 25 NIV). Today we celebrate the feast-day of just one such 'little child': St Catherine of Siena. But although truly a little child in terms of her faith, this great woman, who did not even receive a formal education, became one of the few Doctors of the Church.

St Catherine was born in Siena in 1347 and died in 1380 at the tender age of thirty-three. She was the youngest in a family of twenty-three, a precocious and socially talented child. Strong-willed, determined and clearly anointed by the Holy Spirit in a unique and special way, Catherine resisted all attempts to marry her off, instead joining the Dominican Third Order and by way of compromise living at home. She dedicated her life to Christ and became famous worldwide for her wisdom, insight

into the mystery of Christ, and ability to lead and guide even popes and kings.

She left the Church so many gifts: her witness of life, her holiness, her sanctity, her wisdom and her Dialogues, the fruit of her visions in which God spoke to her personally and directly. We sit at the feet of this truly wonderful 'little child of God':

'O eternal Trinity, you are a deep sea in which the more I seek, the more I find, and the more I find, the more I seek to know you. You fill us insatiably, because the soul, before the abyss which you are, is always famished; and hungering for you, O eternal Trinity, it desires to behold truth in your light. As the thirsty hart pants after the fount of living water, so does my soul long to leave this gloomy body and see you as you are, in truth. O unfathomable depth! O Deity eternal! O deep ocean! What more could you give me than to give me yourself?...By your fire, you consume every trace of self-love in the soul. You are a Fire which drives away all coldness and illumines minds with its light, and with this light you have made known your truth.'

1 John 1:5-2:2 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 8-9, 13-14, 17-18
Matthew 11:25-30

Luke tells us: 'We must go through many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God' (v. 22 NIV). How are you with hardship? Probably, like most of us, not that good. Hardship is not something we seek out: in fact, truth be told, we actively look to avoid it. But is it possible to avoid hardship and be a Christian? Or was hardship perhaps only something that these early believers were required to undergo? Maybe it could be said of us, as a British Prime Minister once said, that 'They have never had it so good'!

There is no doubt that the first believers underwent terrible trials and persecution. The blood of these first martyrs was truly the seed of the Church. But what of today? What is the seed of the Church today? We in the West do not always appreciate that in some countries persecution and hardship are still very much part of the fabric of life. This is especially true in places where militant Islam or certain violent sects within Hinduism consider it their duty to persecute and on occasions murder Christians – Nigeria, Burma, Iran, Iraq, China and North Korea spring to mind.

In our own land, our greatest threat is from the violence and hardship inflicted on us by the secular state which, despite its cherishing of the virtue of tolerance, seems particularly intolerant of the Christian faith. We could call this 'militant secularism', which, together with its sister 'militant atheism', seems focused on eradicating Christian faith from our public and cultural landscape. What is our response? Well, we must be prepared to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of heaven.

We may not be whipped or tortured or put into jail without due process or legal representation, but we may well be ridiculed, mocked and despised. A time may come when we may well be fined and even given a prison sentence for our beliefs. Nevertheless, we must love our enemies, turn the other cheek and pray for those who persecute us, showing love and kindness in return, for this is how we enter the kingdom of heaven.

Lord, may I always be prepared to stand up for my faith. May my desire to witness be contagious.

Acts 14:19-28 • Psalm 144(145):10-13, 21
John 14:27-31
