



The setting of today's Gospel is a pool in Jerusalem where sick people gathered in the hope of being healed. It was very crowded and probably pretty distressing. Jesus' compassion for sick people radiates from the Gospels. He makes their miseries his own: 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases' (Matt. 8:17 quoting Isa. 53:4). However, he did not heal all the sick – from a huge crowd he chose one man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, whose muscles had wasted and who must have experienced many disappointments. The Catechism gives us some insight into this: '[Jesus] did not heal all the sick. His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover' (para. 1505).

Jesus' question, 'Do you want to be healed?' (v. 6), was an invitation to the man to believe that he could be healed but also maybe to desire even deeper healing. Jesus asks us the same question, for instance when we lie paralysed by inner hurts or by our own sin, unable to pray and divided from each other. Jesus' words, 'Rise, take up your pallet, and walk' (v. 8), were

sufficient to heal this man, give him great joy and transform his life. When Jesus found him again he was in the temple: at this second encounter Jesus showed him how much more important and lasting is the forgiveness of sin and the healing of the wounds it causes.

What of the response of the Pharisees to this man's healing? They seemed keener to enforce Sabbath regulations than to marvel at this miracle. It is an encouragement to us not to be similarly hard of heart. Jesus asks us to have compassion on all who are sick or who suffer and be prepared to help them, even when it costs us time, or means overcoming prejudices, or doesn't fit into our plans. We can help by our prayer for them and with them: this expresses our faith in God who is all-powerful, and also shows our love. Jesus wants to bring his healing touch to them, and we are his hands in this world.

Lord Jesus, your grace is enough for us and your power is made perfect in our weakness. Give us hearts like yours, full of compassion for all who suffer, so your love, comfort and healing may reach out through us.

Jesus' life was governed by one overarching reality: his relationship with his Father. His intimacy with his Father was the source upon which he drew to fulfil his mission and destiny. He did nothing without the Father's consent. He delighted in obeying and pleasing his God and Father. Every moment of Jesus' life was an expression of his perfect submission and obedience to the will of God.

Talk of submission or obedience is guaranteed to raise hackles. In one sense this is understandable. We look at such issues from a human perspective and are suspicious of those who claim the right to our obedience. Oppression, suppression and domination have been inflicted on others in the name of authority since time immemorial. The wounds of this kind of abuse don't heal easily. We are right to resist such misuse of power. There's a sense in which the ingredient that is missing when authority is abused is love. In contrast, love is abundant in Jesus' relationship with the Father. Theirs is a relationship of mutual delight. The Son delights in the Father, the Father in the Son. The Son submits to the Father freely and willingly, and the Father

affirms the Son in all he does and says.

The amazing truth of revelation is that we are called to celebrate and partake in the love between the Father and the Son. This is not just a theory or a pious platitude. It's a central teaching of our faith. The way Jesus lived is how we are called to live. How real is our relationship with God the Father? Do we know the Son? Do we understand the Blessed Trinity as the standard of all our relationships? Jesus' mission was to reveal his Father. Our mission is to know the Father and the Son.

Practically, on a day-to-day basis, what does it mean to know the Father and the Son? The key is our prayer life. It is in prayer that we engage and commune with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We can ask the Father to draw us to himself through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father, I rejoice in your relationship with the Son. Draw me more deeply into the love that you share, and let me know the joy of the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 49:8-15 • Psalm 144(145):8-9, 13-14, 17-18
John 5:17-30

You can almost feel the exasperation of Jesus facing the Jewish leaders who firmly refused to accept him as the Son of God. 'What on earth do I have to do to make you believe? Aren't the claims about me made by John the Baptist enough? What about the miracles, signs and wonders you watch me perform daily, let alone the evidence of the Scriptures which proclaim me so clearly?' It's little wonder that they found it hard to believe. Jesus' ministry shook their comfortable world to its foundations. His miracles and teaching gave them a daily dilemma of having to face up to either accepting that Jesus was who he said he was, or rejecting him as some sort of crank.

Before we criticize Jesus' opponents for their lack of faith in him, we need to look at ourselves. How deep is our faith? It may be strong enough when things are going well, but how does it cope with setbacks and challenges? Faith should prompt us to try to understand the circumstances and situations arising in our lives in a way that always acknowledges the presence of the action of the loving hand of God. This is not so easy when our lives don't go according

to plan. It's then, when we are prone to frustration and depression, that we need to allow our faith to help us to understand and accept what God is doing in our lives. Paul calls us to '[r]ejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you' (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

Faith is both individual and corporate. Each of us needs the constant action of the Holy Spirit to deepen our faith through our prayer and reading Scripture. As members of the Church we belong to a rich community of faith and are recipients of the grace available through the body of Christ. Through the witness and testimony of others, we have living proof of God's loving presence, which serves to build up our own faith.

Without frequent reference to God each day we have a tendency to seek human praise rather than God's praise (v. 44). But with active participation in God's plan, we are helped to live out the Lordship of Jesus in our lives.

Jesus, give me the grace to turn to you, place my life in your hands, and accept your perfect plan for me.

Exodus 32:7-14 • Psalm 105(106):19-23
John 5:31-47

It is sometimes said that celebrity is the new religion. Fame, even fifteen minutes of it, is the drug of the moment. Public acclaim and recognition are sought as the prize of popular culture. Some people are willing to do anything for a few moments in the limelight. If we look back in time to the incident in today's Gospel at the Jewish feast of Tabernacles (sukkot) we can see that things were not that different. Jesus' family thought in a somewhat similar vein: 'For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world' (v. 4).

In fact Jesus went secretly to the feast. But then he entered the temple courts and began to teach. His message is so important that it cannot be silenced. When Jesus teaches we need to listen. The basic thrust of his proclamation is: 'I have been sent. You do not know the one who sent me, but I do, because I am from him.'

Jesus was sent by the Father to save humankind. Jesus is God's remedy, solution and answer to the plight of the human race. Consider that plight if you will. Human

history is littered with the effects of our fallen nature – wars, hatred, division and just plain old sin. Our own hearts know something is not right. The good we want to do we find difficult. We live with a constant struggle between good and evil. We grow frail, our bones grow old, and our bodies corrupt and die. There is a sombre reality to being human. It is true that we also love, bring forth children, create and build. But fundamentally we know something is not right. This is why Jesus was sent – to restore God's original intention, to manifest a perfect humanity and to offer himself as a sacrifice pleasing to the Father.

Like Jesus, we need to proclaim this message. It's a message that needs to be heard. But perhaps, to enable us to proclaim it openly, we first and foremost need to hear it ourselves – to listen anew and to let it sink into our hearts. We need to make the message of the gospel our own.

Lord Jesus, you revealed the new humanity and became the perfect sacrifice to restore us to the Father. Teach me to proclaim your death and resurrection with new boldness and clarity during this holy season.

Jesus created waves, ruffled feathers and raised hackles. He unsettled the establishment, caused a stir and profoundly challenged the civil and religious authorities of his day. Not everyone likes that picture of Jesus – perhaps we prefer the image of a Jesus who was more part of the establishment, 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'. But that is not the story the Gospels tell. To meet the real Jesus we only have to read a few passages from the Gospels like the one before us.

To be blunt, Jesus mystified, perplexed and intrigued the people of his day – as he continues to do two thousand years later. If we look at Jesus' life and teaching with open minds and hearts, then he moves us to question life, its meaning and who he is. He raised many questions for the people of his day: Was he a prophet (v. 40)? Was he the Christ (v. 41)? Didn't the Scriptures say that the Christ would come from David's family and from Bethlehem, David's town (v. 42)? The questions he raises in our day are equally challenging: Who is he? Why did he die? Did he rise from the dead? How do we apply his teaching in our own time?

One thing was certainly true then, and it is still true today: 'No man ever spoke like this man!' (v. 46). This was the view of the humble temple guards – working men – who understood instinctively that Jesus was special and unique. It certainly wasn't the view of most of the Pharisees – mercifully Nicodemus was the exception to the rule (vv. 50-51). Their preconceived ideas and mindsets prevented them from understanding who Jesus was. Many suffer from this attitude today. We have made up our minds who Jesus is: we may accept him as a good, holy man, an excellent moral teacher, an outstanding human being. But we refuse to go beyond this point because to do so brings us into the realm of acknowledging that Jesus is who he said he is – namely God. If we admit that this is true, we have no other choice but to bow down and worship him.

Lord Jesus, I boldly and humbly proclaim you as God. You took upon yourself our human nature – you breathed our air, you ate our food and drank our water, you wept, you laughed, you suffered and you died; but in rising you won for us eternal life. Your name be worshipped and adored.

John presents us with a very moving story. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find the humanity and human love of Jesus illustrated more than here: his concern for his friends in their bereavement; his response to the emotional and sensitive Mary; his words of encouragement to the more practical Martha. What is truly touching about this incident is John's insistence on the deep love that Jesus felt for this small family group, within which he must have felt so much at home.

Family and friends had come to mourn Lazarus. There was no doubt that he was dead. The rabbis believed that the soul hovered near the body for three days, and so with Lazarus having been four days in the tomb no one held any hope of resuscitation. The raising of the dead was one of the surest signs that Jesus worked by the power of God, since God is the author of life. Lazarus' restoration to life is a figure of something greater, namely resurrection and eternal life. Lazarus was restored to his present life, which is different from resurrection because he would eventually die again. But the miracle is important both in itself and because of the

deeds and words that accompanied it. All this together makes it a sign of the messianic power of Jesus.

Why didn't Jesus prevent the death rather than wait to overcome it? John, looking back at the incident, can see that it was all for the better. The miracle sign has shown God's glory. The God of healing love is revealed through the work of his Son. Hidden deep within the episode is a further truth: that Jesus' gift of life to Lazarus involved his own death, the offering of his own life. To love Lazarus and give him life Jesus had to be willing to risk and lose his own. The trip to Bethany was over shadowed by the approaching cross.

Jesus reveals to us the true meaning of life and death. We can take the opportunity in these last weeks of Lent to examine our faith in times of suffering, and our hope in the face of death. We are asked to look beyond the signs, however wonderful they may be. The signs point to Jesus, the Son of God. Our faith is in him. If we reflect on this we shall prepare ourselves for the joy of Easter.

Lord Jesus, you are the resurrection and the life.

Ezekiel 37:12-14 • Psalm 129(130)

Romans 8:8-11 • John 11:1-45

Today's Gospel depicts Jesus sitting and teaching the people. Suddenly the scribes and Pharisees burst upon the scene, dragging with them a woman caught in the act of adultery. You can imagine the reaction of the crowd. They turn from a group of people intently listening to the words of a teacher to a mob crying out for retribution against the powerless woman thrust into their midst. The scandalous nature of her offence inflames them all the more.

Jesus' opponents think they have caught him in a trap. As far as they can see, there is no way he can win in this situation. There is no doubt of the woman's guilt. The law of Moses prescribed death as the punishment for a married woman who committed adultery (Deut. 22:22). But the Romans had deprived the Jews of the right to carry out the death penalty (John 18:31). So Jesus is put in the position of either rejecting the law or challenging Roman authority. What is more, there is a further tension with his own teaching. Would he adopt a hard line, contradicting his own teaching on mercy and leading him into a conflict with the authorities, or would he reject the law and show

himself to condone immorality?

But Jesus turns the tables upon his antagonists. He decides for mercy without contravening the law or condoning the behaviour. The law recognized the responsibility of the witnesses for the fate of the accused (Deut. 17:7). Jesus confronts them with the need to examine their own behaviour. As they apply to themselves his words about the innocent one throwing the first stone, they skulk away. Jesus, the sinless one, the only one who could condemn the woman, is left alone with her. He does not condemn, for that is not his mission (John 3:17). He releases the woman from sin and gives her the chance to live a new life.

The words 'do not sin again' are crucial. Jesus offers all who come to him the opportunity to turn away from their sin, to put the past behind them, to be forgiven and to embark upon a new life with him. He calls us to do so today. In this season of Lent especially, Jesus calls us to come to him in the sacrament of reconciliation and receive the forgiveness he longs to give us.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62 • Psalm 22(23)

John 8:1-11

Throughout his Gospel, John is at pains to point out how Jesus reveals his divine origins. In today's dialogue the religious sensibilities of the Jewish audience would have been aroused by Jesus repeatedly using the term 'I am', which in the Hebrew Scriptures is the name God chose to reveal to Moses (Exod. 3:13-14). Their worst fears – that he was claiming to be directly from God, in fact that he was claiming to be God – were confirmed in an assertive, repeated 'I am he' (vv. 24, 28).

Jesus confronted the people and challenged them to respond to his self-revelation and believe in him. Put at its simplest, that is our role in life: to respond to Jesus and believe. Many people do not know how to respond to Jesus. Do we see him as God, as a distant and remote figure who understands little of our condition and seeks to punish us? Or do we see him as no more than a man, a brilliant teacher, maybe, but ultimately unsuccessful in his mission?

The balanced truth is that Jesus is fully God and fully man: as God he has always been and will always be almighty and resplendent in the glory of his Godhead; as man he has experienced to the full all

the sufferings and the joys of being human. He allowed himself to be subject to the limitations and temptations of our human nature but always fulfilled perfectly the will of his Father.

It is important for us to acknowledge that we are from below and that he is from above. It is because Jesus is both God and man that we can share in the trinitarian life of God. Jesus died on the cross so that we might be raised to life with him – and it is through his being 'raised up' on the cross that Jesus draws all humanity to himself.

Faith is the gateway into eternal life; we were infused with this grace at baptism and need to keep it fresh and alive. Lent is the season to be purified from all that obscures our vision of the true nature of our Saviour. As we come to him in repentance he will shed the light of his truth upon us.

Lord Jesus, you are truly God and truly man. I know that you understand all my fears, temptations and weaknesses. Strengthen my faltering faith, and teach me to acknowledge you as truly my Lord and my God.

Numbers 21:4-9 • Psalm 101(102):2-3, 16-21
John 8:21-30

Jesus and the religious leaders are once again locked in conflict. It is a bitter confrontation between light and darkness. For a brief moment, some of his audience show glimmerings of faith; they have been impressed by his miracles, but they are less eager to look carefully at the meaning of his words.

For all their obstinacy, Jesus loves these men and seeks to bring them to the light. He challenges them to face the truth that to be his disciples they must believe his teaching, and also to accept that sin has a real hold on their lives. Their reaction is predictably hostile. Their security and salvation lie in their claim to be children of Abraham and they totally reject the suggestion that they are slaves to sin.

Jesus makes the same challenge to us today. What is our reaction? As Christians, we want to respond to his invitation to go deeper, to let his word, which is the revelation of God's truth, pierce and penetrate our hearts and lives. The surest way is, of course, through prayer and a careful study of Scripture, asking the Holy Spirit to teach us who Jesus is. But what of sin? How do we respond to Jesus on this subject?

Jesus said: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin' (v. 34). Jesus looks on us with the same love and compassion with which he looked on his Jewish listeners. He sees how many of us have become dull to the reality of sin; he knows that our consciences are not as keen as they should be. As with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus does not seek to condemn us. He wants to bring us into the light so that we can lay aside our excuses and humbly see our need of him.

We can be assured that Jesus holds each of us in his hand and no one can snatch us from his grasp. He loves each of us deeply and does not want us to be enslaved by anything. The heart of the Gospel message is that by grace we have been set free to live in the righteousness, peace and joy of the Holy Spirit as sons and daughters of God.

Father, as we move towards Holy Week, help us to examine our consciences carefully, repent sincerely and receive joyfully the abundant grace available to us in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Deuteronomy 3:14-20, 24-25, 28 • Deuteronomy 3:52-56
John 8:31-42

‘**T**ruly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am’ (v. 58). There is no other passage in the New Testament where Jesus’ claim to be God is more explicit. Jesus consciously and deliberately takes the divine name that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush and applies it to himself (Exod. 3:13-14).

For his Jewish listeners it was the ultimate blasphemy, and they picked up stones to kill him. For us today it affirms a wonderful truth: the whole thrust of John’s Gospel is to reveal that Jesus is the only begotten Son who from all eternity has been in the bosom of the Father. He is the divine Word who is God, and who was with God from the beginning (1:1), and who in the fullness of time became man, taking to himself our sinful flesh (1:14). Jesus is the perfect revealer of God because as God the Son, at the Father’s side, he alone can make him known (1:18).

It is an astonishing reality that almighty God, the transcendent, uncreated Creator, who made the heavens and the earth and has no need of humankind, crossed that unbridgeable gulf and came and

joined us in the frailty and weakness of our humanity. He did not send some powerful intermediary, but came himself as Emmanuel, God with us. We can only wonder and give thanks and ask the Holy Spirit to open our minds to catch some glimpse of the limitless love God must have for us, his children. Because God came in person, he asks us to come to him in faith so that he can share with us his own divine life, which he pours into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. More than anything, the Father wants worshippers who will worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23).

Whatever our level of understanding, whatever the state of our faith, God the Holy Spirit seeks to confirm in us the truth of who Jesus is. He calls us to be very bold in proclaiming that God has come among us, has walked and talked, laughed and eaten with us; but, above all, has laid down his sinless life as a perfect sacrifice that takes away our sins. In our prayer today we can beg the Holy Spirit to show us more clearly who Jesus is and know with certainty it is a prayer he delights in answering.

Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.

*Genesis 17:3-9 • Psalm 104(105):4-9
John 8:51-59*

Let’s get right down to the point. Jesus claimed to be God. It’s as simple as that. Just how offensive this was to the Jews of his generation is hard for us to grasp. For them God was transcendent, other, beyond and in a certain sense unreachable (of course all these things are true). But in Jesus, God became touchable, real, present in time and, most shocking of all, a human being. To say his hearers were incandescent with rage would be understating it – they were frenzied and murderous. To pelt a man to death with stones, a crowd needs to have gone beyond the point of the rational or reasonable. Jesus’ words moved them to focus their attention on extinguishing him from the face of the earth. In a way, their reaction was understandable. For a mere human being to claim to be divine was no less than blasphemy. And blasphemy, under the law, carried the penalty of death. They were clear why they were stoning him: ‘because you, being a man, make yourself God’ (v. 33).

The great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis had a penetrating insight into the meaning of the incarnation:

The things he [Jesus] says are very different from what any other teacher has said. Others say, ‘This is the truth about the universe. This is the way you ought to go,’ but he says, ‘I am the Truth, and the Way, and the Life.’ He says, ‘No man can reach absolute reality, except through me. Try to retain your own life and you will inevitably be ruined. Give yourself away and you will be saved.’ He says, ‘If you are ashamed of me, if, when you hear this call, you turn the other way, I will also look the other way when I come again as God without disguise. If anything whatever is keeping you from God and from me, whatever it is, throw it away. If it is your eye, pull it out. If it is your hand, cut it off... Come to me everyone who is carrying a heavy load, I will see that right. Your sins, all of them, are wiped out. I can do that. I am Rebirth, I am Life. Eat me, drink me, I am your Food. And finally, do not be afraid, I have overcome the whole universe.’

Lord God, grant me the gift of wonder this Lent – wonder at the incarnation, wonder at the cross, wonder at the resurrection.

*Jeremiah 20:10-13 • Psalm 17(18):2-7
John 10:31-42*

We have come to the eve of the most holy of weeks in the Church's liturgical celebrations. The following days will help us to prepare to rejoice in the salvation that has come to us through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through Caiaphas' words the workings of the minds of those who plotted Jesus' death are exposed. Caiaphas was the High Priest, the spiritual leader of the Jewish nation. The High Priest's position was tenable as long as he remained in favour with the Romans. Caiaphas was worried that the crowds surrounding Jesus would make the Romans nervous and would be misinterpreted as a revolutionary type of unrest among the Jews. His fear, more than likely, was that this would lead to Roman reprisals – including maybe the loss of his own position.

In accordance with the grace of his office, Caiaphas prophesied, but his heart was untouched by the truth of his words. He could not possibly have understood the ironic truth contained in his own words: 'you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die

for the people' (v. 50). Caiaphas, though he had heard much about Jesus, like the rest of the religious authorities of his day, had never come to know him. He had shut out any possibility of Jesus' loving, healing, transforming presence having an impact on his life. It is easy to make the same mistake. We need to open ourselves to Jesus' love, to grow in knowledge of him.

To know Christ is to love him and to follow him. The events of Holy Week call us to follow Jesus in our own lives through his death and resurrection. In so doing we will experience new life. It is through the cross that we obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor. 1:18).

Lord Jesus, help me to follow you through the events of this coming Holy Week. By staying close to you in prayer, may I come to experience and know more fully all that you went through at the time of your passion. Fill me with the grace to know that all you endured was for my salvation, and to rejoice with you at the resurrection

Ezekiel 37:21-28 • Jeremiah 31:10-13
John 11:45-56

Jesus knew the appointed hour for him to die; he had pondered all the prophecies concerning himself and was waiting until everything had taken place that the prophets said would occur before his passion began. When all that was accomplished the passion would then follow, in the due ordering of events and not at the compulsion of fate.

'Listen to these prophecies, and see if they are true. Among the other things that were foretold of Christ, it is written: 'They mingled gall with my food, and in my thirst gave me vinegar to drink.' How this came about we know from the Gospel. First they gave Jesus gall; he took it, tasted it, and rejected it. Then, to fulfil the scriptures as he hung on the cross, he said: 'I am thirsty.' They took a sponge soaked in vinegar, tied it to a reed, and lifted it up to him where he hung. When he had taken it he said: 'It is finished.' What did he mean by that? It is as though he said: 'All the prophecies foretelling what would happen before my passion have been fulfilled. What then is left for me to do?'

'So, after saying, 'It is finished', he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Did the thieves crucified beside him choose when to die? They were imprisoned in the flesh with no power over its limitations. But it was when he himself chose to do so that the Lord took flesh in a virgin's womb. He chose the moment of his coming among us and the duration of his life on earth. He also chose the hour when he would depart this earthly life. It was in his power to do all this; he was under no compulsion...

'How could Christ be subject to the decree of fate, when elsewhere he had said: 'I have power to lay down my life, and I have power to take it up again. No one can take it from me; I lay it down of my own accord, and I will take it up again'? Unless he had been willing he would not have suffered, his blood would not have been shed; and if that blood had not been shed, the world would not have been redeemed. So let us pour out our thanks to him, both for the power of his divinity and for the compassion of his suffering humanity.' (St Augustine of Hippo)

Isaiah 50:4-7 • Psalm 21(22):8-9, 17-20, 23-24
Philippians 2:6-11 • Matthew 26:14-27:66

Jesus came to the home of his friends Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Earlier, he had lifted the sisters' grief-stricken hearts when he restored to life their dead brother, Lazarus. Now these good friends extended to him their love and hospitality, and brought him comfort and protection as the net of intrigue and hatred tightened around him. Within a few days he would pour out his life on the cross. When Mary anointed Jesus' feet she anticipated his burial, and her gesture was recognized by Jesus (v. 7).

Mary understood that he who had unbound her dead brother had come to bring life into the world. Her expression of extravagant love can inspire us to look for ways in which we might show our love and gratitude to Jesus. This week we celebrate the depth of his saving love for us. Mary knew that she had found in him a priceless treasure and that he was worth everything that was valuable in her life. Above all, she loved Jesus. The precious perfume became a wonderful way for her to express her total gift of her life to him. Judas ungraciously questioned the action as sheer

waste. He failed to see that Mary's gesture of loving faith was a reminder to those present of who it was that was in their midst.

Mary's act of pure love brought a sweet fragrance with it – a fragrance that will spread to all those we meet when we give Jesus first place in our lives. Often we think that our time is very precious and we cannot see how we could find extra time to spend with the Lord. The concerns of life will always be with us and we have to be challenged by Mary's attitude. Jesus calls us this week to spend some extra time in prayer, reading the accounts of the passion or perhaps preparing reflectively for a good confession. Let us not miss this opportunity. When we waste ourselves on the Lord, the rewards of joy, peace and union with him far outweigh anything that this world could ever offer us.

Jesus, I love you. I know that you are the most precious person in my life. I long to turn away from all that is shallow and that draws me to the passing things of this world. I long to put you first and to waste all that is precious to me for love of you.

Isaiah 42:1-7 • Psalm 26(27):1-3, 13-14
John 12:1-11

We may wonder how Judas could possibly have betrayed the Lord. After all, he had been with him constantly for three years; he had known him well, heard his teaching, seen his miracles and his power. Surely this should have been enough to inspire him with a love of Jesus, and some idea of who he was. It is easy to say to ourselves that we would never have done such a thing in his position.

Judas must have been bound by his own limited ideas of who Jesus was and how he expected the Messiah to act. He was not open enough to receive the full revelation of who Jesus was, unlike Peter who came to know that Jesus was 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16). It is often suggested that Judas was disappointed in Jesus because he failed to live up to his expectations of a Messiah who would liberate Israel from Roman domination. Judas saw Jesus in purely earthly terms; he did not understand that Jesus' kingdom was not of this world, that he came to free men and women not just from human oppression but from the power of sin and death.

We too can have wrong ideas about Jesus and cling to our own thoughts about him rather than asking the Spirit to reveal him to us. Even though Judas walked and talked with Jesus, he still went wrong because he was living out of his own power and sinful nature, not relying on God. We can be very devout and perform many religious practices and yet still be far from Jesus if we are being led by the desires of the flesh and our ego. If we are really to know Jesus and to be able to serve him as he desires, our sinful nature needs to be put to death on the cross. 'We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin' (Rom. 6:6).

Lord Jesus, we want to know and love you more deeply. Show us any wrong ideas about you that we cling to, and set us free from them. May our sinful drives be put to death with you on the cross, so that we might be able to live a new life in the power of your Spirit.

Isaiah 49:1-6 • Psalm 70(71):1-6, 15, 17
John 13:21-33, 36-38

Judas' act of treason is infamous and his name has become a byword for a traitor. However, it is far too convenient for us simply to demonize Judas. We shall never really know what drove this disciple to betray his Lord. He may have had an idea of the Messiah that was more aligned to the aspirations of the Zealots, who longed to break the yoke of Roman oppression. He may have thought that the other-worldliness of his Master needed to be balanced by political influence. Or he may simply have been propelled by greed and the hope of some quick cash.

What is clear is Judas' role in the unfolding drama of Jesus' passion. Judas' inner turmoil and confusion illustrate something of our primeval rebellion against God at the dawn of human history. Judas' sin, like Adam's, was pride – he thought he knew best and refused to submit his mind to the divine plan. Peter revealed the same tendency when he tried to divert the Lord from the cross. He was in turn severely rebuked: 'Get behind me, Satan!' (Matt. 16:23).

We don't like the idea of original sin – it offends a sense we have of our own goodness. In truth, with God's help, we are capable of

wonderful and noble acts of love and charity, but the Church has always pointed towards an original wound inflicted on us at the start of our history. We all have a tendency to rebel against our Creator and live independently of him. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council expressed this truth powerfully and eloquently:

What revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when people look into their own hearts they find that they are drawn towards what is wrong and are sunk in many evils which cannot come from their good creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as their source, men and women have also upset the relationship which should link them to their final destiny; and at the same time they have broken the right order that should exist within themselves as well as between them and other people and all creatures. (Gaudium et spes 13)

Lord Jesus, as I prepare to immerse myself in your passion, death and resurrection, grant me a clear and crisp grasp of my fallenness. As I take hold of my deep need, fill me with a new understanding of the salvation you won for me through your cross.

Isaiah 50:4-9 • Psalm 68(69):8-10, 21-22, 31-34
Matthew 26:14-25

Menial, lowly tasks offend our dignity: we consider such duties beneath us. Jesus shatters this thinking, assuming the position of a slave. He offers us a lesson in humility, disarming our pretensions. Humble and self-effacing service is the way of our Master. Our flesh rebels at the thought and our minds fight such a notion. We like the idea of status without cost and esteem devoid of sacrifice.

Jesus' way is the way of the cross. It's the road of self-denial and sacrifice. It's a narrow path, but it leads to life. The image of Jesus washing feet hardened by rock and soiled by dirt is striking. This act of service is a metaphor for the ultimate act of love – the cross. Through his cross Jesus would take on himself the filth of sin, becoming for us sin itself. The stain and ugliness of our rebellion were absorbed by Jesus on the tree. His blood was shed to cleanse us of our sins, wash away our guilt and clothe us in his righteousness.

St Ambrose of Milan, deeply moved by the image of the Lord washing feet, wrote: 'Jesus, I wish you would let me wash your feet,

since it was through walking about in me that you soiled them. I wish you would give me the task of wiping the stains from your feet, because it was my behaviour that put them there. But where can I get running water I need to wash your feet? If I have no water, at least I have tears.' One can't manufacture this kind of sentiment. It is a work of the Holy Spirit, born of a grasp of God's immense love for us. God's grace can widen our hearts and open our minds to his great love.

Holy Thursday begins the most solemn moment in the liturgical year. It's a time to take stock, examine and focus once again on God's plan of salvation. The Father so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we might have life. The Son so loved the world that he laid aside his majesty, embracing our humanity and dying on the cross.

'Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.'
(Ps. 51:1-2)

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 • Psalm 115(116):12-18
1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-15

Jesus' destiny reaches its climax. Jesus was born to die and his hour has come. Good Friday is a holy moment. It's a day of mystery and paradox. A day of mourning but also rejoicing. A day of seeming defeat but actual victory. A day of darkness but radiant light. Nothing reveals God's love like the cross. Its eloquence speaks with a unique authority, piercing the hardest of hearts.

We need to be aware of the situation into which Jesus came. The human race had strayed far from God's eternal purpose. We drank deeply of the cup of rebellion and sank into all manner of sin. Sick and wounded, we wandered in darkness, living aimless and futile lives. Created in the image of our Creator but bereft of our original innocence, we dived headlong into chaos. We languished in the abyss – the mess of our own making. It is still all too easy for us to fall into self-destructive sin. We know this in our hearts and discover within an ambivalence towards God and our neighbour. Our preference is for self-rule and independence from God. War, hatred, greed and pride dominate the landscape of human history.

God's remedy is his Son; his solution, the cross. The cross

meets our deepest need – the need to be reconciled, to be put right with God. Our sin, our rebellion, hostility and folly, are fully embraced by the cross. The cross becomes for us the source of eternal salvation. Jesus' cross releases us from the grip of death, restoring our dignity. Heaven is reopened – the cross the ladder by which we once again enter our heavenly home.

Make time today to ponder the depth of God's love. Today, on this good day, don't be afraid to let your heart sing in praise of God's love and mercy. Rejoice! The tree of life transforms the tree of death, reversing the tragedy of the Fall. Our original wound is healed – we are redeemed, restored, reinstated as children of the Father. Through the cross we can now take hold of our true and eternal life.

‘Through the cross, death died and Adam came back to life. Through the cross, each apostle attained glory, each martyr obtained a crown, each saint achieved sanctity. Through the cross, we are clothed with Christ, discarding the old man. Through the cross, we sheep of Christ are reunited in the same flock and destined for the heavenly feast.’
(St Theodore the Studite)

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 • Psalm 30(31):2, 6, 12-17, 25
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 • John 18:1-19:42

Today we don't simply recall a historical event. We are involved in something much greater and more exciting than mere events from the past. Our faith teaches us that when we are baptized we too die with Christ. Our old self is crucified with him that we might no longer be enslaved to sin (v. 11). The glory of our baptism is that our immersion in water reflects a deeper mystery, namely our immersion into the death of Christ. At baptism not only is the stain of original sin washed away – wonderful in itself – but, amazingly, we actually come into contact with Jesus' own death. Our share in his death means we also share in his life. During Easter we shall renew our baptismal promises and be offered an opportunity to discover anew the grace of our baptism. We shall confidently proclaim our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, renounce Satan and all his empty promises, and taste the joy of rededicating ourselves to the Lord.

We are called to do as Paul teaches: 'consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (v. 11). The Greek word translated 'consider' is *logizomai*,

which literally means 'to do accounts' or 'to calculate'. What is the significance of this word? Accounting and arithmetic deal with numerical fact. In like fashion Scripture teaches that we are to consider our death with Christ as hard fact. It's a fact like $1 + 1 = 2$. It is certain, definite and we can utterly rely on it.

We are urged to take an active stand in proclaiming this truth every day. Like a good bookkeeper who records actual data and facts, we must record the truth that we have died with Christ. As we look into our hearts we often don't feel very dead to sin – in fact it seems very much alive and kicking! However, we can step out in faith, holding on to the truth of the gospel and pray:

'O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? Christ is risen and you are abolished, Christ is risen and the angels rejoice, Christ is risen and the tomb is emptied of the dead; for Christ, being risen from the dead, has become the leader and reviver of those who had fallen asleep. To him be glory and power forever and ever.'
(St John Chrysostom)

Romans 6:3-11 • Psalm 117(118):1-2, 16-17, 22-23
Matthew 28:1-10

Our faith is rooted in real and actual events that occurred in history. Jesus, God made man, was born as a baby in the town of Bethlehem, he ministered in Galilee and Jerusalem, he died on a cross at Calvary and rose again on the third day. All of these events are historically verified by reliable witnesses: the birth and the ministry of Jesus by the historians Josephus and Pliny the Younger, and the resurrection by the disciples. In about AD 56 Paul wrote, 'I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve' (1 Cor. 15:3-5). Paul is referring to what we can call the living tradition of the resurrection and we are inheritors of this living tradition today.

However, the primary evidence for the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a sign and a confusing one at that: the sign of the empty tomb. None of the Evangelists witnessed the actual event: they described only its aftermath, if you like. Why is this? Of course, like many things in relation to faith,

in order to understand we need first to believe: faith comes before understanding. In accepting and believing that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead, we then enter into its mystery.

What happened then when Jesus rose from the dead? Pope Benedict explains that, when Jesus rose from the dead, an 'evolutionary leap' occurred and a new kind of life broke forth from the tomb. This new life is outside of the boundaries that we know and understand. Although it occurred within history, Jesus' resurrection is beyond history and it is beyond mere flesh and blood to grasp. In order to take hold of it we need the gift or grace of revelation.

The resurrected Jesus revealed a new human being, set free from the corruption of sin and death. The disciples experienced the Lord as a risen and real person and laid down their lives for this faith. Perhaps the truth of Jesus' resurrection can only truly be grasped with the eyes of faith. Today we open wide our eyes of faith and let the light of the resurrection radiate and illuminate our lives.

Hallelujah, Jesus Christ is risen today!

*Acts 10:34, 37-43 • Ps 117(118):1-2, 16-17, 22-23
Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:6-8 • Jn 20:1-9 or Mt 28:1-10*

Today is a bank holiday. A day to rest from work, take a break, enjoy yourself and be with your family; a day to 'recreate' which, as we all know, means 're-create', to refresh and recuperate from our work. There is nothing wrong with that – rest and recreation are the flipside of working hard and giving your all. However, while we may rest in our bodies, the liturgy takes no rest in its leading of us through the breathtaking gospel story. No sooner have we revelled in the resurrection of our Lord than the liturgy leaps to the account of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost – although we will have to wait for fifty days to pass before we celebrate this feast. The Church, almost in her excitement and joy, leads us to reflect and pray on the meaning of the outpouring of the Spirit.

So intoxicated and happy were the first believers at the early hour of nine in the morning that people thought they were literally drunk! And, of course, they were – they were drunk on the Spirit of God. Peter proclaimed immediately that the disciples were not drunk on alcoholic spirits but on the Spirit of the Living God. In fulfilment of

Jesus' promise, God had poured out his Spirit to equip his followers for the task of proclaiming the gospel to the world. Peter saw in this unique and wonderful event the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Joel who had pointed to a time when the Spirit would indeed be poured out upon all humankind (Joel 2:28-32). The coming of the Holy Spirit was happening before their very eyes.

This was a transformative event. The coming of the Spirit brought about transformation in the lives of the disciples. They went from being cowed, cowardly and confused to joyful witnesses for Christ. It was as if they had drunk deeply from the well of salvation and were drunk on the spirit of joy. Are you drunk on joy? Is your parish a joy-fuelled and joy-filled community? In his recent Apostolic Exhortation Pope Francis chides us all in a teasing, fun kind of way, suggesting that too often as believers we can live as if it is Lent and not Easter, and we can seem as if we have just returned from a funeral not a resurrection!

Lord, fill me, on this Easter Monday, with the new joy and hope of the gospel.

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

Do you believe God intervenes in your life? Many believe in God but do not believe that God gets too involved in the nitty-gritty, day-to-day grind of our lives. They have a kind of watchmaker view of God – you know, God winds up the clock and then lets it get on with its tick tock, tick tock. This is a nonsense, of course: we know from the Scriptures that God is profoundly involved in our lives and wants to intervene in them in a powerful and life-changing way.

On 24 May 1738 God did just that in the life of one John Wesley, the founding father of Methodism, who was then a Church of England priest. The young and devout Wesley was in Aldersgate in the city of London, in a chapel which you can still visit today, at a meeting of a group called the Moravians. As he listened attentively to a sermon from the book of Romans he found that his heart was 'strangely warmed'. This experience, which he later understood to be an experience of the Holy Spirit, transformed his life. Through it he grasped in a new and exciting way the message of God's love and took this message, on horseback, the length and breadth of England.

Those who listened to the first sermon of Peter, the first pope, were not so much strangely warmed as cut to the heart. Now here is the thing: once they were cut to the heart they needed advice and help. They turned to Peter and pleaded: 'what shall we do?' (v. 37). Peter's answer has reverberated down through the centuries and is as true today as it was then: 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...' (v. 38). The answer lies in repentance and baptism. Now most of us reading this reflection will already be baptized and cannot be baptized again – or can we? Yes, we can because we are all continually in need of a second conversion. The life-long task of the Church is to call, urge and exhort us to turn back to the Lord so that we may be refreshed in spirit, soul and body.

Lord, grant me the grace, gift and joy of repentance that I may be baptized again in the tears of contrition, sorrow and repentance and be filled with the joy of salvation.

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

It could be said that on Easter Sunday our world changed forever – it was the defining moment in human history. On Easter Sunday a power was unleashed: the power of the resurrection, the power of the new life of the Spirit. On Easter Sunday a new human being was revealed in the risen Christ. In an effort to describe what had taken place, Pope Benedict coined that most memorable and striking of phrases ‘an evolutionary leap’. Of course evolution relates to the natural and biological world where the overriding principle is ‘survival of the fittest’ and a Darwinian ethic prevails which is basically a ruthless pursuit of dominance and survival over and above any other consideration. Jesus’ evolutionary leap was the opposite. Jesus revealed a new human being who came to serve rather than be served, who was meek and humble, and willing to lay down his life for others.

The healing of the beggar recounted today illustrates the power and grace of this new life. The Acts of the Apostles forces us to get our minds around miracles – because there are so many. St Augustine, that giant intellectual of the Church, said simply: ‘I never

have any difficulty believing in miracles, since I experienced the miracle of a change in my own heart.’ G.K. Chesterton, another towering intellect, 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, because there is a God we believe in miracles. Miracles are God’s business.

There are miracles today, without doubt, but, to be fair, in our parishes we don’t see too many of them. Minor miracles happen every day in answer to our prayers – but a cripple getting up and walking or a recovery from a terminal illness? Perhaps one of the reasons such amazing things don’t occur more often is that we are not hungry enough for them and we don’t cry out to God enough for them. For truly and surely the grace is there – both in our prayers and certainly in the sacraments of the Church.

Lord Jesus, miracles are not contrary to nature but only what we know about nature. Give me a new hope and expectancy in the power of your word, the power of your grace and the power of your name. In Jesus’ name may we be set free to walk in the power of the Spirit.

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

Are you an optimist, for whom the glass is always half full, or are you a pessimist, for whom the glass is half empty? Or perhaps you lean towards a more cynical bent and wonder if there is really a glass in the first place! Of course, regardless of our personality, human nature is inclined towards a certain degree of cynicism, doubt and incredulity. This, to be fair, protects us from being too gullible and too easily led astray. It is good, healthy and proper to question, probe and examine. We are evidence-based creatures and we need facts and evidence on which to ground our beliefs. The problem, however, comes when the facts and evidence are staring us in the face, there for everybody to see. It would be fair to say that, in such a case, to persist in cynicism, doubt or incredulity then becomes unreasonable and obtuse, and simply reveals a deep-seated spirit of unbelief.

It is this attitude which Peter is addressing today. He is basically saying to the people who witnessed the healing of the beggar, ‘Why are you so surprised at this healing? Why do you stare at us as if it is by our own power that we could do

something like this? The God of Israel, the Father of Jesus, did this miracle through us.’ And he goes on to say in effect: ‘You crucified the One who is the author of life, the Lord and the Messiah, but God raised him from the dead. You acted out of ignorance but the message of Christ is now held out to you. Repent, turn away from your sin, and be renewed by the Spirit of the Living God.’

This same message is delivered to us today. In a way this is the gospel message – this is the message which has changed our lives and will in turn change the lives of others. We are being called by Pope Francis to be Spirit-filled evangelizers – men and women who are in love with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but also in love with the gospel message. We are to be, if you like, ‘gospel activists’, men and women who understand and can deliver to others the life-giving message that Peter preached after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Lord, set my heart on fire with love for the gospel, and teach me to share it with others with joy, freedom and confidence.

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

The Acts of the Apostles is a wonderful gift to the Church. It is a kind of white-knuckle rollercoaster ride of evangelization, which, it is fair to say, got the budding Church well and truly on her way. It is an eyewitness account of the years following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and brings us in touch with a Church we may not recognize today! The grace of the Spirit we see at work was rather raw, naked and unpredictable.

One of the fascinating things about reading Luke's masterpiece is that we see lived out many of the sayings of Jesus. For example, he said that he did not come to bring peace but a sword. Now that image does not fit very comfortably with a Jesus 'meek and mild', but the truth is that the gospel proclaimed in its purity and beauty is powerful and explosive and therefore can be divisive (see Luke 12:51).

We see Peter and John creating just these kinds of waves in today's reading. The temple authorities clearly thought that some form of social revolution was imminent as a result of the teaching and preaching of these men. They responded in the same way that authorities who feel threatened have responded

throughout the centuries: they threw these revolutionaries into jail (v. 3). It is evident that the apostles had caused quite a commotion since Israel's supreme court lost no time in rounding them up and summoning them to appear before them.

Were they cowed? Did they recant? No. Rather they were filled with the courage, strength and exuberance of the Holy Spirit. These were men who were not to be messed with. They did not bring a message of social revolution like that of the ill-fated Spartacus, whose struggle led to so much bloodshed. Jesus was not a Spartacus or a Barabbas who incited political revolution. The message of the apostles provoked a different kind of revolution – an encounter with the Living God and therefore an encounter with a living hope which transformed life and the world from within.

'I [God] will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.' (Deut. 18:18-19 NIV)

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

We human beings put a lot of store on education and social pedigree. Academic qualifications and status of one kind or another are a kind of social shield we hold up against the world to defend our dignity and position. If we hold professional qualifications – as accountants, lawyers and doctors, for example – we are rightly proud of them and are afforded a certain respect because of this achievement. In church circles, too, we have all manner of titles and status – from the humble 'Father' right up to 'Canon' and 'Monsignor', and so on. Interestingly, Pope Francis has stopped the awarding of the title 'Monsignor' until a priest has reached the age of sixty-five. Prior to the reforms of Vatican II there were fourteen versions of a Monsignor!

God, however, chose twelve very ordinary men to be apostles – a fact reinforced by Luke in today's reading (v. 13). They did not belong to a professional elite – as the Pharisees and Sadducees did. And it was the boldness and wisdom of these very ordinary men that surprised their interrogators. The point is that God changes everything – especially the way

we think. It is as if the Holy Spirit turns everything on its head. The foolish become wise, the lowly are raised up, the ordinary turn out to be extraordinary.

What is clear and what we need to bear in mind is that the Spirit shows no deference to our systems of class, education and social distinction. This is because in baptism we are baptized into the death and resurrection of the Lord of Life, the Prince of Peace and the King of Kings. We belong to a royal priesthood and have blue blood running through our veins – we are priests, prophets and kings. This is where our true and eternal dignity resides. And, in truth, when each of us is dead and gone, returned to the dust of the earth, this is the only status, qualification or privilege we can take with us. Just as there are no pockets in a shroud, there are no worldly titles and privileges in heaven because heaven belongs to the poor, the meek and those who humbly bow before their Lord and King, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Lord, teach me that my true dignity and security rests in knowing you, being a son or daughter of God and belonging to the royal priesthood of the baptized.

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

The New Testament has 'double-crossing' Judas and 'doubting Thomas'. The first disciples were nothing if not a motley crew and, as we all know, the Church is made up of the good, the bad and the mediocre. Yet, whilst Judas is reviled Thomas is embraced: his doubt seems to have a special appeal for our modern, sceptical world. Thomas is often hailed as a saint for our times, but the truth is he is a saint for all times, because the darkness of unbelief is part of the human condition.

We walk by faith and not by sight, and we can only perceive God as in a mirror, dimly (see 1 Cor. 13:11) – in biblical times mirrors were made of polished metal, which yielded a somewhat distorted image. Even though faith brings light to our minds and hearts, we often live it out in darkness and we are often put to the test. The world we live in can seem far removed from the one promised us by faith. So many things in life make faith difficult: the terminal illness of a loved one, failure or rejection in its many hurtful forms and just the sheer pressure of day-to-day living with all its stresses and strains.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses so beautifully and simply: 'Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice and death seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it' (para. 164).

What are we to do when we are assailed with doubt or when we question our faith or even God's existence? We are, of course, not alone. Our brothers and sisters who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith were not immune from questions and doubts. And God himself understands our temptation, for on the cross Jesus himself cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46 NIV). God is close to us in all our struggles, and in the cauldron of our post-modern and in some ways post-Christian world our faith is often tested and tried. Nevertheless, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, the saints and heroes of faith, and they, along with our Lord and Saviour, intercede for us.

Lord, teach me to walk in the night of faith by clinging to your cross and holding tight to the raft of your Word. Come near to me, Lord; strengthen and console me.

Acts 2:42-47 • Psalm 117(118):2-4, 13-15, 22-24
1 Peter 1:3-9 • John 20:19-31

Most of us haven't suffered too much for our faith. We largely keep our head down and get on with our lives. The workplace can be a difficult place from a faith point of view – wearing a cross as a piece of jewellery has, for example, landed some believers in hot water with their employers. As Christians we like to blend in, not stand out. We prefer to witness by our actions, rather than by our words. This is human and understandable, but perhaps we all need just that little bit more courage to step up and witness more boldly and confidently for our faith. However, what is clear is that sooner or later mocking, ridicule and even persecution will follow.

Jesus left his first disciples, and us, in no doubt that persecution was part and parcel of following him. And, as we know, this is precisely what happened. Persecution featured predominantly in the first three centuries of the Church's life. No sooner had Paul got back on his horse after his conversion than he was being persecuted. Peter was crucified – like his Lord and Master – and Paul was beheaded. The first believers, blamed for the fire in Rome, were cruelly persecuted under Nero, their bodies, daubed

in tar, lighting up the night sky of the ancient city. And even now, around the world – India, Nigeria and Sudan as prime examples – Christians are still suffering violent persecution and torment.

Today we celebrate the feast day of St George, the patron saint of England, who himself was no stranger to persecution. The Greek Church venerates him as the greatest of the martyrs, and his feast is also celebrated on this day in the Byzantine Church. A common story about George is that he had the courage to confront the Emperor Diocletian over his persecution of Christians (245–313). George was named patron saint of England in 1222 and is also venerated in the American state of Georgia, which took his name. In religious iconography he is portrayed as a dragon-slayer, an image which we can draw on today as we reflect on what it means to stand firm in faith, armed with the sword of truth and protected by the breastplate of faith and the helmet of salvation, in order to fight the good fight of faith.

Lord, teach me always to be prepared to stand up for my faith and proclaim the gospel, whatever the cost. Give me courage, strength and wisdom.

Rev 12:10-12 • Ps 125(126) • 1 Pt 4:12-19 • Jn 15:18-21 (Jn 15:1-8)
(Proper of Season: Acts 4:23-31 • Ps 2:1-9 • Jn 3:1-8)

Who doesn't have worries and anxieties? Who hasn't been woken in the early hours of the morning fretting about this, that or the other? Who hasn't felt the profound need to off-load this burden and longed for comfort, consolation and peace of mind? This is the human condition; this is the human heart. Life can often be hard and difficult, make no mistake. God knows we have our ups and downs, our struggles and our fights, our good days and our bad days. Welcome to our world.

Jesus addresses this turmoil in today's reading. Could there be more comforting or consoling words than these? Who but God could utter such loving and compassionate words? 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (NIV). No human heart could fail to be moved and deeply touched by these words – they are truly among the most beautiful in the entire Bible and in the Christian tradition. For this is God speaking directly, personally and intimately to every person.

For our part we are called to own these words, make them our own, understand that God, the Creator and Lord, is speaking them to us. Because the truth is that in the midst of our woes and struggles we easily lose sight of God's love and mercy. This is the promise of Jesus – no mere human being could promise such comfort, consolation and lifting of our burdens. Indeed, such a promise would be cruel if it could not be fulfilled. But that is the point, isn't it – when we turn to Jesus, when we pour out our weariness, our frustration, our despair, yes, our burdens, he hears us and carries them for us.

St Catherine of Siena, whose feast we celebrate today, is one of the Church's most wonderful saints – especially wonderful because she became a Doctor of the Church despite having received no conventional education. She had a lively sense of God's overwhelming love for every human person and once said: 'Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.'

'For I who am infinite God want you to serve me with what is infinite, and you have nothing infinite except your soul's and love's desire.'
(St Catherine of Siena)

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

Jealousy, along with its close cousin envy, is so virulent and toxic that it has often been described as 'the green-eyed monster'. If we are on the receiving end of jealousy it can be very unpleasant. However, if we ourselves are in its vice-like grip, it is even uglier and more destructive. At the root and heart of both envy and jealousy is profound insecurity. We are envious and jealous because we are unhappy and suffering in some way. The problem is that those of us held captive by these sins often don't realize it – it takes a fair degree of integrity, honesty and self-awareness to recognize them in ourselves and a fair degree of courage to confess our shabby secret.

Envy and jealousy, of course, infect many aspects of our lives. As one example you only have to think of parents who enter the 'Mums' or 'Dads' race at their children's sports day! And, truth be told, it is found in an especially specious and virulent form in our religious circles. At its most humorous (if this were possible) we become envious of those who seem to wear a T-shirt which says, 'God loves everyone but I am his favourite'. But at its worst

it is a terrible fire of hatred and resentment which can rip and tear communities, friends and relatives apart.

In today's reading, Luke, pulling no punches, tells us in no uncertain terms that the high priest and the Sadducees were filled with jealousy, which drove them to persecute Peter and John. They had them jailed, but neither the walls of their literal prison nor the chains of jealousy could bind our intrepid apostles. The Holy Spirit rides roughshod over the pettiness of human nature for he has only one thing in mind – the proclamation of the gospel message. The angel commands: 'Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life' (v. 20). It is the message of new life that sets us all free – from jealousy and envy, and from all sin, which seeks to trap us and reduce our humanity.

Lord, I repent of the times I have felt jealous or envious of others. Ground me in your love, root me in your mercy, secure me in your deep and abiding presence, that I may overcome such thoughts which rob me of my humanity and vocation.

Acts 5:17-26 • Psalm 33(34):2-9
John 3:16-21