

Thursday 30th April

Acts 13:13-25

We join Paul today in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch where there was a significant Jewish presence. Whenever the apostles arrived in a new town or city to begin to proclaim the gospel, they always presented it first to the Jews (see Rom. 1:16). Whether it was Peter or Stephen or Paul, each of these giants of the Church displayed an amazing ability to summarize and compress Israel's story and provide their audience with a clear explanation of the nation's role in salvation history. On this occasion Paul's preaching was so powerful and convincing that 'almost the whole city' came to believe (v. 44).

How it happened is rather hard to understand, but over the centuries there grew up within the Church a sense that the Jewish people, rather than being our elder brother in faith, had rejected Christ and were therefore worthy of scorn. This is evidenced by the fact that, prior to the Second Vatican Council, on Good Friday prayers would be said for the 'perfidious Jew' – perfidious meaning 'stubborn and unbelieving'.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council, judging this emphasis to be not only wrong but damaging to our relationship with the Jewish nation, pronounced, 'The Church cannot forget that it received the revelation of the Old Testament by that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant. Nor can it forget that it draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild branches of the Gentiles have been grafted' (Nostra aetate 4).

The Holy Spirit invites, encourages and leads us to deepen, nurture and nourish our love for the Jewish people. We owe them a great debt: from them we have the Torah, the Psalms and the Prophets, and from them our Saviour came. One of the practical ways we can grow in our esteem for the Jews is by reading more of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, which are the Scriptures the Lord himself read. We can read the Old Testament with our heart set firmly on the New, and in this way we will come to understand that the New is the fulfilment of the Old. This is important because Jesus declared that he had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them (Matt. 5:17).

Today, we give thanks and praise to Almighty God for the rich inheritance of faith the Jewish nation has handed down to us and especially for our Saviour.

Acts 13:13-25 • Psalm 88(89):2-3, 21-27

John 13:16-20

Wednesday 29th April

St Catherine of Siena (Patron of Europe) • (Feast) Matthew 11:25-30

Bishops and priests sometimes enjoy switching the phrase ‘Brothers and sisters’ in the liturgy to read ‘Sisters and brothers’. They think – one presumes since they rarely explain why – that this reveals a sensitivity and sympathy for the role of women in the Church. Of course, what they don’t realize is that, in fact, this is all rather patronizing and condescending – as if one minor concession can cover over a multitude of sins. The truth is, you see, more complex and actually more enlightening, as we can see from the life of witness of one of the Church’s greatest daughters, St Catherine of Siena, whose feast-day we are celebrating today.

St Catherine of Siena (1347–80) was a woman way ahead of her time – or was she? Perhaps she was simply a woman on fire with the love of God and living in the power of the Spirit, and as a result she rose far above the cultural and social norms of her day. She was one of twenty-three children (her mother eventually joined her in the convent). Despite being largely uneducated, she is accorded the title Doctor of the Church and considered one of our greatest theologians. During her life she suffered many trials and tribulations, not least because she was a woman in a male-dominated society and Church, but she overcame not by any feminist ideology or by allowing herself to be patronized but by the sheer grace of God. She had a vivid and living sense of God’s love not only for her but for every human person. Even at times when she was immersed in prayer, worshipping and adoring God, if called upon to do an act of charity or serve others, she would leave her prayer immediately.

St Catherine bore witness to the simple truth that in Christ there is no male or female: there is only the new creation. Our faith transcends gender. The mystery of the new creation, the blessing and fruit of our baptism, isn’t that we become less of a man or a woman: we become, in fact, more of a man or a woman – more masculine, more feminine and more human. St Catherine of Siena bears witness to the truth that the Church has always esteemed and valued women since it not only raised her to the altar of sanctity, but it also made her a Doctor of the Church.

St Catherine of Siena, pray for us.

1 John 1:5–2:2 • Psalm 102(103):1-18

Matthew 11:25-30

Tuesday 28th April

Acts 11:19-26

Stephen's martyrdom and the persecution which followed caused the Church to scatter like good seed. Some went to Phoenicia (Lebanon), others to Cyprus and Antioch. The gospel was on the move, as it has been ever since. The fruit of this evangelism was immediate and tangible. Luke informs us: 'the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord' (v. 21). Despite being a world without mobile phones, the Internet or even the telegram, news of this outbreak of evangelism soon reached the Church in Jerusalem and the believers rejoiced.

The Church responded by sending Barnabas, whose name means 'son of encouragement', to go and see what was happening. He had come to the attention of the church leaders for his goodness of heart and generosity (see Acts 4:36-37). True to his name, he encouraged the new believers 'to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose' (v. 23). Paul joined Barnabas and they stayed there a whole year leading, guiding and ministering to the believers. It was here at Antioch that believers were first referred to as Christians.

This is in essence how the early Church grew – believers were won for Christ, they were built up in their faith and they in turn won others. Faith is like this – it exists in order to be spread and shared. Our parishes exist in order to evangelize and we play a key role in this work. We can think sometimes that sharing our faith or being involved in evangelizing is for others, but this is a mistake because God has called us to be witnesses.

But what do we give witness to? Like the first believers we are called to witness to God's love and to a life of love. Where there is no love we must put love; where there is no hope we must put hope; and where there is no faith we must put faith. Like Barnabas we too can be 'full of the Holy Spirit and of faith' (v. 24), so that we burn with a love and desire to share the gospel and are so full of joy and enthusiasm that it overflows to those we meet.

Father in heaven, you call us to live a life of love and proclaim the gospel of love. May I do so in a way that wins others to Christ by the power and joy of the gospel.

Acts 11:19-26 • Psalm 86(87):1-7

John 10:22-30

Monday 27th April

Acts 11:1-18

Some years ago the Catholic bishops of England and Wales launched a campaign to encourage parishes to be more welcoming. The very notion that they felt there needed to be such a campaign seemed like a defeat. An unwelcoming parish is rather like an unfriendly pub, a hostile restaurant or an unhelpful shop – these attitudes rather defeat the object. A parish that has to be told to welcome people seems bizarre and frankly rather sad.

Whether our parishes are friendlier today as a result is difficult to say. Many have been attending Mass for years and yet the parish priest does not know their names and people rarely stop to chat or catch up after the service. Parishes, let's face it, are subject to the same mindsets as anywhere else. They have cliques and power struggles and can also be riddled with class, race and gender distinctions. Hard to hear for sure – but true. Now, before we get a flurry of letters from Mr or Mrs Indignant of Tunbridge Wells or Preston, of course there are, thank God, many parishes that are welcoming and friendly.

Despite the power and grace of the Holy Spirit at work in the early Church, it too was subject to exactly the same failings. God forbid if you were a non-Jewish believer in those early days! The first believers struggled to get their heads and hearts around how expansive, dynamic and embracing God's family is. The gospel is for everyone – God has no favourites. Like everyone else Peter was deeply entrenched in this discriminatory mindset, but the Holy Spirit transformed him by the renewal of his mind.

It is the Holy Spirit who works in our minds and hearts so that we are able to be warm and welcoming towards others. It is the Holy Spirit who makes our parishes places where people feel immediately warm and welcome. Sadly, as Pope Francis points out, it can be the parish priest who lacks joy or is unfriendly, but lay people need to rise above this and hold out the hand of Christian fellowship to everyone: the stranger in their midst, the new parishioner, the struggling single mother, the lonely, and the seemingly unloved and unlovable.

Lord, I repent of my wrong mindsets which cause me to judge others. Pour out your Spirit of love and compassion upon me so that I may be a warm and authentic witness of the gospel of love.

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

John 10:1-10

Sunday 26th April

John 10:11-18 • Fourth Sunday of Easter (B)

Midway through the Easter season the liturgy always dedicates one Sunday to the theme of the Good Shepherd, setting it aside as a day to pray for vocations to the priesthood – that men would be called by God to share in Christ's role as shepherd of his people. Today, on Good Shepherd Sunday, we would like to take time to reflect on this familiar image of the Good Shepherd.

When we see a shepherd with his flock today, it is often the dog doing all the work while the shepherd stands blowing a whistle. While it might be thought that this is an image of a priest today (priests might think they are more like the dog running madly around), it is not the image that the words of Jesus would have evoked in his contemporaries' minds. To them, a more familiar sight would have been a shepherd walking along a country road, with a line of sheep following closely behind him. Another familiar image would have been two shepherds sitting together beneath a tree with spreading branches, resting in the heat of the day, with their sheep lying all around them. With such pictures we can easily relate to Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who keeps his followers close to him as he leads them through the dangers of life and protects them from the scorching sun of temptation and opposition.

In his words in John 10, however, Jesus is not simply calling upon familiar pastoral images, but is also drawing heavily upon the Old Testament, where the shepherd is primarily an image of God himself taking care of his people and where the promised Messiah is also described as a shepherd. Furthermore, adding to Old Testament revelation, in the space of seven verses Jesus speaks five times of the Good Shepherd 'laying down his life for his sheep'. Here he is drawing upon both Isaiah 53 (which speaks about the Suffering Servant) and Zechariah 13 (which speaks about the shepherd being slain and the sheep scattering). Jesus is the slain shepherd who takes all human sin upon himself. When the Father raises him from the dead a whole new state of being becomes possible for human beings. Union with the risen Jesus brings us into the Father's presence.

Father, we pray that those you are calling to shepherd your people, would hear your voice and would gladly follow in your footsteps.

Acts 4:8-12 • Psalm 117(118):1, 8-9, 21-29

1 John 3:1-2 • John 10:11-18

Saturday 25th April

St Mark (Feast) • Mark 16:15-20

Today, as we reach the end of the week, we focus on one more of Jesus' disciples. This time it is Mark, who as well as writing one of the Gospels accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, although his early departure seems to have caused a rift between Paul and Barnabas. Mark was mentored by Peter who describes him as his 'spiritual son' (1 Pet. 5:13 NIV). In his account of the resurrection of Jesus, Mark makes reference to a young man who was following the arresting party from a distance. When they tried to seize him, catching hold of the skimpy linen garment he was wearing, he escaped naked (14:51-52). Since only his Gospel mentions this incident, the tradition has grown up that Mark himself was that young man.

In his Gospel Mark gives rather more attention than the other writers to the weaknesses of the apostles, recording, for example, that they fled in fear at Jesus' arrest. Perhaps he also wanted to acknowledge his own running away. His Gospel also mentions a young man dressed in white in the tomb after the resurrection. Although we understand this character as an angel, perhaps there is the hint that he also represents the transformation of Mark and the other disciples as a result of the resurrection. Our own faith in Jesus puts us in touch with the same transforming power.

All the characters we have looked at this week understood the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of Christ. The Gospel of Mark was written to reveal the true reality of Jesus as the Son of God, presenting his life and teachings through the language and imagery of the Old Testament to show that it is Jesus who reveals its true meaning.

Today's reading forms the conclusion of Mark's Gospel and records Jesus' commissioning of the apostles for the task of evangelization. The preaching of the gospel would be accompanied by miraculous signs including healing the sick, driving out demons and speaking in new languages. Mark's Gospel speaks much of the miracles, healings and exorcisms performed by Jesus, which all fulfil Old Testament prophecy and reveal Jesus as God's Son. The same signs continue now in the life of the Church and manifest the presence of the risen Lord among us.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the Gospels. May we treasure them and seek to live out their teaching.

1 Peter 5:5-14 • Psalm 88(89):2-7, 16-17

Mark 16:15-20

Friday 24th April

Acts 9:1-20 • Easter Weekday

The conversion of Saul is a climactic moment in the Acts of the Apostles. Much of the rest of Luke's book about the spread of the gospel and the growth of the Church will be concerned with his journeys and his increasing mission in the Gentile world. The event is so well known that the phrase 'Damascus road experience' has entered into our language to describe any kind of momentous turnaround in our lives. But what did that turnaround in his thinking actually consist of?

We probably need to return to the martyrdom of Stephen that we read about earlier this week. Stephen's witness to the risen Christ must have had some impact on Saul. He had recounted the history of Israel but in a way that revealed the Israelites' repeated rejection of God's saving work. He wanted to show that their rejection of Jesus, who was spoken of by the prophets, was typical of a pattern throughout their history. This is an example of the way that the early Christians were interpreting the Old Testament in the light of Jesus. Jesus himself, on the road to Emmaus, had shown the extent to which the Old Testament was – although often in a hidden way – really a prophecy of Jesus.

At the heart of Saul's conversion was a radical realization and re-reading of the Scriptures. For Saul, the holiest day of the year would have been the feast of Yom Kippur, the day on which the high priest entered the 'Holy of Holies' in the temple and sprinkled sacrificial blood on the mercy seat over the ark of the covenant, before sprinkling it on the people. These actions symbolized the renewing of the covenant between God and the people.

When Saul encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he came to a completely new understanding of Jesus' crucifixion. Far from being the justified punishment for blasphemy, he came to understand that Jesus' death was itself the holiest of events. It was the very reality of which Yom Kippur was merely a sign or symbol. The blood of Jesus established a new covenant between God and his people – not just with the Jews but with all of humanity. Through his death and resurrection Jesus has entered the very presence of the Father and has taken all of humanity with him. Saul – from then on known as Paul – entered into union with Jesus, as do we, at the moment of his baptism!

Acts 9:1-20 • Psalm 116(117)

John 6:52-59

Thursday 23rd April

St George (Solemnity in England) • Acts 8:26-40

St George has been the patron saint of England since the fourteenth century. He is thought to have been a Roman soldier who was martyred because he spoke out against the torture and murder of Christians during the persecutions. He quickly became venerated throughout Christendom as an example of bravery in defence of the Christian faith. He was said to have appeared to the Crusader army before the Battle of Antioch in 1098, and this led to him being adopted as the patron saint of soldiers. A century later, obviously seeing in St George someone to inspire his troops on his own crusades, Richard the Lionheart had the saint's emblem – a red cross on a white background – emblazoned on their uniforms.

The story of St George's apparition during the Crusades has a coincidental resemblance to today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. An Ethiopian eunuch from the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, was travelling back from Jerusalem to Gaza. He was most likely a convert to Judaism, since he had been to Jerusalem to worship in the temple and was reading from Isaiah on his return journey. He met Philip on the road and invited him into his chariot. After their time together, Philip seems to have been miraculously transported away by the Holy Spirit.

However, the central element of the account is not the miraculous aspect but the way that Philip opened the eunuch's eyes to the meaning of the Isaiah text – the Suffering Servant song from Isaiah 53 – explaining that the Suffering Servant was Jesus. It is a powerful prophecy of the passion and death of Christ and reveals that Jesus took upon himself the sin of the whole of humanity and offered himself in worship of the Father. In becoming the embodiment of sinful humanity, Jesus' loving act became the means of reconciling humanity with the Father because Jesus involved all of humanity in his own act of loving worship.

Whenever we celebrate Mass – the liturgy of the Eucharist – we are united with that same sacrifice of Jesus, by which we are reconciled in a new covenant with the Father. St George gave his own life because he refused to renounce his faith in Jesus as his Saviour. The emblem of St George can serve as a reminder to us that the real victory in which we share is the victory over sin – we are purified by the blood of the cross.

Proper of Saints: Rev 12:10-12 • Ps 125(126) • 1 Pt 4:12-19 • Jn 15:18-21
(or Jn 15:1-8)

Proper of Season: Acts 8:26-40 • Ps 65(66):8-9, 16-17, 20 • Jn 6:44-51

Wednesday 22nd April

Acts 8:1-8 • Easter Weekday

Stephen's martyrdom led to a great persecution in which Saul, later to become the Apostle Paul, played a great part. One effect of the persecution was to scatter the early Christians away from Jerusalem. Philip, another deacon like Stephen, went to Samaria, where his preaching had great effect. The people listened and came to faith in Jesus, and there were many who were healed of infirmities and of problems associated with the influence of evil spirits. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that, because of the preaching and ministry of Philip, there was much joy in that Samaritan city.

We hardly notice what is happening here but, up to this point, the preaching of the gospel had largely taken place in and around Jerusalem. With the onset of persecution and the scattering of the Jerusalem Christians, there was perhaps a feeling of failure. But now, for the first time, evangelization was moving outwards away from Jerusalem. For the Acts of the Apostles this is a significant moment. Before his ascension, Jesus had told his disciples that they would 'receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you' and that 'you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8). Now the witness to Jesus has reached as far as Samaria through the preaching and the signs manifested by Philip. Very soon, following the seeds already sown by Stephen, the great conversion of Saul is to take place and the mission will indeed spread to the ends of the earth. By the end of Acts, the witness to Jesus has reached as far as Rome. From that central point the whole Roman Empire is open before the gospel message. In a real sense, reaching and becoming established in Rome has set the basis for the gospel reaching 'the end of the earth' and thus fulfilling the prophetic words of Jesus concerning the power of the Holy Spirit received by the apostles at Pentecost.

While the outward movement of the gospel message to Samaria was the occasion of 'much joy', at the same time failure and persecution in Jerusalem was integral to the story. Our own time can seem like a time of failure with regard to the spread of the gospel message, especially as we see dwindling numbers in many of our churches. Today's reading reminds us that the Holy Spirit uses such failures to forge new pathways.

Acts 8:1-8 • Psalm 65(66):1-7

John 6:35-40

Tuesday 21st April

Easter Weekday • Acts 7:51–8:1

The parallel between Stephen and Jesus that we noted in yesterday's reflection continues even more strongly in our Acts reading today. At his own trial, Jesus had prophesied that people would see the Son of Man in glory, as Stephen now does. Like Jesus, Stephen accuses the Jewish authorities of acting in the same way as their ancestors who had persecuted and murdered the prophets. But also, like Jesus, he forgives his persecutors and commends his spirit not simply to the Father, but to the Lord Jesus, who now stands at his right hand.

The remarkable way in which Luke here describes the death of Stephen, the first martyr, is a powerful testimony to the work of the Spirit conforming believers to the likeness of Jesus – not only in the way that they live but, perhaps even more especially, in the way that they die. In the early Church, martyrdom was seen as the ultimate fulfilment of baptism, as we see from Paul's letter to the Romans: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might walk in newness of life' (6:3-4). For Paul, as for Luke, the Christian life is a matter of being conformed to Christ's death and resurrection. It is martyrs like Stephen who most clearly manifest this Christ-like conformity.

But sharing in a Christ-like death is not simply a matter of suffering martyrdom – even if that was quite common in times of persecution. Dying with Christ, according to Paul, also means dying each day to sin. It means allowing the sacrifice and the cross of Christ to put to death our fallen nature. Perhaps the question rises in your mind: how does the cross of Christ put the fallen nature to death? Paul gives what seems like a rather strange answer: 'So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11). Consider yourself dead to sin! It is precisely through this 'act of faith', through considering ourselves dead to sin, that the Holy Spirit makes it a reality day by day.

Lord Jesus, with St Stephen, I commend my spirit into your hands that today I might be dead to sin and alive to God the Father in the power of your Spirit. Amen.

Acts 7:51–8:1 • Psalm 30(31):3-8, 17, 21
John 6:30-35

Monday 20th April

Acts 6:8-15 • Easter Weekday

During this coming week, we shall be reading, in the Acts of the Apostles, about several men whose lives are a testimony to the action of the Holy Spirit, who filled the lives of believers at Pentecost and continues to be given to believers up to the present day. Two of these men, Stephen and Philip, were among the first seven deacons, chosen because they were ‘men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom’ (Acts 6:3). In addition, we celebrate the solemnity of St George, the conversion of Saul and finally the feast of St Mark – three men whose lives graphically show that the gift of the Holy Spirit has a transforming effect upon those who open their lives to receive his presence. As we reflect on the lives of these saints this week, we can be inspired by their witness and filled with confidence that the same Spirit is at work in us.

What is clear from our assigned readings for today and tomorrow is that Luke, the author both of the Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles, has chosen to show Stephen in the same light as Christ himself. Compare the description of Stephen as ‘full of grace and power’ and as working ‘great wonders and signs among the people’ (v. 8) with that of the child Jesus growing in ‘grace’ (Luke 2:40, 52) and speaking ‘gracious words’ (Luke 4:22 NIV) and, in adulthood, as ‘a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst’ (Acts 2:22).

In addition, when the wisdom of Stephen creates frustration among his opponents, they resort to false witnesses and accusations of blasphemy in a way that parallels the trial of Jesus. Even the manner of Stephen’s arrest and his being brought before the Sanhedrin is a replica of the arrest of Jesus. Finally, there is the comment, which seems strange at first, that all in the Sanhedrin ‘looked intently’ at Stephen and saw that ‘his face was like the face of an angel’ (v. 15 NIV). Like the face of Moses as he came down from Mount Sinai and again as he stood before the transfigured Jesus and like the face of Jesus himself on the Mount of Transfiguration, Stephen’s face shines because he shares the likeness of Christ through the gift of the Spirit.

Acts 6:8-15 • Psalm 118(119):23-30

John 6:22-29

Sunday 19th April

(B) Third Sunday of Easter • Luke 24:35-48

Jesus appears to the disciples after his death. They touch him and he feels real; they give him food and he eats it. As it was written, he has risen from the dead on the third day after the crucifixion.

How awesome is the power and the glory of God to do this. Truly, we are meant to relax into his Holy Spirit and stop trying to do everything ourselves. ‘The sun hears the fields talking about effort,’ wrote St Catherine of Siena, ‘and the sun smiles and whispers to me, ‘Why don’t the fields just rest, for I am willing to do everything to help them grow?’ Rest, my dears, in prayer.’

Likewise, Christ instructs us to let go and let God: ‘Do not be anxious about your life,’ he says. ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin’ (Matt. 6:25, 28).

When we have a ‘To Do’ list that never seems to get done, full of endless responsibilities and goals, it is easy to forget God. Perhaps we feel despondent because we do not consciously feel the support of God.

‘He has never left you,’ reassures St Catherine of Siena. ‘It is just that your soul is so vast that just like the earth in its innocence, it may think, ‘I do not feel my lover’s warmth against my face right now.’ But look, dear, is not the sun reaching down its arms and always holding a continent in its light? God cannot leave us. It is just that our soul is so vast, we do not always feel his lips upon the veil.’

In mystically interpreting artist Robert Natkin’s painting Egypt, Sister Wendy Beckett describes our inner selves as mysterious landscapes, as an ‘Egypt of the heart’. Here, she says, we are fulfilled beyond comprehension but never in control. ‘We both fear our Egypt selves and seek to repress them,’ she writes. ‘Yet God cannot make us holy unless we are present to him in our whole truth. Pretending [this inner Egypt] is not there simply cuts it off from God’s transforming love. Like this supremely beautiful Natkin, we cannot fathom the ‘meaning’, but intuit its mystical presence. We enter more and more deeply into the sheer ‘thereness’ of the painting. So do we enter, with grace, into the sheer truth of our being: we expose it all to God, and he will make our Egypt his Land.’

Acts 3:13-19 • Psalm 4:2-9

1 John 2:1-5 • Luke 24:35-48

Saturday 18th April

Acts 6:1-7 • Easter Weekday

The disciples are instructed to ‘choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom’ (v. 3 NIV). How do we know who is full of the Spirit and full of wisdom? Perhaps we instinctively know – some people have a peaceful, holy presence about them, whilst, at the opposite end of the scale, some individuals have a very unpleasant presence and it is difficult to be around them.

Where does the sensitivity to be able to pick up on the presence and aura of others come from? We don’t all possess it. Was this what Jesus was referring to when he said: ‘Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice’ (John 18:37)? Rather than being ‘evil’, were those who persecuted Christ simply not in possession of the ability to sense his holiness? To experience his presence, the living waters, in prayer, is to feel an unwavering loving peace. So to have met him in the flesh must have been absolutely extraordinary – his spiritual presence must have been overwhelmingly beautiful.

Poor old Pilate, as we know, did not possess the sensitivity to pick up on it! ‘What is truth?’ he asks in response (John 18:38).

And what of the beautiful, invisible halo that some people carry with them? Why is it that we so enjoy sitting beside them in church? It is because they love, surely. They have a genuine faith perhaps, a genuine attitude of loving service, a genuine kindness that creates humility.

In the recent television documentary *Hotel India*, film stars, billionaires and royalty are seen enjoying the luxurious Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai. But the star of the show is steward Mr Chaskar, who is a beacon of smiling service and humility. ‘Smiling says that I care, that I understand, that I am very happy,’ he says, and of course he has that beautiful, holy presence.

How ironic, in a documentary about the glitter society teaches us to crave – the glamour, money, power and looks – that the person who shines out is one of the butlers. ‘Guest is God’ is the hotel’s motto – it’s all about service. Whilst the guests interviewed talk about themselves, Mr Chaskar’s whole being is orientated to others.

This is the attitude of the wonderful Prayer of St Francis:

‘Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love.’

Acts 6:1-7 • Psalm 32(33):1-5, 18-19

John 6:16-21

Friday 17th April

Easter Weekday • Acts 5:34-42

The Pharisee Gamaliel says of the apostles that 'if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God' (vv. 38-39 NIV).

It is very old language to use the word 'human' as a reference to something inherently evil. In fact, wise theologians may say that to be fully and truly human is to be holy. After all we are all meant to be love machines! Jesus tells us that 'the kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17:21 KJV). We are intended to contain and express divinity, which is unconditional kindness and peace.

But this common human vocation of being a love machine is only achievable once we have been filled with Love. And God is the one who does this, for God is Love. He will fill us with his sweet sanctity and enable us to endure and to achieve much goodness.

This is what Gamaliel means, for Love is unstoppable. There is, said Thomas à Kempis, 'nothing higher' than Love. 'For love is born of God', he wrote, 'and can only rest in God...Love feels no burden, takes no account of toil, attempts things beyond its strength; love sees nothing as impossible...Love therefore does great things; it is strange and effective; while he who lacks love faints and fails. Love is watchful, and while resting, never sleeps; weary, it is never exhausted; imprisoned, it is never in bonds; alarmed, it is never afraid; like a living flame and a burning torch, it surges upward and surely surmounts every obstacle.'

In order to have all that unstoppable energy, we must invite God in. We do this when we pray, which, in its most beautiful and best form, is the simple listening of the heart. We receive God by emptying our hearts and heads of our preoccupation with ourselves, and we listen, we absorb, we receive the silent mystery of God's Love.

When we go to Mass, we are also inviting God in. We take in the body and blood of Christ under the sacramental signs of bread and wine. There is a great relief in this receiving, in being able to 'let go and let God', as the saying goes. But the receiving can also be difficult because it means that our egos have to get out of the way!

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

John 6:1-15

Thursday 16th April

Acts 5:27-33 • Easter Weekday

What does it mean when the Bible says that ‘We must obey God rather than human beings’ (v. 29 NIV)?

To obey means to carry out the orders, commands or instructions of a person, an organization or, in this case, God! Christ’s instruction was to love. He said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39 NIV).

In truth when the Bible says not to obey human beings, it perhaps means to be careful what we seek, idolize and crave. St Thomas Aquinas said that ‘The things we love tell us what we are’. Do we obey Jesus’ command and love God? If so, then we love Love, for ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). Do we love others? Or do we love material possessions? Do we love competition and approval? Do we love the false bonding of gossip? Do we love anxiety because it’s become a habitual comfort? Do we love talking and reading about prayer, rather than prayer itself? We all have our unhelpful loves!

‘We become what we love,’ said St Clare of Assisi, ‘and who we love shapes what we become. If we love things, we become a thing. If we love nothing, we become nothing. Imitation is not a literal mimicking of Christ, rather it means becoming the image of the beloved, an image disclosed through transformation. This means we are to become vessels of God’s compassionate love for others.’

This change happens, of course, when we love God, but we can only love God when we have encountered God, and God is the one who decides when that happens! It took St Teresa of Avila twenty years of meditation before she felt the loving presence of the Divine. After that, she looked back upon her former loves: she had been addicted to fine clothes and shoes, she said, and she had adored food. But she does not scold herself (or us) for having such worldly loves. In fact, she says if they involve love, then they will help to ‘unveil the soul’, for through them we are experiencing the sense of love, which is everything. ‘Our passions help to lift us,’ wrote Teresa. ‘I loved what I could love until I held him, for then – all things – every world disappeared.’

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

John 3:31-36

Wednesday 15th April

Easter Weekday • John 3:16-21

There are two perspectives – one earthly, the other heavenly. The earthly view is narrow, limited and finite. It struggles to grasp the divine. The heavenly view, on the other hand, is broad, expansive and infinite. It delights in the divine and embraces God's rule. Jesus is the heavenly man. He came from heaven and speaks to us as the One from heaven. His testimony about himself, his Father and his kingdom is completely trustworthy and reliable.

John wants us to grasp the glory of God's plan of salvation. He is keen to communicate the sheer immensity of God's love and condescension in becoming a human being. God has given us of himself fully, totally and without limit (John 3:34). What more could God give us? His supreme and perfect gift is manifested in his Son. In Jesus we discover God's ultimate answer to the human condition. The mystery and complexity of human existence discovers both its meaning and its destiny in Jesus.

The incredible and extraordinary revelation is that the Son of God became a son of man so we children of men could become children of God. God shared our humanity in order to raise us to be like the heavenly man. This is, if you like, the mystery of our salvation, which was kept hidden but is now revealed.

The Christian faith, when sufficiently grasped, is shocking. Its revelation of God's love and kindness to a rebellious and wayward race is frankly over-whelming. There is perhaps none better to help us penetrate its mystery than that great warrior of Christ, St Athanasius. He dedicated his life to preaching and teaching fearlessly that Jesus was both God and man – that his divinity did not extinguish his humanity nor his humanity corrode his divinity. With poetic and beautiful insight St Athanasius reflects on the glory of the man from heaven: 'The Logos does not in the least belong among the created things: rather, he is their Creator. This is why he took on a created and human body, in order to renew it as its Creator and to deify it in himself and thus lead us all with him into the kingdom of heaven.'

Lord Jesus, you are the man from heaven. You are from above and speak to us as the One from above. Your humility has opened the way for us to share in your divinity and holiness. Lead us to know and love you ever more deeply.

Acts 5:17-26 • Psalm 33(34):2-9

John 3:16-21

Tuesday 14th April

John 3:7-15 • Easter Weekday

Nicodemus has approached Jesus in the night to gain a deeper insight into his teachings. Bafflingly, he learns that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born 'from above', or reborn spiritually (John 3:3). This new life in the Spirit to which Jesus refers is infinitely more mysterious than the earthly, corporeal life we live among our friends, families and colleagues. That outer life is there for all to see, whereas the life of the Spirit is largely hidden. No one can calculate the work of God in the life of another, or imagine how much conversion and growth is taking place. Jesus likens this secret, mysterious work of the Spirit to the action of the wind, reminding Nicodemus that the wind comes and goes without warning. It is a refreshing, invigorating, revitalizing, but always unpredictable. The Spirit is like this, spontaneous, transforming, fanning love into flame and creativity into being. In its unfathomable comings and goings, the Spirit is full of the power of God's love.

Obviously, there is no way that words and examples – even those given by Jesus – can truly 'explain' the action of God's love in our lives, but Jesus has used the image of the wind to unpack for Nicodemus the concept of being 'reborn in the Spirit'. Even then, Nicodemus cannot grasp the message, and reveals this by asking, 'How can this be?' (v.9) Jesus answers that, if Nicodemus cannot even accept the earthly examples, how much less will he be capable of understanding heavenly things (v.12)!

From there Jesus moves on to the theology of the cross, explaining that, being crucified, he will be raised up, that whoever believes... [may] have eternal life' (v.16). This is a foretaste of the triumph of the cross in Christian understanding. Nicodemus is invited to enter into this in imitation of Christ. So, likewise, are we. All this prefigures charismatic prayer, which was prevalent just after the resurrection and has featured prominently again in recent decades. Perhaps being 'reborn in the Spirit' is just another way of expressing the radical 'putting on' of Christ which makes a completely new person of the one who prays.

Acts 4:32-37 • Psalm 91(92):1-2, 5

John 3:7-15

Monday 13th April

Easter Weekday • John 3:1-8

We do not know the circumstances of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus, and no reason is given for the tantalizing little detail that he visited at night. We do know that he was a prominent and educated Jew, and he must have been open-minded in order to want to visit Jesus in the first place. The whole encounter is fascinating, however, in that it has more of the 'feel' of a relaxed after-meal conversation than a formal teaching session – at least initially. Nicodemus' riposte to Jesus, that no one can re-enter their mother's womb, has a touch of the ridiculous, and even perhaps of humour, to it. Nevertheless, Nicodemus quickly found himself out of his depth, and clearly marvelled, as generations of Christians have marvelled since, at the awe-inspiring depth and mystery of the Master's words.

Books and books have been written about the interpretation of being 'born again' but it remains unscathed, as it were, as an expression with a deep element of mystery. For Jesus describes the process of rebirth as being essential for recognizing the kingdom of God and also entering it. Perhaps being born again can be understood as the experience of blinking, awestruck wonderment, seen on the face of a tiny baby, fresh from the comfortable but constricting imprisonment of the womb. Or perhaps being born again should be regarded as undergoing the traumatic and dangerous journey from one domain to another – one of restriction and confinement to one of freedom and space. Or yet, perhaps the sense is that of an empowerment of the senses, those faculties within us which were designed to enable us to live life in the beauty of the world, faculties which were dormant and unused in the long, dark months of gestation. Maybe Jesus intended all of these, and hundreds more, yet undiscovered.

We next hear of Nicodemus at the end of John's Gospel, when he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea and claimed Jesus' body, preparing it hurriedly for interment. Obviously, he had taken the Master's words to heart and had become a disciple. Perhaps, like us, he had struggled to understand the meaning of Jesus' teaching, but undoubtedly he shared the joy of revelation which the resurrection would bring.

Lord, teach me what it means to be born again, so that I may enter more fully into the joy of your kingdom.

Acts 4:3-31 • Psalm 2:1-9

John 3:1-8

Sunday 12th April

John 20:19-31 • Divine Mercy Sunday (B)

Divine Mercy Sunday celebrates the Father's mercy towards us. All of us because of our sins, stand before the Father as sinners separated from him and unworthy to come into his holy presence. By his act of raising Jesus from the dead, the Father accepts the loving sacrifice that his Son made of his own life to save us and to reconcile us to God. Our own act of faith in the resurrection of Jesus, itself a gift to us of God's mercy, opens the way for the Father to bestow upon us his mercy and compassion by forgiving us our sins and thereby reconciling us to himself.

The fruits of the Father's acceptance of Jesus' sufferings and death on the cross for our salvation by raising him from the dead are the giving of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of our sins. As the disciples accept by faith that Jesus has been truly raised from the dead, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (v.22). The Spirit washes away their sins and fills them with God's forgiveness. With their sins forgiven, the disciples no longer stand accused or condemned. Reconciled to the Father, they can freely enter into his presence. By believing in Jesus and his resurrection, we too can receive the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of our sins. We too can know the Father's presence.

Jesus came to take us out of the death brought upon us by our sins and into life (John 10:10). This life is our communion with the Blessed Trinity – our living in a relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Like the disciples, we too can receive life by believing in the name of Jesus (v.31).

Although we do not deserve it, the Father grants us mercy. He wishes to give us the gift of the Holy Spirit, washing away the sins that separate us from him, and to share his divine life with us. By faith in Jesus we can receive the fruits of Jesus' resurrection and be filled with life. How merciful is our heavenly Father! How great is the mercy we have received!

Most merciful Father, I thank you for the great mercy you have shown me. Grant that I may always be grateful for, and worthy of, your mercy towards me.

Acts 4:32-35 • Psalm 117(118):2-4, 15-18, 22-24

1 John 5:1-6 • John 20:19-31

Saturday 11th April

Easter Saturday • Acts 4:13-21

There are those who turn their backs on God because they find engaging with him, and all of the implications of that, too overwhelming. Belief is difficult. It is far easier not to believe. Others turn their backs on God for reasons to do with fear, an unwillingness to acknowledge their human frailty, or because of issues concerned with power and control. Where those first Christians that we have read about this week were convinced by the signs they were shown and turned to God, others – like the Sadducees, chief priests, elders, scribes – resolutely refused to turn to God, as in today's reading. These hearts were hardened. ““What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name”” (vv. 16-17 NIV).

Pope Francis has warned the Catholic Church against ‘excessive organization’ and the dangers of falling into a similar trap as the chief priests and elders. As he prayed with a gathering in Rome last June he said, ‘Yes, you need organization, but do not lose the grace of letting God be God!’ Be ‘dispensers’ of God’s grace, he urged, not ‘controllers’ of it. ‘Where does division come from? The devil! Division comes from the devil. Flee from internal struggles, please! Teach us not to fight between ourselves over a little more power, teach us to increasingly love the Church that is our “team”, and to keep our hearts open to receive the Holy Spirit.’

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. (St Francis of Assisi)

Acts 4:13-21 • Psalm 117(118):1, 14-21

Mark 16:9-15

Friday 10th April

Acts 4:1-12 • Easter Friday

It was Peter and John's teaching about the resurrection that most disturbed the temple leaders and got them thrown into prison. Among the temple leaders were Sadducees. It is not surprising that this group would be unsettled by the preaching of Peter and John, because the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. This issue was the main difference between the Sadducees and other groups of Jews, like the Pharisees.

The Sadducees were very conservative in their outlook, following a strict interpretation of the Old Testament. They did not teach the idea of a future life after death. For the Sadducees this was a revolutionary idea that threatened their position. As N.T. Wright says in his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, the difficulty for the Sadducees was that 'people who believe that their God is about to make a new world, and that those who die in loyalty to him in the meantime will rise again and share gloriously in it, are far more likely to lose respect for a wealthy aristocracy than people who think that this life, this world and this age are the only ones there will ever be'. The notion of the resurrection is then subversive and revolutionary, threatening people like the Sadducees, who held much power. Their interest was not in the word of God, but in the maintenance of the status quo, because this was what was of most benefit to them.

The Sadducees wanted to preserve their own self-interest. To guard against the same temptation, we can harness the power of prayer. Perfect prayer is all love. Our prayers are made up of many different elements, and self-interest will come into our prayer, as it comes into everything else that we do. The key to protect ourselves from becoming like the Sadducees is not to allow self-interest to take first place. The way to prevent self-interest unduly influencing our own lives and prayers is to focus our attention on love.

O my God, I love you above all things, with my whole heart and soul, because you are all good and worthy of all my love. I love my neighbour as myself for the love of you. I forgive all who have injured me and I ask pardon for all whom I have injured.
Amen.

Acts 4:1-12 • Psalm 117(118):1-4, 22-27

John 21:1-14

Thursday 9th April

Easter Thursday • Acts 3:11-26

Peter demands of the incredulous onlookers: ‘Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?’ (v. 12). Of course, it is easier for the crowd to believe that it was Peter and John who cured the lame man than to believe the truth.

God speaks to us through a variety of mediums: miracles, prayer, nature, our circumstances, and, says philosopher George Steiner, the arts. But how do we respond to God? Let’s take the arts as our example. Steiner says, ‘[People] will elect bingo or the television chat-show over Aeschylus or Giorgione’. We all have the propensity to turn our back on God. But why? Perhaps because to engage with him is too overwhelming, too incredible, too mind-blowing.

In Lorenzo Lotto’s painting, Annunciation, Our Lady appears to turn her back to God and his messenger. This is a fascinating piece of art that speaks of how Mary might have felt: surprised and utterly overwhelmed. There she is at home, going about her daily business, when an angel suddenly appears to her to ask her to be the mother of God. Italian art critic Giulio Argan writes: ‘she cannot even turn her head; her gesture, almost a defensive one, is that of somebody who is struck at the back by a sudden call.’ But imagine the scenes which come next which Lotto didn’t paint: Mary taking a deep breath and turning towards the angel. We know when we look at Lotto’s painting that she is only moments away from uttering what will be known as the fiat. All sorts of unexpected events surprise us as we go through life: can we be like Mary and respond by taking a deep breath and having the confidence to turn to God in prayer?

In today’s reading the people Peter addresses have witnessed a clear and convincing sign. Their inability to believe gives way as Peter tells them what God has done for them.

O my God, I firmly believe that you are one God in three divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe that your divine Son became man and died for our sins, and that he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe these and all the truths which the holy Catholic Church teaches, because in revealing them you can neither deceive nor be deceived.

Acts 3:11-26 • Psalm 8:2-9

Luke 24:35-48

Wednesday 8th April

Acts 3:1-10 • Easter Wednesday

Peter is transformed by the Spirit. Contrast his faith and courage in this account, which comes after Pentecost, to the pre-resurrection account in Matthew (14:29-32) where he tries to walk on water with Jesus. Noticing the wind Peter takes fright. ‘You of little faith,’ says Jesus, ‘why did you doubt?’ (NIV). Speaking in Rome last October, Pope Francis said that the Holy Spirit gives us an identity. ‘The Holy Spirit has sealed our hearts, and more, walks with us. This Spirit not only gives us an identity, but it is also a down-payment on our inheritance. With him, heaven begins.’

Peter represents the hope of a promise. He is an example to us all. Throughout his ministry with Jesus, Peter gets things wrong (e.g. Luke 9:33); he denies Christ (Luke 22:57-60). But in spite of these transgressions, or possibly because of them, Peter is given the keys to the kingdom. Peter is one of us: human, flawed, loved unconditionally. Through the power of the Spirit, Peter is able to do what he couldn’t do before: show his faith and courage. Looking straight at the lame man, Peter says, ‘I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk’ (v. 6). Peter takes the man by his hand, and he walks.

The Holy Spirit enables us all as Christians to become fruitful members of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The Holy Spirit dwelling within us can, and does, transform us and the lives of those around us, just as in today’s reading. Peter cures the lame man in the name of Jesus. Peter has allowed the Spirit to change him and work through him, for the glory of God. Paul urges us to live by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26) so that we can be made new.

Come, Holy Spirit, come and fill my heart with your divine love. Come and fill my mind with the knowledge you wish to impart to me. I wish to be transformed into the person you want me to be. I depend upon your work within my soul. I choose to try and remain open to your work within me, so that I may give honour and glory to you, the Father and the Son.

Acts 3:1-10 • Psalm 104(105):1-9

Luke 24:13-35

Tuesday 7th April

Easter Tuesday • Acts 2:36-41

The Spirit was sent forth upon the apostles, and through them the face of the earth was renewed. Through the power of Peter's witness on the Day of Pentecost, three thousand people became Christians. St Teresa of Avila said that 'Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the earth, yours are the feet by which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands by which he is to bless us now.'

How do we allow the power of the Spirit to work within us so that we are effective witnesses as Christ's body on earth? We do not have to bear witness before the sizeable crowds to which the apostles spoke on Pentecost. We can start with our own families and friends, by making our faith visible through the way we live our daily lives and arousing curiosity in Jesus.

There is a school of thought in modern society which says that religion should be kept separate from issues of state. In response to a question to Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, about his faith, former Downing Street spin doctor Alastair Campbell is reputed to have said, 'We don't do God.' But Pope Francis has warned about being a 'lukewarm' Catholic. It is impossible to keep our faith separate from other areas of our lives, because it is who we are. 'The Christian who doesn't necessarily want to cancel out his identity, but to dull it down [is the] lukewarm Christian,' Pope Francis has said. 'He is Christian, yes, he goes to mass on Sunday, yes...He also lives like a pagan, but he is Christian.' This, he went on to assert, is the sin of hypocrisy, 'the leaven of the Pharisees' [in which] I pretend to be a Christian, but I am not. I am not transparent.' The alternative is a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit.

'Empower me to be a bold participant, rather than a timid saint in waiting, in the difficult ordinariness of now; to exercise the authority of honesty, rather than to defer to power, or deceive to get it; to influence someone for justice, rather than impress anyone for gain; and, by grace, to find treasures of joy, of friendship, of peace hidden in the fields of the daily you give me to plough.' (Ted Loder)

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

John 20:11-18

Monday 6th April

Acts 2:14. 22-33 • Easter Monday

The apostles had gathered together and locked themselves away, afraid. Then, on Pentecost morning, they burst out of the upper room and started to spread the good news excitedly, in an animated way, which was without fear. In these passages there is an incredible sense of freedom from the oppression that fear brings. Peter spoke confidently and in a loud voice to crowds of people, announcing the resurrection.

The apostles had received the gifts of the Holy Spirit: counsel (right judgement), courage (fortitude), fear of the Lord (wonder and awe), knowledge, piety (reverence), understanding and wisdom. These are gifts that we too have received at baptism and confirmation, which help us to lead a life of virtue – knowing what is right and avoiding what is wrong. The power of the Spirit is transformative, as is expressed in our prayer today: ‘Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.’ This raises issues about identity, which we will reflect upon in more detail later in the week. Through the Holy Spirit we show our faith. The theological virtues of faith, hope and charity are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in us (CCC 1813).

Throughout this week we read about how the Spirit worked through the apostles. Do we let the same Spirit work through us? Such was the apostles’ enthusiasm for their task that the crowds listening to them reasoned that they must be drunk. The inhibitions of the apostles had evaporated: they were freely expressing their faith. The Holy Spirit makes the unthinkable possible. In June last year Pope Francis prayed publically that God might grant everyone the ‘holy intoxication of the Spirit that enables us to speak many languages, the languages of charity, always close to those brothers and sisters who need us.’

During the same gathering the Pope warned us not to obstruct the work of the Spirit in evangelizing: ‘Go forth into the streets and evangelize, proclaim the gospel.

Remember that the Church was born to go forth, that morning of Pentecost. Let yourselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, with that same freedom. And please, do not cage the Holy Spirit!’

‘Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.’

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

Matthew 28:8-15

An amazing irony and incredible paradox of faith is that the first signs of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead were an empty tomb and folded linen cloths: the absence of a body rather than a risen glorified one! The very existence of the Church is predicated on the central truth of the resurrection. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then truly and surely Christian faith is futile. And yet, the first experience of the resurrection was a cold, empty tomb. Faith invites us to become detectives, as it were, and draw our own conclusions about the empty tomb.

An empty tomb is not direct proof of the resurrection – an absent body could be explained in other ways. One explanation might, for example, be that the disciples had come and stolen the body away, as the religious leaders had feared they might (see Matt. 27:62-66)? However, with Roman soldiers guarding the tomb and a huge stone rolled across the entrance, this seems highly improbable.

Consider, too, the reaction of the disciples, first the women, who had come to anoint the body, and then Peter and John: they all came to the tomb clearly expecting Jesus'

corpse to be there. John himself gives witness that when he saw the folded linen cloths lying on the stone slab, he 'saw and believed' (v. 8). For him, the sign of the empty tomb opened up a doorway into the great mystery of faith. This corresponds to our own experience of faith. The empty tomb is a sign, a pointer, inviting and leading us to a progressive revelation that Jesus is the risen Lord. As with the disciples, full Easter faith is something we progress into.

An important aspect of coming to fullness of faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, appearing to the disciples gathered together for the first time, breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' The Spirit leads us to experience the event of the resurrection in a deeper way. And, in a rounding of the circle, the resurrection makes way for a further intervention of God in human history: the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Spirit brings to life our full faith in the risen Lord.

Lord, as we enter the season of Eastertide, I prepare myself to receive the Spirit in a new and exciting way, which will deepen and purify my grasp of the risen Christ.

*Acts 10:34, 37-43 • Psalm 117(118):1-2, 16-17, 22-23
Colossians 3:1-4 or 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 • John 20:1-9*

The birth, cross, resurrection and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost were real events. Both secular historians and the first believers testified to a drama which unfolded before their very eyes a mere two thousand years ago – a drop in the ocean of history. While our faith is rooted in history, the Spirit, wanting us to transcend history, leads us to a different place by enabling us to understand that we too are immersed in a real and living way in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our faith teaches us that when Christ died, we died with him. Our faith leads us to understand that the most amazing thing that has ever happened to us is that we were baptized. Through the gift of baptism we are immersed into the saving death and risen life of Christ. We not only partake in the divine nature, but through a mystery of faith we grasp that we went down with Christ into the tomb and then we were also raised with him in resurrection life. We shared in his death and we also have some share in the fruits of his resurrection.

Our entire Lenten journey has been leading to this key point: the renewing of our baptismal

promises. During the renewal of our baptismal promises we proclaim our faith in the risen Lord, we renounce evil and all the empty promises of the evil one, and we commit ourselves anew to following Christ. When we do this we receive the great joy of having our faith not only deepened but renewed and refreshed.

In this act of rededication we are doing as Paul commanded when he taught us, 'consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11). The Greek word for 'consider' is *logizomai* which literally means 'to do accounts' or 'to calculate'. This means that as sure as two plus two equals four, we died with Christ and were raised with him and, for that reason, we can live a new life. In other words, we can bank on, rely on and live our lives deeply rooted in the truth that our old selves were crucified with Christ.

'O death, where is your sting? O hades, where is your victory? Christ is risen, we are victorious and can live a new life in the power of the Spirit. Hush, the King, sleeps, but he will soon rise as the Lord and King of Creation.'



April • Friday

John 18:1–19:42 • Good Friday

Do you doubt that God loves you? Do you struggle to believe that God exists? Is your heart hard and resistant? Do you find it impossible to forgive and let go of anger and resentment? You are in good company – many do. The human condition is a fallen and wounded condition. Deep in our hearts we know that we are more prone to darkness than light, evil than good, and we experience an interior struggle which we often find hard to resist. Today is the day on which we look upon the One who took all our doubt, all our struggles, all our frailty and weakness, all our darkness and sin upon himself and became the source of our salvation. We are all born to die, but Jesus was born to die so that through his death we might find life.

Good Friday is a holy moment in the Church's year. On this day we unite in faith with our brothers and sisters throughout the world to contemplate the crucified Lord. We look upon the One who was pierced for our sins, who was bruised for our iniquities and upon whom the Lord placed the burden of us all.

There is no way into the love of God except through the

cross. Only in meditating on, praying before and bowing low before Christ crucified, do we come into a sure knowledge and understanding of God's great love not just for the world but for each of us individually. Try to make time today to reflect on the cross, asking the Spirit to lead you into the depths of its mystery and love. Because this is the divine paradox: in an instrument of death we find life; through the bloody Passion of Christ we are restored, healed and reconciled to God the Father.

Every spiritual blessing and treasure is found in the cross of Christ. The wood of the cross replaced the tree of the Garden of Eden. Through the cross, and the obedience of the New Adam, we are once again restored to paradise and the gift and sure promise of eternal life. No wonder today is called Good Friday. No wonder, although a sombre day, we can be infused and filled with the joy of Christ.

*Lord, through the cross death
died and Adam came back to life.
Through the cross you opened again
the gates that had been shut and we
enter into the new life of Christ.*

*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*



Pope Francis caused something of a stir across the world when one of the first tasks he did as Pope was to wash the feet of young offenders. He truly witnessed to being the servant of servants, humble and eager to serve. We don't associate greatness or leadership or power with service of this kind. Menial, lowly tasks offend our dignity. If we had to be cast in Downton Abbey most of us would prefer to be upstairs than down! Indeed, in first-century Israel, the menial task of foot-washing was reserved for 'bondservants', who were the lowest of the low. Smelly feet haven't become any more appealing through the centuries! Jesus understood that for generations to come this humble act would be a powerful sign of Christian service.

Today Jesus holds out a lesson in humility, disarming our thirst for pretension and status. Jesus' way is the way of the cross and the way of humble service. It's a narrow path, for sure, and in truth, even in the Church, few choose it. This is because the desire to be the greatest and to lord it over others is deeply rooted in our nature. Indeed, nature favours the dominant and despises

the weak and the meek. We live in something of a dog-eat-dog culture and, sadly, the Church and our parishes are not exempt from this reality.

Today, then, is a day to examine our lives by the standard of the service we witness in our Lord – the standard of love. For this is what Jesus is bearing witness to – a kind of naked, vulnerable and humble love of others. St Ambrose of Milan was so moved by today's Gospel, many centuries ago, that he wrote: 'Jesus, I wish you would let me wash your feet, since it was through walking about in me that you soiled yours. I wish you would give me the task of wiping the stains from your feet, because it was my sins that put them there. But where can I get the running water I need to wash your feet? If I have no water, at least I have my tears.' Our old self struggles profoundly with serving and loving in this humble and self-giving way. It is our new self, the new creation alone, that can truly wash the feet of our brothers and sisters.

*Lord, I repent of my selfish ways;
teach me to love and serve with a
grateful and willing heart.*

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

Wednesday 1st April

Matthew 26:14-25 • Wednesday of Holy Week

Betrayal and deceit are despicable in all human relationships – in truth they are rarely forgiven. In times of war their perpetrators are treated with harsh brutality. For example, in the aftermath of the Second World War, French women who fraternized with the enemy were rounded up, their heads were shaved and they were marched through the villages, where they were spat upon and beaten. A traitor is hard to forgive.

So what do you think of Judas, whose name has become almost a byword for a traitor? His act of treason is forever etched into the drama of salvation. It is, however, too easy to demonize him; it is just too convenient and reveals a certain laziness and passivity on our part. The truth is we shall never really know what drove Judas to betray Christ. He had an idea of the Messiah which was simply wrong, more aligned, in fact, with the ideology of the Zealots who longed to break the yoke of Roman oppression. He came perhaps to the conclusion that the tools of this world were more efficient in brokering influence than the tools of the next. For Judas the meek did not inherit the earth – they were simply crushed. Or he may simply have been driven by greed and the hope of some quick cash. Sometimes the more obvious answer is the right one – but in truth we can never know.

So here's the thing: do you identify with Judas? When we read the Scriptures we tend to identify with the characters: we can see ourselves in the dullness of the disciples, their slowness to grasp who Jesus was; we resonate with Peter's enthusiasm and Thomas's doubt. But identify with Judas? Perhaps not! There is more of Judas in us, however, than we care to recognize. We know deep in our hearts that our relationship with God is damaged or wounded through our own sin and our own fault. Despite the fact that through baptism the wound of original sin is erased, we remain fallen and prone to darkness and sin. Judas succumbed to this darkness and sin. Nevertheless, we know that only he or she who is without sin can accuse him – we who are with sin, cannot.

Lord, thank you for your gracious kindness and mercy which falls down like the dew upon my life. Teach me to walk in mercy and to know deep in my heart that there but for your grace go I.

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

Matthew 26:14-25