

The cycle of the Church's liturgy is sensitive to the natural flow of the seasons. In the bleakness of winter, for example, we celebrate the incarnation, and in the green shoots of spring we rejoice in the resurrection of the Lord. However, in the heat of the summer, when many are blessed to be taking a holiday, she appears insensitive and reminds us of that most sombre and sober reality of faith: the final judgement.

Final judgement is a recurring theme in Matthew's Gospel. It is the overarching theme of today's parable, the Parable of the Net, which is unique to Matthew, as is also the Parable of the Tares (13:24-30). Jesus drew upon real situations and real life in his parables. Fishermen in first-century Israel used a technique called seine fishing: they employed a huge net which hung in the water with its bottom edge held down by weights and its top buoyed by floats. Seine nets were deployed either from the shore or from a boat. In this parable it appears they are fishing from the shore (v. 48).

The teaching of God's final judgement is a difficult one because it is hard to understand how God who is all-loving and

all-perfect, can ultimately separate and divide his people into those who are saved and those who are to reap final damnation. In the Eucharistic Prayer the priest prays on our behalf, 'save us from final damnation.' Pope Francis caused a stir recently by teaching: 'The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone!' 'Father, the atheists?' 'Even the atheists. Everyone!' This encouraging and uplifting message was clarified by a note published by the Vatican which said: 'Pope Francis has no intention of provoking a theological debate on the nature of salvation through his homily: they cannot be saved who, knowing the Church as founded by Christ and necessary for salvation, would refuse to enter her or remain in her.'

Of course, that is the point, isn't it? God has given us free will: we can choose God or reject God. We can ultimately choose to live outside God's plan in this life and the life to come. However, as the parable teaches us, all judgement belongs to God and God alone.

'Nobody is ever lost in God's eyes, even when society has condemned him.' (Cardinal Jean Marie Lustiger)

Exodus 40:16-21, 34-38 • Psalm 83(84):3-6, 8, 11
Matthew 13:47-53

The people of Jesus' time had many questions about him – and so do the people of our own time. Often this questioning is rooted in scepticism and unbelief. People can't 'figure him out'. 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary...?' (vv. 54-55). Their ignorance gave way to fear and then to offence, and as a result Jesus worked no miracles in Nazareth.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century biblical scholarship took a new direction. A quest began amongst academics and intellectuals to discover more about the historical Jesus, rather than the divine Jesus who could perform miracles. For some this odyssey ended in atheism and unbelief. For example, Fr George Tyrell, a highly regarded Scripture scholar of his day, lost his faith as a result of this approach to the sacred text. Rather like the people in today's Gospel, they saw that Jesus was a man who was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth and who did many good things, but they could not accept that he was, as we proclaim in the Creed, 'God from God, light from light, true man and true God'.

Scripture teaches that Jesus' divinity did not overwhelm his humanity nor did his humanity diminish his divinity. God's plan from the very beginning was to become one of us. St Thomas Aquinas said, 'By his divine nature, Christ is simple. By his human nature, he is complex.' Plato, one of the greatest thinkers in human history, said, 'Never can God meet man', and Celsus said, 'God is away and beyond everything.' Jesus completely changed our understanding of God.

Flesh and blood cannot comprehend the central mystery of Christian revelation – the God-man. The Holy Spirit is, however, eager to help us penetrate its depths. Asking questions is necessary and important. The people of Nazareth's questions came from unbelief; our questions need to come from faith.

'Maker of the sun, he is made under the sun. In the Father he remains, from his mother he goes forth. Creator of heaven and earth, he was born on earth under heaven. Filling the world, he lies in a manger. Ruler of the stars, he nurses at his mother's breast. He is both great in the nature of God and small in the form of a servant.' (St Augustine of Hippo)

Leviticus 23:1, 4-11, 15-16, 27, 34-37 • Psalm 80(81):3-6, 10-11
Matthew 13:54-58

Powerful men can be a mixture of contradiction and paradox. Take Herod, for example: despite his power, influence and authority he was weak and cowardly. Unable to resist the taunts and challenge of his mistress, seduced by the erotic dance of her daughter and backed into a corner by her guile, he acquiesced and ordered the beheading (murder) of John the Baptist. The Baptist, on the other hand, had no secular power, no military authority and no political influence, apart from that which he exercised over his small band of disciples. Yet two thousand years later his witness continues to be a shining beacon to every generation, providing a true moral compass and urging us to speak the truth no matter the cost and consequences.

Children as we are of the modern world, how are we to interpret today's reading? One way is to recognize that within each of us there is both the heart of a Herod and the heart of a Baptist. We all experience an interior struggle, which is best understood as the spiritual battle being waged daily in our hearts, our minds and our conscience. To put some meat on this, consider the following adage and ask yourself whether it is true:

'Cowardice asks the question: Is it safe? Expedience asks the question: Is it political? Vanity asks: Is it popular? But conscience asks: Is it right? The great scientist and genius Albert Einstein once said: 'Never do anything against conscience even if the state demands it.'

In the same way that John the Baptist was called to stand up for what is right, we too will be called to stand up for what is right. Will it cost us our lives? Probably not. Will it be costly? Yes, to some degree. Why? Because, as today's reading illustrates, it is impossible to speak the truth and hold firm to conscience and not be considered at the very least 'barmy' or 'stupid'. However, this is a small price to pay when we know that we delight God the Father by taking a firm stand for the gospel of hope and life.

Lord, teach me to stand up against all that is opposed to the gospel and live by a conscience informed by the teaching of the Church and the Holy Spirit, knowing that, in the words of St Augustine, 'A good conscience is the palace of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the paradise of delight.'

Leviticus 25:1, 8-17 • Psalm 66(67):2-8

Matthew 14:1-12

The Torah provided guidance on every aspect of a faithful Jew's life. It laid down the general rule that an elder son should receive double the portion of a younger one: 'He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him' (Deut. 21:17 NIV). Disputes over such matters were normally settled by rabbis.

In today's reading from Luke the man's request of Jesus is selfish and materialistic. There is no indication that he has been listening to what Jesus has just been saying about wealth, riches and possessions (12:1-11). It is striking that Jesus now arms himself with a parable in order to drive his teaching home. Perhaps this highlights something about the way our minds work. Direct and clear moral teaching sometimes bounces off our minds and hearts. It is as if we are resistant to straightforward moral prohibition or teaching which addresses our mortality or how brief our lives can be and how loved we are by God. 'Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all

numbered. Don't be afraid you are worth more than many sparrows' (vv. 6-7).

The parable of the rich fool is unique to Luke's Gospel. God knows this parable has spoken to every age but it speaks especially to our own. Pope Francis recently warned of a 'cult of money' which is increasingly dominating our lives. We are living in a world in which the disparity between the rich and poor grows greater day by day. This is evident even in our own nation, where food banks have become a reality in relatively middle-class areas. Greed has very much been part of our moral landscape – we have seen, as one example, bankers grow rich through outrageous bonus schemes on the backs of the vulnerable and the foolish who have borrowed beyond their means. Perhaps this age of austerity will give way to an age of wisdom, prudence and financial discipline, leading to more genuine care and solicitude for the poor and needy among us.

Lord, you know our hearts and how greed is a constant temptation which we resist and overcome by the grace of God and the strength of the Holy Spirit.

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23 • Psalm 89(90):3-6, 12-14, 17

Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11 • Luke 12:13-21

Jesus was in good company when he miraculously fed the 5000 (in fact, it was probably more as this figure does not include women and children). The prophet Elisha miraculously fed 100 men with just twenty loaves of bread (2 Kgs. 4:42-44). But, as we know, one greater than Elisha was among us. Jesus fed more with less. Clearly the feeding of 5000 was the mother of all catering challenges, and Jesus revealed his glory through it. However, this miracle – like all of Jesus' miracles, but this one to an even greater extent – points to a deeper truth, a deeper reality.

Part of the mystery of the feeding of the 5000 (and also the feeding of the 4000 – see Matt. 15:32-38) is that it leads us toward the 'source and summit' of the Christian life – the Eucharist. In a very real sense it anticipates the Last Supper where Jesus will break bread and will institute the Eucharist. God sent Jesus to save us – body and soul. God did not just save our souls or our bodies: he saved both. We are not our souls and we are not our bodies – we are both. Our faith is rooted in this profound and sublime

truth that we are redeemed body and soul. The Eucharist is food for the soul, for sure, but also for the body. The Body and Blood of Christ we receive in the Eucharist feeds us, strengthens us and brings vitality and life to the whole of us.

Many people speak of feeling empty today. There is a huge gaping hole of loneliness and lack of meaning within their lives. They may not realize it but they are crying out for the Eucharist. Through, in and by the Eucharist, we are satisfied and nourished; instead of feeling empty, instead of being malnourished, we are fed. Every time we receive the Eucharist we are being fed by Jesus. Pope Pius X said, 'Holy Communion is the shortest and safest way to heaven. There are others: innocence, but that is for children; penance, but we are afraid of it; generous endurance for the trials of life, but when they come we weep and ask to be spared. The surest, easiest and shortest way is the Eucharist.'

Lord, grant me awe, wonder and amazement at this gift of yourself, by which I am nourished and given strength to live the Christian life.

Numbers 11:4-15 • Psalm 80(81):12-17
Matthew 14:13-21

The feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord gives us a kind of glimpse into life beyond the grave. It is, if you like, a preview of the eternal and divinized life to come. Many believers take the view that we should not contemplate, pray about or discuss heaven and everlasting life – the suggestion or undercurrent being that to do so is in some way escapist or avoiding reality. Of course the very opposite is true. Today, the liturgy, in encouraging us to reflect and meditate on Jesus' Transfiguration, is encouraging us to do just this – to fix our thoughts on things above: 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things' (Col. 3:1-2 NIV).

Jesus' Transfiguration had a profound impact on Peter. He never forgot it and he holds out to us an utterly reliable first-hand witness account. In his second letter, he wrote: 'we were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard

this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain' (2 Pet. 1:16-18 NIV).

The Transfiguration was a foretaste, a pledge, if you like, of the life to come. We firmly believe and hope that just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives forever, so too after death we will live with God forever. The hows, the whens, the wherefores are impossible to answer and are really only accessible to faith. Yet our participation in the Eucharist already gives us a foretaste of Christ's transfiguration of our bodies. The Eucharist, the source and summit of our faith, takes us to the summit of Mount Tabor every time we receive it because, more than anywhere else, this is where we receive the pledge and promise of the life to come – our hope, our prayer, our longing.

'Just as bread that comes from the earth, after God's blessing has been invoked upon it, is no longer ordinary bread, but Eucharist, formed of two things, the one earthly and the other heavenly; so too our bodies, which partake of the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, but possess the hope of the resurrection.' (St Irenaeus)

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 • Psalm 96(97):1-2, 5-6, 9
Luke 9:28-36

Our Gospel today gives us an example of great faith. It is interesting to note that in Matthew's Gospel the greatest models of faith are people who are not Jewish at all – the wise men, the Roman centurion and this Canaanite woman.

Jesus has arrived in the district of Tyre and Sidon (v. 21). A Canaanite woman approaches him. She is clearly agitated and in distress; she 'cries out' to him. There is every reason why this woman should have wanted to avoid Jesus – women were regarded as second-class citizens in this ancient society and a woman would not have addressed a strange man, let alone someone in the position of a teacher. In addition there was the barrier of race – she was a Gentile and Jesus was a Jew.

But the woman ignores these barriers and asks for help. She has a serious problem and she is desperate. She believes Jesus is Israel's Messiah. 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!' she says. 'My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession' (v. 22 NIV). This Canaanite woman was gripped with the conviction that Jesus could help her. So she poured out her request. She even argued with him. So convinced was

she that this Saviour was merciful she persisted in her request. Her conviction led her to plead and argue.

Even when she was discouraged by Jesus – in a way that seems almost harsh to us today – and discouraged by the disciples, she persisted in trusting that Jesus would be willing to help her. Weak faith is faith that gives up easily. Great faith is faith that does not give up easily. She builds her case upon the mercy of Jesus. Great faith is a matter of holding on to the character or promises of God.

Jesus is pleased when she persists in her request (vv. 27–28). She gets what she wants. Her faith is richly rewarded by the Lord. The contemplative Thomas Merton said, 'Ultimately faith is the only key to the universe. The final meaning of human existence and the answers to the questions on which all our happiness depends cannot be found in any other way.'

Lord, may I emulate the faith of the Canaanite woman in the way that she was so full of humility and so courageous in her approach to you. Help me to believe that you want to intervene in the problems I face in my life.

Numbers 13:1-2, 25-14:1, 26-29, 34-35

Psalm 105(106):6-7, 13-14, 21-23 • Matthew 15:21-28

Rudyard Kipling said, 'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.' We all go through life asking questions which begin with one of Kipling's 'serving men': What is the meaning of life? Where am I going? Who am I? What's the point? What should I do with my life? Who should I marry? What job or career should I pursue or give myself to? These are necessary questions pertaining to human life. Today, however, we are invited to ask a question that is both human and divine. It is the question: 'Who do you say that I [Jesus] am?' (v. 15).

It would be a good thing to memorize Matthew 16:15 because there is a way in which it is the key that unlocks the entire Bible. It could be said that it is the key that opens up the mystery of faith. It is the one question which will resound in eternity and it is the one question which sheds light on our destiny beyond the grave. For God sent his One and Only Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but would inherit eternal life (John 3:16). This is eternal life: to know

God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3).

Peter's answer to this question signalled that he was the rock upon which the Church would be built. For the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ is built on the rock of revelation. What is revelation? Revelation is that which reason alone cannot see, understand or figure out. The human mind, amazing as it is, rebels against certain truths of faith which can only be revealed by the grace of revelation, by God the Father.

The danger we face is that our faith becomes cool, lukewarm or, worse, cold. Truth on ice, as it were, helps no one, least of all us. We all need a grace of revelation to penetrate the mystery of faith. This grace comes when we pray, read the Scriptures and receive the Eucharist. It can also come out of the blue, spontaneously and without any effort on our part, but such a gift is always rooted in the soil of working with God to prepare our minds and hearts.

Lord, burn in my heart a message of love and mercy which I can proclaim to the world.

Numbers 20:1-13 • Psalm 94(95):1-2, 6-9

Matthew 16:13-23

Edith Stein, or St Teresa Benedicta, was born a Jew but abandoned the faith as a young woman and embraced atheism. By God's grace she recovered her faith in God, converted to Catholicism and became a Carmelite nun. Tragically she was put to death in the gas chambers of Auschwitz by the Nazis. Edith Stein was truly a wise virgin who, despite going to sleep in the slumber of atheism, was reawakened by the Holy Spirit as a true daughter of Zion, a wise and beautiful virgin at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

The punchline of today's parable speaks to every human being and every human situation: 'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour' (v. 13 NIV). None of us knows the day or the hour when we must shed our mortal coil and return to God. Yet when did you last hear a sermon about judgement, heaven, hell and the second coming? When did you last hear a sermon which moved or compelled you in the same way that verse 13 of today's reading moves and compels us?

Many sermons today, sadly, are read from homily notes and do

not reflect the preacher's own insight or understanding. Homilies or sermons like these are hollow words landing on empty minds and hearts. The role of the preacher is to stimulate our minds and hearts to consider and reflect more soberly on the verities of life – such as death and judgement. Perhaps the key to the renewal of the Church is that our bishops, priests and deacons might experience the conviction that they are not preaching as clearly and as convincingly as they should be. If their hearts burn, so too will our hearts; if they are lukewarm, so too will we be.

Is this too harsh a view? Is this unfair? Perhaps it is – we are all responsible for our faith. The foolish virgins wanted the wise virgins to share their oil with them because their lights had gone out. Perhaps at the end of the day no one can renew or refresh us in the faith except God and the Holy Spirit.

We pray for preachers and clergy that they would be empowered to instil within us a sense that our time on earth is brief and none of us knows the day or the hour the Lord will call us.

Today we celebrate the feast-day of St Lawrence of Rome (c. 225–58). Like his Lord and Master Jesus of Nazareth St Lawrence lived only thirty-three years. He was one of the seven deacons of ancient Rome and was put to death with many others during the Valerian persecution of 258 AD. A tradition has it that he was burnt to death on a grill and that, when half burnt, he said to his torturers words to the effect, 'You can turn me over now as I am done on this side.' In fact, it is more likely that he was beheaded. Nevertheless, the tradition has held and, because of it, St Lawrence is revered as the patron saint of cooks and chefs. In Rome, which has adopted him as the city's patron, there is a shrine to him containing the gridiron thought to have been used to put him to death. The church of San Lorenzo in Panisperna is identified as the place of his execution. Interestingly, the Benedictine monks of Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire also have a special devotion to the saint.

St Lawrence did not hold on to his life in this world. He loved the life to come, the eternal life, and his

Lord and Saviour so much that he was prepared, willing and eager to lay down his life. No greater love can anyone have than to lay down their life. Throughout history men and women who are prepared to die for what they believe in have inspired others. We may not be called to shed our blood as martyrs but we are called to live lives of heroic virtue. We are called to be martyrs of love, service and giving.

Many today see the Catholic Church in unfavourable terms. The child abuse scandal has caused untold damage to the Church's reputation and standing in the world and, because of this stain, many today are not proud to be Catholics. We need to remember, however, that we stand on the shoulders of saints like St Lawrence who laid down his life for Christ.

O God, Blessed Lawrence showed forth the fire of his love for you, both by faithful service and glorious martyrdom. Make us love the things that he loved, and do the works that he taught. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Who is the greatest? This question has perplexed and challenged human beings since time immemorial. Some human beings claim the title for themselves – such as the former boxing heavyweight champion Cassius Clay, also known as Mohammed Ali, whose battle-cry famously was, 'I am the greatest.' Of course, in the animal kingdom and the wilds of nature 'social dominance' is a matter of survival. Animals such as baboons, apes and lions control their pack through aggression and sheer dominance. Sadly, real life can to some extent mirror the jungle. The question of who is the greatest is first asked in the playground and then reverberates throughout people's lives: in the workplace, in the boardroom and on the factory floor.

It was clearly a question very much on the disciples' minds also: 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' (v. 1 NIV). The Judaic mindset was very rooted in the idea of God rewarding and blessing his people with material prosperity. The idea of a righteous poor man is not one that sits very comfortably with Judaism. God's blessing is associated with material possessions, size of family (fecundity) and so on. Jesus, ever

the teacher and way ahead of his time when it came to teaching aids, called a little child forward and, we can imagine, stood him in the middle of a circle of the intrigued, socially aspirational disciples. 'Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven', he told them (v. 4 NIV).

Jesus basically turned the idea of greatness on its head. The great are the poor, the servants, the lowly, the humble; those who serve, not those being served. My God, if we took hold of this teaching we would transform the world and the Church. Indeed, many say that Pope Francis is himself singlehandedly transforming the world and the Church. Of course, he is the Pope and he moves and acts as the Spirit leads him. But he is moving and acting to demolish many traditions which only serve to accentuate the pomp and circumstance of his office. As one example, he has, interestingly, refused to make use of the Pope's summer residence (Castel Gandolfo).

'Let us with great diligence implant in our souls the mother of all things that are good – I mean humility.'
(St John Chrysostom)

Deuteronomy 31:1-8 • Deuteronomy 32:3-4, 7-9, 12
Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14

If you have an opportunity to visit Auschwitz Concentration Camp, you should take it. Of course, if we forget the Holocaust we are destined to repeat it. But perhaps this is the story of humankind – we often do not learn from our mistakes. There is no other place on God's earth that showcases as effectively as this death camp the tragedy of evil and our ability to act in inhuman and demonic ways toward our fellow human beings.

But what was at the heart of this industrial-level killing machine? We turn to the Catechism of the Catholic Church for clarity and wisdom. It teaches us that envy and hatred are always at the heart of murder; all taking of life has its roots in these two dark drives of the human heart. Adolf Hitler nursed a life-long resentment towards the Jewish people. It was as if the more hard-working, creative and wealthy they became, the greater the intensity of his hatred and loathing for them grew.

Today's Parable of the Unmerciful Servant offers us a striking insight into what the human heart is capable of. The unmerciful servant has forgotten God's goodness and mercy towards him, and not only does he not forgive his debtor but

he acts violently towards him. His attempt to throttle or choke his fellow servant shows what a fine line there is between inner resentment and outward violence.

On visiting Auschwitz one can be overwhelmed by the evil that was once unleashed there. And, strangely, it is as if that evil still lingers, casting a dark shadow over the place. However, in the midst of this terrible darkness, this scandal of depravity, one can visit the cell in which St Maximilian Kolbe died. Here this servant of God laid down his life for his friend and was baptized in the blood of the martyrs. Today we celebrate the feast-day of this great saint and martyr.

'Let us remember that love lives through sacrifice and is nourished by giving. Let's remember that not everything which is good and beautiful pertains to genuine, essential love, because even without those other things love can be present, indeed a perfected love. Without sacrifice there is no love. Sacrifice the senses, taste, hearing and, above all, the mind and the will in holy obedience. I wish for you and for myself the best appreciation of sacrifice which is the unconditional willingness to sacrifice.' (Letter of St Maximilian to Fr Konstanty)

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 • Psalm 65(66):1-3, 5, 16-17
Matthew 18:15-20

‘For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’ (v. 34).

When did you last pick up your Catechism? If we are honest, it is a big book and, not unlike the Scriptures, it needs unpacking into smaller bite-sized pieces, so to speak. We are very blessed in that we are a people of the Word and of tradition. We draw strength and grace from two tables – the Word and tradition. The tradition is contained in that wonderful resource we know of as the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

One bite-sized piece of teaching in the Catechism that we can consider today is that, ‘In the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each person’s relationship with God will be laid bare’ (para. 1039). We have received, through the grace of baptism certainly but also through the grace of revelation, a knowledge or awareness of the mystery of the kingdom of Christ. Giving us this grace and blessing was the Father’s good pleasure (v. 32). In other words, God the Father delights to give us knowledge, insight and revelation into the deeper mysteries of Christ. The greatest gift we have is that of being in a relationship with Jesus

Christ: believing in him, knowing him and serving him. This is heavenly treasure, this is true riches.

We will be judged according to our response to this gift. ‘Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required’ (v. 48). One of the things that God desires of us is that we should be alert and waiting for Jesus to return. Christ will judge whether our hearts are ready and waiting for his return or are unprepared, unengaged and preoccupied with the things of this world.

Truth be told, we don’t think much along these lines. Although the teaching of the Church is that the return of Christ is imminent, we have grown dull and weary and have lost a certain liveliness to this truth. Of course, the Church also warns us against a kind of doom and gloom approach – you know, ‘The end of the world is nigh’. St Francis of Assisi was once asked what he would do if one morning he was told that Christ would return that day. So ready was he for Christ’s second coming that he replied that he would plough his field as planned.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’

Wisdom 18:6-9 • Psalm 32(33):1, 12, 18-22
Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19 • Luke 12:32-48

The temple tax in Jesus’ day was a religious and public duty. Exodus 30:11-16 set down the requirement for the people to pay their temple tax as an act of atonement. The temple tax was therefore a tax for sinners. Clearly, then, Jesus who was sinless was not obliged to pay this tax. Yet he did so – rather in the same way that he did not need to undergo the baptism given by John the Baptist by the Sea of Galilee, but he did so, to fulfil all of God’s righteousness. Jesus did not seek a confrontation with the temple officials concerning this matter: ‘But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours’ (v. 27 NIV). Jesus did not want to put up unnecessary stumbling blocks to prevent anyone from believing in him, so he paid the tax, even though he had every right, as the Son of God, to be exempt from it.

Jesus certainly chose an unusual way to pay the tax. This is the only miracle worked in any sense for his own benefit. Ironically, the way he

chose to pay the tax strengthened his case for not paying it, for he demonstrated his almighty rule over creation. As Lord and Master of creation, it was creation itself which gave up the currency (a fish) for the payment of his tax – sadly not an option for the rest of humankind as we all have to pay our taxes in line with the common good of our humanity and for the welfare of the state.

It is interesting to note that Jesus also paid Peter’s atonement money for indeed through his cross and resurrection he would atone for the sin of the whole world. We have lost a sense today of the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross. Through his obedience to the Father he did not give way to sin and so became for us the perfect sacrifice, the sinless Lamb of God, who gave himself for the sin of the world. Through his atoning death Jesus reconciled us with God the Father and shed his blood for the forgiveness of our sins, winning for us the gift of eternal life.

Lord Jesus, by your cross and resurrection you have redeemed the world.

Deuteronomy 10:12-22 • Psalm 146(147):12-15, 19-20
Matthew 17:22-27

The Dutch priest, theologian, philosopher and intellectual Erasmus, speaking from the Middle Ages and perhaps getting rather carried away with himself in a burst of love and veneration for Mary, declared: 'No worship of Mary is more gracious than if you imitate Mary's humility.' Of course, we know that we don't worship Mary as worship is reserved for God and God alone. Yet sometimes our hearts overflow with love and thanks to God for her and we venerate her witness as the perfect disciple. She was, however, much more than the perfect disciple: she was and is the Mother of God.

Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ which flows directly from it. Through her union with Christ she was preserved free from all stain of original sin and so, when the course of her earthly life was finished, she was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory. She was exalted by the Lord our God as Queen over all things, so that she might be more fully confirmed to her Son, the Lord of Lords and the conqueror of sin and death.

Today, on this most holy and wonderful of feast-days, we are, in

fact, celebrating the promise of our own resurrection from the dead.

In the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary we anticipate, in some way, our own resurrection from the dead. Mary has, in this sense, gone before us, marked with the sign of faith. In the profound and moving words of the Byzantine Liturgy: 'In giving birth you kept your virginity; in your Dormition you did not leave the world, O Mother of God, but were joined to the source of Life. You conceived the living God and, by your prayers, will deliver our souls from death.'

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council, almost imitating Erasmus' enthusiasm, said: 'In a wholly singular way she co-operated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the Saviour's work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us all in the order of grace' (Lumen gentium 61).

Lord, Mary as our Mother in faith and Mother of grace in no way diminishes or obscures the unique mediation of Christ but rather reveals its power – because Jesus Christ is the Saviour and Lord and Mary says, 'Listen to him.'

Revelation 11:19; 12:1-6, 10 • Psalm 44(45):10-12, 16
1 Corinthians 15:20-26 • Luke 1:39-56

Marriage is a controversial subject today as many governments around the world seek to establish, under equality legislation, the right to marriage for gay, lesbian and transgendered people.

Marriage was controversial in Jesus' day too. There was an ongoing dispute between two highly respected rabbis, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, who each gave a different interpretation to what 'something indecent' means in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. For Shammai, 'something indecent' could only mean marital unfaithfulness, the rupturing of the marriage contract or covenant through the act of adultery. In his view this was sufficient grounds for the man – not the woman – to commence legal divorce proceedings against his wife. Hillel, however, took the more stringent and frankly bizarre view that a man could divorce his wife if she did anything that displeased him. This extended to such trivial things as burning his dinner or not washing his clothes correctly.

Jesus, as he so often does, goes back to the beginning. For Jesus God's plan for marriage was that it be a life-long union of commitment

and love, ended by natural death, not the death of divorce. The Lord concedes that Moses and the Torah allowed some latitude in the case of breakdown of the marriage relationship but attributed this concession to the hardness of the human heart.

It is the same today. The heart is hard towards marriage, and in a way it always has been because the heart is hard towards God's plan. The intimate union between a man and a woman is at the very heart of the story of the human race. Adam and Eve were united by grace; their union was ruptured through sin. Christ, the new Adam, reconciled us to the Father, restoring our relationship with him. The Spirit and the Bride pray constantly for the marriage union of Christ and the Church. We are called therefore to esteem marriage as vital to God's plan for the human race and do our utmost to cherish, encourage and promote this divine and holy institution.

'Intimate partnership of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws. God himself is the author of marriage.'
(Gaudium et spes 48)

Joshua 24:1-13 • Psalm 135(136):1-3, 16-24
Matthew 19:3-12

Jesus came into the world in a primitive, barbaric and brutal period of history. A period when basic human needs and rights were trodden on. A period when the value put on life was very low. What this meant in practical terms was that women and children had no rights under the law. They did not exist, they were not valued; they were seen as chattel or slaves almost – used, abused and dispensed with accordingly.

Jesus changed the way we think about women and children. He afforded them great dignity and respect, and this is precisely what we encounter in today's Gospel. In their response to those bringing their children to be blessed by Jesus, the disciples were very much acting out of their unrenewed and unenlightened minds. Jesus was acting out of the new humanity. He embraced, welcomed and blessed the children who came to him, showing for all time that the Church should be the safest place for our children.

This is the tragedy of the child abuse scandal which has engulfed the Church in recent years. Bishops, priests and others have, in their desire to protect the Church from scandal, dragged her deeper and deeper into the mire of scandal

and filth. Cover-ups, obfuscation, deception, perjury and downright criminal acts have tainted the reputation and standing of the Church globally. It was not like this in the beginning. In the beginning Jesus revealed that children are the apple of God's eye. They possess an innocence and beauty which inclines them to approach God the Father in humility and simplicity.

The clergy who committed these terrible sexual crimes and their brother clergy who covered them up did so for their own dark reasons but they did not do so in our name, the name of lay people all over the world. We join our prayer for reform and renewal with the moving and heartfelt prayer of Pope Benedict:

'How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the Priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him! How much pride, how much self-complacency! The soiled garments and face of your Church throw us into confusion. Yet it is we ourselves who have soiled them! It is we who betray you time and time again, after all our lofty words and grand gestures. Have mercy on your Church... You stood up, you arose and you can also raise us up. Save and sanctify your Church. Save and sanctify us all.'

Joshua 24:14-29 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5-8, 11

Matthew 19:13-15

It is an amazing reality of the Christian faith that Jesus of Nazareth, whom we worship and adore as God made man, lived, breathed and moved in an age without television, radio, the Internet or even the motor car. He was born into an ancient world without the printing press or means of communication which can reach, in an instant, millions of people. And yet, his words, the most holy, sacred and loving ever spoken, resound through history, speaking to every person, person to person, heart to heart, one to one.

We could divide Jesus' words into his sweet words and his bitter words. His sweet words are preferable by far. They speak of those who are blessed; they speak of mercy, kindness, turning the other cheek and forgiving from the heart. His bitter words speak of judgement, punishment, millstones, hell and division. The thing is that with Jesus, as much as one might want to pick and mix, select this teaching over that one, or prefer his sweet to his bitter words, we cannot: we have to study and pray on all of Jesus' words.

Today we encounter an especially bitter teaching. It's hard, isn't it,

to think that the Prince of Peace, whose first words after he had risen from the dead were, 'Peace be with you', says also, 'Do you think I came to bring peace to earth? No, I tell you, but division' (v. 51)? The truth is the name of Jesus divides as much as it unites. There are many in our world who despise the name of Jesus. Indeed, his name is used by many as a word of cursing. Try mentioning Jesus' name in polite company. Sometimes, even in Church circles, to mention the name of Jesus creates a hostile reaction. Why is this? It is because Jesus is God. His is the name above all other names and before him all things, in heaven and on earth, will bow down. Jesus did come to bring peace on earth but this peace was secured through the bloody suffering of his cross. First came division, hatred and violence, and then came the peace that only Jesus, the Prince of Peace, can pour out, the peace of Christ in our hearts.

'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.' (Rom. 5:1 NIV)

Jeremiah 38:4-6, 8-10 • Psalm 39(40):2-4, 18

Hebrews 12:1-4 • Luke 12:49-53

‘Eternity is a terrible thought, I mean when it is going to end?’ (Tom Stoppard). Our lives are finite, limited, brief and over before we know it. It used to be three score years and ten (seventy years) but now we expect to live longer and certainly so as medical science learns more about how to extend both the length and the quality of life. However, there is something inside of us which rebels, fights against and is repelled by the idea of ceasing to exist, except in the memory of others. Eternity has always been the preserve of the priest and the philosopher. In order to discover the answer to what happens after we die and what is beyond the frontier of death we need wisdom and insight.

The rich young man we encounter in today's Gospel was clearly searching for answers and the gift of eternal life was something that was very much on his mind. The question he put to Jesus is probably the most profound of all the questions we ask about life: ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’ (v. 16). Jesus was clear that there is a life beyond death and we inherit it by keeping

the commandments. The rich young man must have been elated at some level by Jesus' answer because, as someone who had kept the commandments, he was on the path to eternal life. It was Jesus' challenge to him that caused his deflation and sent him away sad. For he could not let go of his possessions and follow the Lord.

Tragically, the rich young man fell at the first hurdle because he looked into his own heart and saw that he could not save or change himself. The Lord was leading him, if you like, as the Spirit leads us all, to a kind of holy despair. A cry of the heart, an abject and heartfelt confession of our inability to save ourselves, which leads to a turning to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. This then is the key to eternal life. Only Jesus, the perfect human being, is the One who is able to give us the gift of eternal life.

Lord God, through the gift of baptism, I am immersed into your death and resurrection and rise with you to the glorious blessing of eternal life, the life that death cannot extinguish, the life of dwelling in the Father's heart.

Judges 2:11-19 • Psalm 105(106):34-44
Matthew 19:16-22

St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) is referred to as the ‘last of the fathers’. He was a man of outstanding holiness, learning and intellect and is a giant of the Church. Today we celebrate his feast-day and give thanks to God for his witness and teaching. Born in Fontaines in France, he became a Cistercian monk and later founded the Abbey of Clairvaux, where he was appointed Abbot. He left the Church a rich patrimony of writing and wisdom.

St Bernard was one who put into practice in his own life the virtue of humility. He wanted to be great among the brothers but sought greatness through service and humility. Humility is the way of God, the way of Christ and the way of the Spirit. Perhaps at the end of the day all holiness and all perfection is rooted in immersing ourselves deeper and deeper into the humility of Christ. St Bernard of Clairvaux excelled in humility; humility for him had pride of place among the virtues. He wanted to be the best at living a humble life.

Some of St Bernard's teaching on living humbly might strike us as strange today but he was a saint

and not many of us are. So we listen to his wisdom. For example, he taught that a humble bearing showed itself in the lowering of eyes. He promoted quiet and restrained speech. He cultivated a reluctance to laugh and resisted levity. He kept silent unless invited to speak. Although abbot he did not insist on any special rights. He loved and delighted in service of others. He always thought of others as more holy than he, regardless of their reputation or standing in the monastery. He readily and easily confessed his sins and, if falsely accused, refused to defend himself. Above all he hated sin and saw his vocation as a life-long struggle to resist and overcome temptation. He put great emphasis on the beauty of the interior life. Those who knew him said that he carried with him the aroma of Christ, the sweet smell of the goodness, truth and beauty of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ in him, the hope of glory. Christ in us, the hope of everlasting life.

‘Beauty is the interior adornment which is renewed day by day as the power and strength of Christ grows within our soul.’

(St Bernard of Clairvaux)

Judges 6:11-24 • Psalm 84(85):9, 11-14
Matthew 19:23-30

What do you think is the meaning of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard? Do you find yourself agreeing with the complaint of the workers who bore the burden of the work and the heat of the day? Their complaint was that they were paid the same as those workers who only laboured for a few hours. Sometimes life just isn't fair, is it? One of the things Jesus reveals through this parable is that God's ways are not our ways, and our ways are not God's. Because this is a parable of Jesus, there are many depths, levels and dimensions to it. We for our part, in this brief reflection, can only point the way to a deeper immersion into the wisdom of Jesus' teaching.

The key to the parable is perhaps the punchline: 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last' (v. 16 NIV). Deep in our human psyche there is rooted a way of thinking that goes something like this: 'God helps those who help themselves'; 'God favours the holy and righteous and prefers them to sinners and the unrighteous'; 'I have not committed adultery or murdered anyone and I always do my best, therefore God is pleased with me.' We don't tend to challenge the way we think

and often, without realizing it, we accept ways of thinking and acting which are far outside of God's mind and heart.

Jesus revealed that God the Father is lavish, generous beyond measure, gracious and merciful. In the kingdom of God, we cannot save ourselves; all is gift and grace. To think with a gospel logic we need to get our minds and hearts around Jesus' teaching because the logic of the kingdom is illogical – it is rather a kind of folly. The first is last; the one who serves is greater than the one being served; self-sacrifice is better than self-indulgence; it is better to give than to receive; in order to gain life we must lay down our lives in love and service of others.

Today let us take into prayer the truth that God's grace is free, unmerited, exciting, and is loving and embracing of every human being: Jew, Gentile, believer, non-believer, those who are found, and those who are lost, lonely and afraid.

Lord, your mercy and compassion has no bounds. May our hearts too be expanded and show the same openness and kindness to others.

Judges 9:6-15 • Psalm 20(21):2-7

Matthew 20:1-16

The idea of the banquet is a rich one in the Jewish tradition. We encounter reference to it frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures (see, e.g., S. of S. 2:4; Dan. 5:1). The prophet Isaiah foresaw a time when God's people would rejoice at a sumptuous banquet celebrating God's victory over darkness, sin and death (Isa. 25:6). Jesus sets today's parable against the backdrop of a wedding banquet hosted by a king for his son.

At the heart of the parable is rejection and indifference to an amazing, incredible and wonderful invitation. The invited guests are preoccupied with their own lives and reject the invitation for various rather weak but predictable reasons: some were literally indifferent ('paid no attention'); others were busy about their work; and then there was also a group who were positively aggressive, violent and murderous in their reaction (v. 6). It is sobering to note that the king is no pushover or weak despot simply intent on pleasing his son. He takes direct and violent retaliatory action against those who murdered his emissary. If the king is God the Father, as he clearly is, what is the meaning of this action? Jesus always shatters the myth of

social exclusion: the kingdom of God is an all-inclusive community demolishing and obliterating the distinctions which so often underpin our society (and alas, which also often form part of our parish and Church society).

In the parable the servants are sent out to the highways and the byways to invite to the banquet 'both good and bad'. It was the custom of the day for the host to provide a wedding garment for his guests. This would have been more than necessary in this context because many had come straight from the streets. However, one guest had not put on the garment, which was seen as a terrible insult to the host. From the beginning the wedding garment has always been understood as the grace of baptism in which we are clothed. Clothed with the garment of baptism we enter into the banquet of the Son. We are all invited to the banquet of the Son which we enjoy when we receive the Eucharist.

Lord, we enter the banquet of your kingdom through baptism, we dine at it through the Eucharist and we clothe ourselves daily in the garment of righteousness, won for us by Christ's death on the cross.

Judges 11:29-39 • Psalm 39(40):5, 7-10

Matthew 22:1-14

Engaging Jesus in a battle of words was futile. The Sadducees had gone away licking their wounds, after just such an encounter (v. 34). The Pharisees, clearly suckers for punishment, stepped forward into the fray. They lined up one of their experts in the law to ask the Lord a profound and interesting question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment...?' (v. 35). The rabbis of Jesus' day often played about with compressing parts of the Torah and important teachings into short, punchy and pithy quotes. In doing this, of course, they gained a reputation for wisdom and clarity.

The question 'Which is the greatest commandment?' strikes at the very heart of all religion. In fact, it can be identified as the key question we need to answer in understanding who God is and who we are. Jesus revealed by his answer that the answer is love. Love of God and love of neighbour are what faith and religion are all about. Nothing else really matters.

Of course, this is not to say that liturgy doesn't matter, or faith in Christ doesn't matter, or living a moral life doesn't matter. All of

these things matter, and in living a life of love these are lived out and put into practice. However, all the religious practice in the world without love in our hearts towards God and neighbour is futile, empty and meaningless. Why? Because love is the greatest commandment. St Augustine once said, 'Love and do what you will.'

However, what is striking about love, in the words used in the gospel that Jesus spoke is that he did not use the word *phileo* (friendly affection) but rather *agapao* (committed self-sacrifice, devotion and service). The Beatles were into 'Love, love, love'. Love is all very well but we are talking about a quality of love which is frankly shocking and radical, and demands our all. That is why there is no law against love. There cannot be – because love invites us to lay down our life in service of others. We love because God first loved us. It is as simple and yet as complicated as that. Our love, both for God and each other, covers over a multitude of sins.

'To my God a heart of flame; to my fellow man a heart of love; to myself a heart of steel.' (St Augustine)

Ruth 1:1, 3-6, 14-16, 22 • Psalm 145(146):5-10

Matthew 22:34-40

We have all said daft and stupid things. We all regret things we have said and, indeed things, we have not said. We are all familiar with the idea that we may have engaged our mouth before first engaging our brain. Bartholomew (also called Nathanael) did precisely this when he uttered those memorable words: 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (v. 46). He was to learn that, in fact, not only could good come out of Nazareth but the greatest good known to humankind – Jesus of Nazareth.

Philip, acting as a true evangelist – because an evangelist is one who leads others to Christ – said, 'Come and see' (v. 46). Perhaps, at the end of the day, the best thing we can do when evangelizing or witnessing to others, is simply to invite them to 'come and see'. Ultimately it is a person's own encounter with God that makes them want to give their lives to Christ. This is precisely what happened to Bartholomew – he had a profound personal encounter with Christ.

What is interesting about Philip was that he was not put off by his friend's reaction. He stuck with him, persevered and was not offended by his cynical attitude.

A parish priest was once invited to a business breakfast where a speaker was sharing his faith. The priest sat next to a cynical and rather hard-bitten businessman who scoffed and mocked the speaker under his breath. The man turned to the priest and said: 'Your faith is just a prop, a support system to get you through life.' The priest said, 'You are right: my faith does give me support, solace and comfort. Where do you find strength, comfort and support?' The man said that his wife, family and business gave him everything he needed. A few months later the priest and businessman met up again. Tragically the man had been diagnosed with cancer, his wife had left him and his business was in serious trouble. The priest found a man no longer hard or resistant to the gospel message but broken and open to hearing the message of God's love. The businessman gave his life to Christ and was received into the Church.

Lord Jesus, on this the feast of St Bartholomew, renew in me a desire to share my faith with others, witness to your love and always be prepared to give a reason for the joy and hope in my heart.

Revelation 21:9-14 • Psalm 144(145):10-13, 17-18

John 1:45-51

The cardinal and theologian Hans von Balthasar wrote a controversial treatise called *Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved'*? Having explored this profound theme, he concluded that ultimately all judgement is God's and God's alone. The Catholic Church has never made any declarations about who it thinks will be finally damned but prays that every human person will be saved.

The Scripture scholar Origen caused a stir in the early Church by suggesting that so immense was Jesus' saving death on the cross that even Lucifer, Satan himself, would be redeemed. Interestingly, despite being arguably the greatest Scripture scholar the Church has ever known, he was never made a saint! And, only recently, Pope Francis also provoked controversy when he suggested that atheists could be redeemed through their good works. As wonderful as von Balthasar was as a theologian and, of course, as our own Pope Francis is, such debate is an opportunity for us to sit up and think more deeply about such matters. We, for our part, look to the Scriptures and the wisdom and light they offer.

In his teaching Jesus made it clear that each one of us needs to make every effort to enter through the narrow door and that salvation involves having a living, vital, dynamic relationship with God. The opposite – a cold, distant, dysfunctional relationship with him – invites the rather harsh rebuke: 'I do not know where you come from' (v. 25). The response to this rebuke is interesting: 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets' (v. 26). People rejected Jesus then and they reject him now.

Christian salvation is not about being good or moral or worthy, because we are none of these. Salvation is about believing Jesus of Nazareth is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Through having faith in him, knowing him and walking with him in this life, we inherit eternal life. Our hope and prayer is that by God's infinite mercy all will be saved, and for this we fervently pray.

Lord, you are the narrow door, you are the gate of salvation. Woe to me if I do not witness to the love and mercy of God.

Isaiah 66:18-21 • Psalm 116(117)
Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13 • Luke 13:22-30

The Pharisees were a religious and social elite within first-century Israel. They were well-educated and of high social standing. They formed part of the ruling Sanhedrin and were revered as holy, upstanding and righteous members of Jewish society and culture. Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea and the apostle Paul were all Pharisees.

Who are the Pharisees today? Can we identify any group within the Christian community as being like the Pharisees of old? Dan Harrington SJ, the world-renowned Scripture scholar, said: 'A modern Christian equivalent to the phrase 'scribes and Pharisees' would be something like 'theologians and Jesuits.' Fr Harrington is himself a Jesuit! As, indeed, is Pope Francis! Pope Francis has been quick to condemn clericalism and ambition within our clergy. He is a wonderful witness himself of one who has come to serve and not to be served. The Pope is, if you like, aware of both the blessings but also the dangers of the clerical state: if those called to this noble and high calling act and behave like the Pharisees, then their witness to the humility of Christ is undermined.

Jesus loved the Pharisees, as indeed we love our clergy. But we are all called, clergy, lay and religious, to live in a way which embraces the path of humility, love and service. We are all equal before God: baptism is the primary sacrament, not ordination or marriage, and through the grace and blessing of baptism we receive all that we need for salvation. Through baptism we also receive the threefold ministry of Jesus Christ: the ministry of priest, prophet and king.

The Church has always been in need of reform and, as the great Church reformer St Charles Borromeo understood, all serious root-and-branch change, renewal and reform within the Catholic Church begins first and foremost with the clergy. Jesus saw in the Pharisees a religious hypocrisy and a harsh spirit which looked down on others and judged them. This attitude is in sharp contrast to the warmth, humility and beauty of the Beatitudes.

Lord, protect me from the self-righteous and judgemental spirit of the Pharisees. Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Help me to reveal your mercy, grace and steadfast love to those who are hurting and in need in our world.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 8-10 • Psalm 148(149):1-6, 9
Matthew 23:13-22

There can be no doubt that Matthew chapter 23 is a stinging rebuke of the Pharisees. Jesus gives a severe warning about the need to avoid the religious styles of the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes were religious intellectuals, skilled in interpreting the Old Testament and applying it to everyday life. We learnt about the Pharisees yesterday. They were said to occupy the chair of Moses, which was a position of esteem and authority in the synagogue.

Jesus accuses them of neglecting the more important concerns of the law (justice, mercy, fidelity) on account of their obsession with calculating the religious taxes to be paid on vegetables and spices. This overwhelming interest in trivia (the 'gnat', v. 24) is causing them to overlook the bigger things (the 'camel', v. 24) of truth, justice and humility towards their neighbour. They are concerned with the ritual cleanliness of the cups and dishes used at meals, but their diligence in this area is not matched by their purity and innocence of heart. Jesus accuses them of being 'blind guides'. He points to the hypocrisy of appearing holy and righteous while in reality, on the inside, being full of greed and self-indulgence.

He uses a metaphor to try and help them get back on the right track: clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will be clean also. In other words, what really matters is the heart, because God sees into the dark inner recesses of our heart and shines his light on what drives and motivates us.

Before we get on to our high horse in our attitude towards the Pharisees, we need to realize that we too are inconsistent in the way we live out our Christian life. We all fall short; we can all easily fall prey to living by a double standard. The challenge is to have the courage, in the quiet of our hearts, to come before God in prayer, throw ourselves on his mercy and ask the Holy Spirit to teach us the gift of self-knowledge or self-awareness. There is a way in which the Pharisees were simply blind to themselves. They did not see what they were doing or how they were acting. There is none so blind, after all, as those who do not see.

Lord, shine the light of your truth into my heart and mind and grant me the gift of self-knowledge and the grace to examine my conscience.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 • Psalm 138(139):1-6
Matthew 23:23-26

Under the Torah a person who stepped on a grave became ceremonially unclean (Num. 19:16). To avoid this the religious authorities requested that graves were painted with whitewash to make them more visible, especially at night. Still today glaring white tombs can be seen scattered throughout the Holy Land. The Pharisees were certainly not flattered by Jesus' comparison of them with whitewashed tombstones. To say they would have been offended would be a gross understatement. The point is clear: though they seemed one thing to others, the truth is, underneath, in their hearts, they were like the bones of the dead. Jesus knew, didn't he, that it was precisely these men, motivated by intense anger and hatred, who would one day do to him as they had done to the prophets? They would, indeed, 'fill up the measure of their fathers' (see v. 32).

This Jewish elite planned and orchestrated the death of Jesus but, in doing so, they were acting on behalf of the fallen human race and not the Jewish people. Despots and tyrants and misguided people have tried to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus. As if this

people alone, this people beloved of God, were solely responsible for the death of the Saviour. It is true, however, that in a moment in history the Pharisees especially were complicit in the death of Jesus. They incited the people and brought their influence to bear on their Roman rulers to carry out the brutal execution of Jesus on the cross. Despite their devotion and obedience to the Torah they could quite easily conspire to murder, if necessary. The Church has always resisted, however, any understanding that the Jewish people themselves were responsible for the death of Jesus.

The truth is that the attitude of the Pharisees is in us all – the self-righteousness and self-delusion of the Pharisees is the delusion of us all. We need a grace of revelation to understand that it was the fallen human race that crucified the Lord, and it was for a fallen human race that the Lamb of God, the Sinless One, laid down his life, only to take it up again.

*'When I survey the wondrous cross,
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss and
pour contempt on all my pride.'
(Isaac Watts)*

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 • Psalm 138(139):7-12
Matthew 23:27-32

Today we remember the martyrdom of one of salvation history's greatest sons. For St John the Baptist is one of the greatest men who has ever lived (Matt. 11:11). Today, on this holy feast-day we mark the slaying of a true soldier and warrior for Christ. St John the Baptist is not remembered as the Church's first martyr: this privilege is reserved for St Stephen. He is, however, a giant among the saints of the Church and we pay him special homage and veneration.

John the Baptist was 'more than a prophet' (Luke 7:26). In him the Holy Spirit concluded his speaking through the prophets. He completes the cycle of prophets begun by Elijah. He proclaimed the consolation of Israel, the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. He was full of the Spirit of truth and proclaimed the truth with passion and courage. It was for his witness to the truth that he ultimately paid the highest price possible – he was brutally slain, laid low by the fall of an axe upon his holy head. He who baptized others in water was himself baptized in his own blood.

What lessons do we learn from today's Gospel reading and from this wonderful and special feast in

the Church's calendar? We learn, basically that John the Baptist was killed for upholding the standards of the moral life. He openly and without compromise condemned the adulterous relationship between King Herod and his mistress, Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Herodias was enraged by this exposure and sought revenge. She was not so much a woman scorned as a woman sworn to avenge this humiliation.

We too risk inviting scorn, hatred and persecution if we stand up for the truth of the moral life or the virtues. We live in a world which largely sees truth and moral truth not in terms of right versus wrong, good versus evil, but as a subjective and personal matter, based on circumstances and how we feel. We are invited today to emulate the spirit of the Baptist and be prepared to take a stand. This does not mean that we become judgemental or harsh or morally indignant, but rather that we uphold the dignity of the human person and the beauty of God's plan.

Lord, we give thanks and praise for our brother in faith, St John the Baptist. May we strive to bear witness to the truth, whatever the cost, regardless of the price.

1 Thessalonians 3:7-13 • Psalm 89(90):3-4, 12-14, 17
Proper of Saints: Mark 6:17-29

The parables, without the shadow of any doubt, reveal the mind of a genius, the like of which the world never knew before Jesus' advent and will never know again. This is because the parables come directly from the mind of God made man. When we study and reflect on the parables, we are literally touching the divine mind.

Jesus situated his parables within everyday events and happenings. In ancient rural societies weddings were huge events – as, of course, they still are today. Everyone in the village would turn out to accompany the bridegroom as he arrived at the home of his bride to escort her back to his home for the wedding festivities. No one, including the bride, knew when he would turn up but he would often come at night. The groom, best man and others that escorted him would conduct a torchlight procession to the home of the bride. Jesus seized upon this custom to teach some profound lessons about the kingdom of God.

The parable is about a central truth of our faith which nowadays we don't tend to think very much about: the return of Christ, the second coming, the parousia. All the bridesmaids fell asleep (they

were all subject to the power and influence or sleep of sin) but it was those with enough oil (faith) who were able to welcome the groom and enjoy the wedding banquet with him. We do not know when the Lord will return, but return he will. We do not know when we will die and face the Lord, but die and face the Lord we will. We tend to fear judgement, but perfect love casts out fear because fear has to do with punishment.

God can work in us in such a way that we long for the return of Christ. The return of Jesus has been imminent since the Ascension – this is simply a truth of our faith. Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, we express our longing and prayer for Jesus to come back (see Catechism of the Catholic Church 673). We are living through the final age of the world – the only remaining intervention by God in a definitive way in human history will be the second coming of his Son Jesus.

Our Jewish brothers pray and long for the first coming of Christ. We pray and long for the return of our Lord and Saviour.

The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 • Psalm 96(97):1-6, 10-12
Matthew 25:1-13

The Parable of the Talents is one of the best known of Jesus' parables. Its basic premise and meaning is clearly that God rewards those who are diligent, use what is given them and produce fruit for the kingdom. The converse is also true: those who bury their talents are lazy and indifferent, and through their own negligence are unfruitful and unproductive.

The parable is addressing that most difficult of issues: the final judgement. This is one of a number of truths or verities of the Christian faith which are hard to talk about. We don't tend to hear sermons or homilies these days about death, heaven, hell, final judgement or the second coming. However, all are central truths of our faith.

God's judgement is a recurring theme in the Bible. The flood in Genesis, for example, was an act of God's judgement: 'And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights' (Gen. 7:12). The prophet Ezekiel has God say, 'I will deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them' (Ezek. 7:27 NIV). What Christian revelation makes clear is that God has given judgement to his Son

Jesus: 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him' (John 5:22-23). Paul taught clearly about judgement: 'So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God' (Rom. 14:12 NIV); 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body' (2 Cor. 5:10).

The truth is that, at some level, we all fear God's judgement. Which of us is worthy? Who of us has not sinned? We know, deep down, that we are wasteful of our talents and disobey God. So what of judgement? The greatest talent we have received is the grace to love God. At the end of our lives we will be judged on this talent more than any other.

I do know that when we die and it comes time for God to judge us, he will not ask, "How many good things have you done in your life?" Rather he will ask, "How much love did you put into what you did?"
(Blessed Mother Teresa)

1 Thessalonians 4:9-11 • Psalm 97(98):1, 7-9

Matthew 25:14-30
