

Daily Reflections

Friday 1 August

Matthew 13:54-58 • St Alphonus Liguori (Memorial)

The inhabitants of the tiny hamlet of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, are clearly rather flummoxed by him. Put simply, they cannot get their heads around the fact that one of their own is so wise and charismatic, and is able to perform these extraordinary miracles. The Nazarenes ask five rhetorical questions about the Lord. In essence, if we boil them down, they are questions we might find on the lips of our contemporaries today: Who is this Jesus? Where does he come from? Where do his wisdom and power come from?

We can boldly claim that no other person in history has befuddled and flummoxed the human race as much as Jesus. Jesus never fails to challenge, perplex and confuse, and from the very beginning he caused offence. Jesus causes offence because the incarnation is offensive. Jews reject the very notion that God could become man, and Muslims are horrified by the suggestion. Unbelievers and sceptics scoff at God's existence and pour scorn on the Christian revelation that God not only exists but humbled himself by becoming man.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council expressed their understanding of God made man in the following words: 'For by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things, except sin' (Gaudium et spes 22). This profound truth is at the very heart of Christian faith.

However, before we get too self-righteous or indignant with Jesus' fellow Nazarenes we need to examine ourselves: there is a way in which we too can become so familiar with the truths of our faith that we become nonchalant or even lukewarm towards them and they no longer excite us or give us joy. To question, probe, enquire and ask God for deeper revelation or understanding into the truths of our faith is good, healthy and proper. Let us only seek to ensure that our questioning doesn't stem from a heart that is resistant to the mysteries of God.

Lord God, teach me to revere and cherish the truth of the incarnation so that I can be drawn ever deeper into its life-giving mystery, to the glory of Jesus.

Jeremiah 26:1-9 • Psalm 68(69):5, 8-10, 14

Matthew 13:54-58

Saturday 2 August

Matthew 14:1-12

Do you have the heart of a Herod or the heart of a Baptist? Herod was weak and cowardly; he was easily seduced and lacked a moral compass. The Baptist was strong and courageous; he was able to resist evil and stand up for the truth. We aspire to have the heart of a Baptist but we know deep down that ours is the heart of a Herod. Well, actually, to be fair we find that there is often a tussle going on within us as to whether we will display the heart of a Baptist or of a Herod. When the moment comes, will we be like Herod and take the easy path of acquiescence, or will we be like the Baptist and be willing to stand up for the truth, whatever the cost or sacrifice? In the words of Martin Luther King Jr, 'Cowardice asks the question: is it safe? Expediency asks the question: is it political? Vanity asks the question: is it popular? But conscience asks the question: is it right?' Albert Einstein said: 'Never do anything against conscience even if the state demands it.'

As believers living in a secular world we are called to stand up for what is right, true and just. This does not mean that we act in a self-righteous, prudish, prissy or even super-sensitive way to the rough and tumble of life – you know, being condemning and indignant at all manner of things we may disagree or struggle with. On the contrary the Spirit gives us the wisdom to know which battles to fight and when to take a stand. The Spirit also teaches us to know ourselves, to understand that we are less courageous than we think and, truth be told, are easily seduced and led astray. It is this insight and self-knowledge that offers us grace and protection against the wiles and snares of the evil one.

John the Baptist paid the ultimate price for his faith. He is remembered and venerated as the greatest man who ever lived, a true warrior and soldier for Christ. We ask for his prayers and intercession because, as one who lived and died by the truth of his conscience, he was a shining light, a beacon in the darkness.

Lord, teach me to live and walk by the truth, and to have my conscience continually enlightened and informed by the teaching authority of the Scriptures and of the Church.

Jeremiah 26:11-16, 24 • Psalm 68(69):15-16, 30-34

Matthew 14:1-12

Sunday 3 August

Matthew 14:13-21 • Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Jesus was in good company when he fed the five thousand. The Old Testament informs us that the prophet Elisha fed one hundred men with twenty loaves. As the account in 2 Kings 4:42-44 makes clear, this provision was truly miraculous. However, it almost pales into insignificance when compared to Jesus' miracle of feeding over five thousand people with only five loaves and two fish! What then is the deeper meaning of this miracle, for Jesus' miracles always have deeper meanings, secrets to give up, revelation to unveil and insight to share?

Tradition has always understood the feeding miracles as in some way pointing to the nourishment we receive from the bread of the Eucharist. The miracle before us today in a very real sense points to the forthcoming Last Supper where Jesus will break bread and institute the sacrament of the Eucharist. The spiritual or Christian life is often understood as being more about the spirit than it is about the body but this is a mistaken notion. God has saved and redeemed us body and soul – we are a unity of soul and body. When we die the soul is separated from the body but God's plan is to reunite soul and body on the last day, at the final judgement. Both body and soul are essential in understanding our destiny as children of God.

The Eucharist is the very source and summit of our faith. It is at the very heart of what it means to be a Catholic Christian. Other Christian denominations have Eucharistic services as memorials and acts of remembrance, but in the sacrament of the Mass something rather remarkable occurs. We receive the Body and Blood of Christ in a real and present way. The whole substance of the bread and wine is transubstantiated, changed in a mystery of faith into Christ himself. We receive the Bread of Life and the Blood of Life, and are nourished through this grace, in body and soul. Just as Jesus fed the five thousand, so today he feeds the world through the Eucharist. We are a people of the Eucharist. When we receive the Eucharist we witness to the truth that salvation cannot be earned or won or secured by our effort or in our own strength: it must simply be received as a gift which feeds us body and soul.

‘Receiving holy communion is the shortest and safest way to heaven.’ (Pope Pius X)

Isaiah 55:1-3 • Psalm 144(145):8-9, 15-18

Romans 8:35, 37-39 • Matthew 14:13-21

Monday 4 August

Matthew 14:22-36 • (Memorial) St John Mary Vianney

Today we celebrate the feast day of that great hero of our faith, St John Vianney, the Curé d'Ars, who is the patron saint of parish priests. On this holy day the liturgy invites us to consider the miracle of Jesus walking on water, defying gravity, contravening nature and suspending the natural law in order to reveal his glory and power.

We are inclined to be rather sceptical today about the miracles. We ask ourselves, 'Did Jesus actually walk on water, or is this just a kind of literary device, employed by ancient writers to highlight someone special?' But, in fact, the Gospels don't give us this option, and neither does the Church. The Church believes in miracles and teaches that the New Testament provides us with eyewitness accounts which are totally and absolutely reliable. Other ancient writers might conflate imagination and reality, but the writers of the Scriptures did not: Jesus actually did walk on water!

More important than the miracle itself, however, is perhaps the word Jesus speaks in the midst of the storm: 'Take heart, it is I; have no fear' (v. 27). Whatever the challenges, circumstances or difficulties we are currently facing, Jesus speaks these words into our lives. No matter how much we are buffeted, battered and tossed about by the storms of life, Jesus is right there with us, by our side, saying to us, as he said to the disciples, 'Take heart; it is I; have no fear.'

One of the ways God helps us not to be afraid is by pointing us to the lives of the saints, and today we can take courage and inspiration from the life of St John Vianney, a faithful son of the Church and fine witness of the life in the Spirit. He was a kind and merciful confessor, who understood human frailty and weakness and spent long hours hearing confession and ministering to souls. He once said: 'I impose only a small penance on those who confess their sins properly; the rest I perform in their place.' He had an acute sense of the mercy and goodness of God and said: 'God is quicker to forgive than a mother to snatch her child from the fire.'

Today, we pray for all parish priests that they may strive to emulate the witness of their patron saint, St John Vianney and, like him, give their lives in selfless service of their parishioners.

Jeremiah 28:1-17 • Psalm 118(119):29, 43, 79-80, 95, 102

Matthew 14:22-36

Tuesday 5 August
Matthew 15:1-2, 10-14

It is an irony and even a tragedy that after their time of Babylonian captivity where they were subject to pagan rule, the Jewish rabbis set about making a whole raft of rules and regulations to govern the daily lives of their people. From then on this interpretation of the law of Moses, the 'tradition of the elders', was handed down from generation to generation, remaining in verbal form until two hundred years after Jesus' death when it was put into writing in the Mishnah.

Jesus often attacked the Pharisees for the way that their rules and regulations oppressed the people. The truth is whenever we begin to interpret God's laws, it is all too easy for the spirit of the law to become extinguished by the letter of the law, and this is exactly what had happened in Jesus' day. As a consequence Jesus reserved some of his harshest judgements and criticisms for the religious leaders of his day.

It is, of course, important to recognize that the Pharisees were in many ways good, devout people. They wanted to do what was right, but they lost a sense of proportion and perspective. They were known for being scrupulous and meticulous to a fault. St Paul of the Cross said, 'Fly from scruples as from a pestilence; they make the soul lose immense treasures.' The treasure the Pharisees were losing was the love of God in their hearts.

The point is our own hearts can also be hard and calloused towards God and our faith can easily become cold and sterile, reduced to keeping rules and regulations. We, too, can be those who honour God with our lips but our hearts are far from him (cf. Matt. 15:8). The Spirit is always working in our hearts to make them responsive and open to the love of God. The remedy to a hard heart is to examine our conscience, asking the Spirit to show us our sin. The Pharisees tended to focus on the sin of others and we can do the same. We can look down on others, thinking that we are better than they are in some way. The Holy Spirit roots us in a sure and sound self-knowledge and self-awareness that we are children of God, but at the same time we are sinners who need to throw ourselves upon God's mercy.

Lord, purify my heart. Lead me in the path of salvation and cleanse me from my sin.

Jeremiah 30:1-2, 12-15, 18-22 • Ps 101(102):16-21, 29, 22-23
Matthew 15:1-2, 10-14

Wednesday 6 August

Matthew 17:1-9 • (Feast of the Lord) (A) Transfiguration of the Lord

The Church gives us so many graces and blessings in the feast days she invites us to celebrate and rejoice in. The glorious feast of the Transfiguration, which we are celebrating today, provides us with a wonderful opportunity to contemplate the life to come. Jesus' Transfiguration was a glimpse of the new humanity, the new risen, glorified life of God, a human body infused and radiant with the life of God. For a short period of time – we are not told how long – the disciples were blessed and privileged to behold the glory of God: a person fully human and fully alive. This person was the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was the Light of the World and the light which illuminated his body came from within.

Jesus' Transfiguration points to our own eternal destiny beyond the darkness, corruption and despair of death. For death and decay await every human body – the body is simply flesh, which returns to the dust of the earth. However, Jesus has redeemed us body and soul. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), and they will be redeemed and transformed in the life to come. This is our hope – our living hope.

There is a link, however, between death and resurrection, between suffering and new life. Jesus was transfigured shortly before his Passion. The grain of wheat had to die in order to rise to new life. As St Augustine said, 'Life goes down to be killed; bread goes down to suffer hunger; the way goes down to be exhausted on his journey; the spring goes down to suffer thirst; and you refuse to suffer.'

Take some time today to ponder and pray on this simple yet profound truth. We will die, but we will also rise. Our bodies which go down into the earth, will be raised up by the power of Christ. Death is not the end; it is the beginning of eternal life. It is the transition from a life which is fleeting and transient to a life which is full of God's life and love. We are to long for this reality, groan for it, want it, desire it and pray for it. Creation groans for the children of God to be revealed.

Lord Jesus, on the last day you will raise up our lowly bodies to be just like your body which shone with the divine light of your heavenly Father. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

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

Matthew 17:1-9

Thursday 7 August

Matthew 16:13-23

Money talks and all bow down to wealth. Our cultural obsession with celebrity is simply an age-old fixation with money, wealth, power and status. Every year The Sunday Times, much to its shame, publishes a 'Rich List', a directory of the UK's and Ireland's wealthiest men and women.

The personal wealth of many on the list is staggering, with those at the top possessing a personal fortune in excess of three or four billion pounds. Felix Dennis, a multi-millionaire publisher, has described those with over £250,000 in the bank as 'comfortably poor'. Of course, this way of thinking is obscene – with over one billion people living on less than \$1 a day the distribution of wealth in the world is a human scandal. But make no mistake: these lists are published because there is an insatiable appetite to know such things. Never has it been more true than in our own time that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Thus, Jesus' question about wealth speaks to every generation and most certainly our own. 'What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?' (v. 26 NIV). How would you answer this question if it was addressed to you personally? The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides us with this definition of the soul: 'the soul refers to the innermost aspect of the person, that which is of greatest value in them, that by which they are most especially in God's image; soul signifies the spiritual principle in the human person' (para. 363). St Francis de Sales said: 'All the world together is not worth one soul.' Echoing this, St Teresa of Avila said: 'We seldom consider the precious things that can be in the soul or who dwells in it, or its high value. Consequently, little effort is made to preserve its beauty: all our attention is taken up with the plainness of the diamond's setting, that is with these bodies of ours.'

Both our souls and our bodies are redeemed and saved. Both will rise on the last day, and both are to be cherished and protected. However, there are no pockets in a shroud: wealth, money and power are transient. The soul is everlasting.

Lord, renew in me today a profound understanding of my call and vocation to nurture and feed my soul on the good food of your Word and your Eucharist.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 • Psalm 50(51):12-15, 18-19

Matthew 16:13-23

Friday 8 August

Matthew 16:24-28 • (Memorial) St Dominic

The three great world religions share many truths. Judaism, Islam and Christianity all proclaim the truth that God is good, that God is love and that God is all-powerful. They also all teach that God is omnipresent and that he is the Lord and Creator. Where Christian faith departs from Islam and Judaism is in the truth, which it has taught from the very beginning, that Jesus was God made man. In other words, the Creator, the Lord, the son of God, became man in Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, the Christian faith teaches and proclaims that God is revealed as One God in three divine persons – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. That Jesus is God and that God is Blessed Trinity is a core revelation of Christian faith. It is fair to say that both Judaism and Islam find this teaching about the Trinity repugnant and objectionable, blasphemous and scandalous. Islam recognizes Jesus as a great prophet; Judaism does not.

If you were to ask any member of the British public the question: ‘Who do you think Jesus of Nazareth was?’ you would probably receive the answer that either Jesus was a great moral teacher (this is a universal view), or that he was a prophet, or that he was the founder of the Christian faith – or, of course, that the person being questioned doesn’t care and isn’t interested! However, the Christian faith teaches us that this question, ‘Who do you say Jesus was?’ is the fundamental question of life on earth!

The answer to this question, our faith further teaches, cannot be arrived at by human reason alone – in order to be able to answer it, we need the grace of revelation. And this grace or light needs to be constantly encouraged and fanned into flame so that it is kept burning within us. We need wisdom to understand that to proclaim that ‘Jesus is Lord’ is a profound blessing. This sure knowledge, surer than anything we can know through our senses, is the bedrock of our faith, the pivotal truth of the Christian revelation. Our faith stands or falls on this primary truth, this essential dogma of faith.

Lord, grant me a new, fresh and lively understanding of the truth that I believe in order to understand, and the more I understand the more I believe.

Nahum 2:1, 3; 3:3:1-3, 6-7 • Deuteronomy 32:35-36, 39, 41

Matthew 16:24-28

Saturday 9 August

Matthew 25:1-13 • St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Patron of Europe) (Feast)

Today the liturgy points us towards the parable of the Wise Virgins but also celebrates the feast of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, who was truly a wise virgin.

Edith Stein (1891–1942) was born into a Jewish family in Wroclaw, Poland. She renounced her Jewish faith in her teens and became an atheist. A gifted and academically able woman she excelled in her studies and went on to become a professional philosopher studying under Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. This philosophy suited her atheistic worldview and stressed the importance of the material, conscious and seen world. She remained entrenched in her atheism for many years. Her unbelief continued despite serving as a nurse in the First World War.

What changed? What turned this die-hard, almost militant atheist into a saint of the Catholic Church? She was made an executor of a friend's will and on attending to his affairs after his death discovered he had a deep faith in God. A true philosopher at heart and a student of the truth of human existence, she set about reading the New Testament. This simple step of enquiry and discovery opened her up to the light of faith and she was received into the Catholic Church in January 1922. She felt the call to the religious life and entered the Carmelite order in Cologne. In 1938 she fled Germany to escape the Nazis who were rounding up the Jewish people for the death camps, but, four years later, she was taken captive with her sister at a convent in the Netherlands and transported to Auschwitz. Her last recorded words were, 'Come, we are going to our people.'

Today we give thanks and praise for Edith Stein's courage and witness. She is a wonderful example for those who have lost their way and are struggling with faith in God. Her conversion to Christ teaches us that God is always calling us and is close to those we may think are far away from him. God always has a plan; we are always in his care and providence. She wrote, 'Things were in God's plan which I had not planned at all. I am coming to the conviction that – from God's point of view – there is no chance and that the whole of my life, down to every detail, has been mapped out in his loving and divine providence.'

St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, pray for us.

Hosea 2:16b-17b, 21-22 • Psalm 44(45):11-17

Matthew 25:1-13

Sunday 10 August

Matthew 14:22-23 • (A) Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

When we see someone achieving something we really admire – perhaps an athlete or artist – we often talk in terms of them being able to even ‘walk on water’. By this we mean that their skill, talent or work is so extraordinary that they could even defy the natural law of gravity. This phrase is an allusion to the miracles we read about in today’s Gospel: Jesus walking on water and calming the storm. The supernatural phenomenon of walking on water is not unique to the Gospels. In Greek mythology the gods Horus and Orion both defied gravity in this way, as did various heroic figures in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. The difference between these accounts and the one we find in today’s Gospel is that the former are myths and the latter is recorded as history, as fact.

So here is a question for you: do you believe Jesus walked on water? It is a fair question and it deserves a fair answer. The Church encourages us to question, scrutinize and interrogate – we have nothing to fear from the truth. However, we must also be aware of this very simple point: the Gospel writers were not writing fiction or perpetrating a kind of propaganda – they were recording real events. Vatican II’s landmark Constitution *Dei verbum* puts it like this: ‘The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of the churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus’ (para. 2). The key phrase is ‘the honest truth’: the apostles were first-hand witnesses who handed down to us a reliable account of what happened in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, we can stake our lives on the fact that Jesus of Nazareth walked on water, thus revealing himself to be the Lord of sea and earth, the Master and good Creator of the natural world. The reason he could walk on water and command the storm to cease is because he created them.

Lord, today I step out upon the choppy and sometimes tumultuous sea of life in the sure knowledge that your word is all powerful and governs my life and the world.

1 Kings 19:9, 11-13 • Psalm 84(85):9-14

Romans 9:1-5 • Matthew 14:22-33

Monday 11 August

Matthew 17:22-27 • St Clare (Memorial)

Jesus was accused of many things during his life – including being a drunk, a glutton and a tax evader! Nowadays, the very hint or suggestion of tax evasion is met with great indignation and shock. We are emerging from one of the toughest recessions in living memory and this is a sensitive subject, for sure. Of course tax evasion is not simply morally wrong but it is also a criminal activity. Tax avoidance may be seen as morally wrong and deplorable by many, but it is not a criminal act, and many reputable firms of lawyers and accountants assist both private individuals and public companies in avoiding the payment of taxes.

An annual temple tax of two drachma was required of every Jewish male over the age of twenty (Exod. 30:13). This was the equivalent of half a shekel (approximately two weeks' wages – not an unsubstantial sum) and was used for the upkeep of the temple. A privilege of royalty throughout history has been exemption from paying taxes. In fact, it was only fairly recently that the English royal family began to pay tax. In asking, 'From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute?' (v. 25) Jesus alludes to his own royal blood as the King of Kings. Peter answers correctly that it is the subjects who are required to pay tax, not the king's own children. Jesus, who is a King, a Servant King, identifies with his subjects not just through taking on the burden of our sin, but also through paying his taxes, and performs a miracle to meet both his and Peter's obligation.

What is at the heart of this account (found only in Matthew's Gospel)? The key truth is the kingship of Christ. Jesus is the King, and one day every knee under heaven and on earth will bow down before him. He did not come in power and glory but humble in a manger and meek on a donkey. Nevertheless, he is the One the prophet Daniel foretold would be given 'dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him' (Dan. 7:14). To grasp in ever deeper measure the Kingship of Jesus is a sign of a growing and maturing faith. For truly and surely he is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

All kingdom, all power, all authority, all dominion are given to Jesus the Son of God, our Lord and our King.

Ezekiel 1:2-5, 24-28 • Psalm 148:1-2, 11-14

Matthew 17:22-27

Tuesday 12 August

Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14

‘Who is the greatest...?’ This is a question that, whether spoken or unspoken, is never far from our minds. Children learn it from the minute they can speak. Parents see it in the playpen and the playground. It overflows into every aspect of human life. No area of life is immune from this all too human tendency to seek recognition and importance. Pope Francis is keen to highlight its presence even among the clergy, cautioning against careerism and the seeking out of position, power and grandeur. Indeed, only recently a bishop resigned after renovating a palace for himself at the cost of millions upon millions of Euros.

Just as the Church is not immune, neither were the disciples. Never one to gloss over the weaknesses and foibles of the disciples, Matthew gives an account of an occasion on which the disciples addressed Jesus directly on the issue, asking: ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ (v. 1). Calling a child to come over, the Lord positioned him right in the centre of the group, knowing full well that children just like women were considered second-class citizens in the ancient world. His teaching was clear and challenging: in order to be great we need to become like children, trusting, unpretentious and oblivious to the complexities of social standing, pedigree, status and power. In order to be great, we must become small.

We tend to associate humility, service and meekness with weakness whereas in truth these traits are indicative of strength and courage. The problem is, though, that if we think we are humble, then we probably aren’t. The humble don’t really go around thinking about such things: they just get on with serving and helping others. The humble also have a living sense of their dependence upon God. They have an instinctive understanding that only by God’s grace and strength are they able to live their lives. The humble also don’t seek praise from others: sure and solid they walk in God’s love. And when they fail to live in the way they know is right, they turn to God in humble repentance and seek his mercy and forgiveness.

Lord, by meditating upon your humility may I come to understand how far I am from humility. But may I never get discouraged but rely on you, for you lift up the fallen and heal the broken-hearted.

Ezekiel 2:8–3:4 • Psalm 118(119):14, 24, 72, 103, 111, 131

Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14

Wednesday 13 August

Matthew 18:15-20

The Church is a far-from-perfect organization because it is made up of sinners. There is a way, of course, that sacramentally the Church is always holy but her members, her sons and daughters – each one of us – are flawed human beings. And so the need to discipline and bring back into line errant members has always been part of the Church's life.

Today's Gospel addresses this rather thorny issue. The Lord lays out a process for dealing with those who by their behaviour risk bringing the Church into disrepute or causing scandal. The process he outlines is humane, just and fair. It is conducted in various stages. The first stage is an appeal to win the person over on a one-to-one basis. This is often the best route, isn't it? But sadly, human nature being what it is, open and honest dialogue isn't always possible. So the next stage involves discussing the matter with a small group. If this fails and the person still doesn't listen, then more radical steps of exclusion are undertaken. The Church, however, always seeks to hold out the possibility of conversion and rarely if ever excommunicates someone from the body of Christ.

While this reading may seem rather removed from our experience, we are all-too-aware of how deeply the child abuse scandal has rocked the Church and continues to undermine confidence. There can be no diluting of the damage that every kind of scandal causes to the body of Christ. We may sin as individuals but our sin infects and damages the whole body of Christ.

We experience the church at the local level – in our parishes or at diocesan gatherings. It is here that we rub up against one another – learn of our weaknesses, our foibles and our sin. Those in positions of authority or responsibility are called to serve and not lord it over others. We are all called to root out envy, hatred, pride, gossip from the community of believers. Sadly, they exist in most parishes. But they can be reduced if we commit to making our parishes places where every human person is treated with great dignity and respect because each of us is created in the image and likeness of God.

Lord Jesus, you are present when we gather in your name. May we always be quick to repent of our sin, and be courageous and bold in confronting and challenging the sin of others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Ezekiel 9:1-7; 10:18-22 • Psalm 112(113):1-6

Matthew 18:15-20

Thursday 14 August

Matthew 18:21-19:1 • (Memorial) St Maximilian Mary Kolbe

The parable of the Unmerciful Servant has much to say to us and is worthy of prayerful study. It shines the spotlight on mercy: God's mercy towards us, and our mercy, or lack of mercy, towards others. It offers us an insight into human nature and the importance of cherishing and valuing God's mercy and forgiveness.

Pope Francis was recently asked by a journalist about the problem of human trafficking. Human trafficking or slavery occurs in many forms today. We tend to identify it most with sex trafficking – the cruel selling of women from impoverished countries into the sex trade – but, in fact, it takes many forms. People are bought and sold into forced labour (at least 20.9 million worldwide), street crime, domestic servitude, or even exploited for the sale of organs and human sacrifice. Trafficking affects every continent and every country. In response to the journalist's question, Pope Francis said that humanity must rediscover the gift of tears and weep over this terrible scandal which blights so many millions of nameless lives. In other words, we must each discover for ourselves what it means to weep for our own sin and for the sin of others.

This is what the servant who was forgiven could not do. But what prevented him from understanding the depth of mercy he had been shown? Scholars point out that his debt was so great that it was the equivalent of the entire US national deficit falling upon one human being – impossible to pay back. Perhaps he was unable to hold on to the grace and blessing he had been shown because he didn't take time to reflect, he didn't ponder, he didn't pray and ask for the light of the Spirit to penetrate his heart and mind. As a result it failed to change his life.

Pope Francis is ushering in an understanding of the Church that somehow through the centuries has been lost – a kind, forgiving and merciful Church, whose sons and daughters understand that we are sinners in need of God's mercy, but, more than that, knowing they have received this amazing gift, in turn reach out to others with the same love, mercy and forgiveness. Our parishes and our homes need to be places where people, whatever they have done, whoever they are, can receive and know Christ's mercy and forgiveness.

'Our sins are nothing but a grain of sand alongside the great mountain of God's mercy.' (St John Vianney)

Ezekiel 12:1-12 • Psalm 77(78):56-59, 61-62

Matthew 18:21–19:1

Wednesday 13 August

Matthew 18:15-20

The Church is a far-from-perfect organization because it is made up of sinners. There is a way, of course, that sacramentally the Church is always holy but her members, her sons and daughters – each one of us – are flawed human beings. And so the need to discipline and bring back into line errant members has always been part of the Church's life.

Today's Gospel addresses this rather thorny issue. The Lord lays out a process for dealing with those who by their behaviour risk bringing the Church into disrepute or causing scandal. The process he outlines is humane, just and fair. It is conducted in various stages. The first stage is an appeal to win the person over on a one-to-one basis. This is often the best route, isn't it? But sadly, human nature being what it is, open and honest dialogue isn't always possible. So the next stage involves discussing the matter with a small group. If this fails and the person still doesn't listen, then more radical steps of exclusion are undertaken. The Church, however, always seeks to hold out the possibility of conversion and rarely if ever excommunicates someone from the body of Christ.

While this reading may seem rather removed from our experience, we are all-too-aware of how deeply the child abuse scandal has rocked the Church and continues to undermine confidence. There can be no diluting of the damage that every kind of scandal causes to the body of Christ. We may sin as individuals but our sin infects and damages the whole body of Christ.

We experience the church at the local level – in our parishes or at diocesan gatherings. It is here that we rub up against one another – learn of our weaknesses, our foibles and our sin. Those in positions of authority or responsibility are called to serve and not lord it over others. We are all called to root out envy, hatred, pride, gossip from the community of believers. Sadly, they exist in most parishes. But they can be reduced if we commit to making our parishes places where every human person is treated with great dignity and respect because each of us is created in the image and likeness of God.

Lord Jesus, you are present when we gather in your name. May we always be quick to repent of our sin, and be courageous and bold in confronting and challenging the sin of others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Ezekiel 9:1-7; 10:18-22 • Psalm 112(113):1-6

Matthew 18:15-20

Friday 15 August

Luke 1:39-56 • Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Solemnity)

We feed, as believers, from one table, of both the Word and the Eucharist. We also, however, receive nourishment from the fount of sacred Tradition. Today we celebrate a feast day that some Christian denominations do not share or participate in: the day on which Mary, the Mother of God, was assumed body and soul into heaven.

In John 14:3 we read, ‘And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.’ On this feast-day we celebrate the mystery of these words and, indeed, not only their mystery but their fulfilment. For the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven. This doctrine was officially declared in 1950 by Pope Pius XI but, of course, has always been understood by the Church to be the truth of Mary’s dignity and her destiny.

Mary is truly the Queen of Heaven. Today we celebrate her life and rejoice in her everlasting reward. Today we rightly focus on Mary but we are led to contemplate our own dignity and destiny also. As pragmatic people we don’t tend to spend much time contemplating what happens after we die, but thankfully Paul did not display any such reluctance. He taught with great confidence on the resurrection of the dead – body and soul: ‘What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body’ (1 Cor. 15:42-44). Mary’s future is our future also. Her dignity is our dignity. Her destiny is our destiny. Not through our own merits but through the grace of baptism and our immersion in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the Eternal One, Mighty God and Everlasting Father.

Mary is truly the mother of every believer – we give thanks and praise to God for this humble daughter of Zion whose ‘yes’ to God meant ‘yes’ for each one of us and entry into the joy and bliss of eternal life.

‘Blessed indeed is Mary, blessed in so many ways, in receiving the Saviour and in being received by the Saviour.’ (St Bernard of Clairvaux)

Revelation 11:19; 12:1-6, 10 • Psalm 44(45):10-12, 16
1 Corinthians 15:20-27 • Luke 1:39-56

Thursday 14 August

Matthew 18:21-19:1 • (Memorial) St Maximilian Mary Kolbe

The parable of the Unmerciful Servant has much to say to us and is worthy of prayerful study. It shines the spotlight on mercy: God's mercy towards us, and our mercy, or lack of mercy, towards others. It offers us an insight into human nature and the importance of cherishing and valuing God's mercy and forgiveness.

Pope Francis was recently asked by a journalist about the problem of human trafficking. Human trafficking or slavery occurs in many forms today. We tend to identify it most with sex trafficking – the cruel selling of women from impoverished countries into the sex trade – but, in fact, it takes many forms. People are bought and sold into forced labour (at least 20.9 million worldwide), street crime, domestic servitude, or even exploited for the sale of organs and human sacrifice. Trafficking affects every continent and every country. In response to the journalist's question, Pope Francis said that humanity must rediscover the gift of tears and weep over this terrible scandal which blights so many millions of nameless lives. In other words, we must each discover for ourselves what it means to weep for our own sin and for the sin of others.

This is what the servant who was forgiven could not do. But what prevented him from understanding the depth of mercy he had been shown? Scholars point out that his debt was so great that it was the equivalent of the entire US national deficit falling upon one human being – impossible to pay back. Perhaps he was unable to hold on to the grace and blessing he had been shown because he didn't take time to reflect, he didn't ponder, he didn't pray and ask for the light of the Spirit to penetrate his heart and mind. As a result it failed to change his life.

Pope Francis is ushering in an understanding of the Church that somehow through the centuries has been lost – a kind, forgiving and merciful Church, whose sons and daughters understand that we are sinners in need of God's mercy, but, more than that, knowing they have received this amazing gift, in turn reach out to others with the same love, mercy and forgiveness. Our parishes and our homes need to be places where people, whatever they have done, whoever they are, can receive and know Christ's mercy and forgiveness.

'Our sins are nothing but a grain of sand alongside the great mountain of God's mercy.' (St John Vianney)

Ezekiel 12:1-12 • Psalm 77(78):56-59, 61-62

Matthew 18:21–19:1

Saturday 16 August

Matthew 19:13-15

Children view the world through the prism of their innocence, simplicity and dependence on others. They tend not to be cynical or prone to unbelief, but rather are very open and receptive because they are teachable. The Scriptures give no indication of the ages of the children brought to Jesus for him to bless, but it would be reasonable to suggest that they were between the ages of one and ten (they were after all described by Matthew as ‘little children’).

The scene of blessing and innocent joy is rudely interrupted by the disciples who, shaped by their culture, rebuke and chastise these parents for bringing their children to Jesus. As we have commented many times before, both women (the mothers) and children were considered second-class citizens in this ancient society and had no rights whatsoever. Jesus meets his disciples’ rebuke with one of his own, confirming for all time that children are precious in God’s sight and to be cherished and protected by the Church.

Perhaps the fact that Jesus himself so cherished, embraced and protected children heightens the anguish, pain and acute sense of violation felt not only by the victims of clerical child abuse but by all believers and people of good will. Just as he protected them from the lash of the disciples’ tongues, so too the Church herself is charged to protect and cherish all children.

Jesus also highlights the truth that the disposition of a child is required in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Of course, as every parent knows, children can be little angels but they can also be ‘little devils’ and, therefore, need ongoing training and formation. That said and recognized, children witness more often than not to the fruits of the Holy Spirit: joy, simplicity, happiness, love of those they depend on, and so on.

The great intellectual Blessed John Henry Newman saw in children a kind of mirror of eternal life: ‘A child is a pledge of immortality, for he bears upon him in figure those high and eternal excellences in which the joy of heaven consist, and which would not thus be shadowed forth by the all gracious Creator, were they not one day to be realized.’

Lord God, give me the heart of a child towards you.

Ezekiel 18:1-10, 13, 30-32 • Psalm 50(51):12-15, 18-19

Matthew 19:13-15

Sunday 17 August

Matthew 15:21-28 • Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Many are troubled by the incident related by Matthew in today's passage. Their concern is based on Jesus' initial reaction to the woman who is clearly desperate and seeking help not for herself but for her demon-possessed daughter. It is hard to understand why Jesus appears simply to ignore her plea for help: 'he did not answer her a word.'

The reaction of Jesus' disciples suggests that the woman has been pursuing them and they have had enough of her (v. 23). They ask Jesus to send her away. In a reply that seems totally unrelated, Jesus reveals the reason for his lack of response to the woman's need: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (v. 24). Jesus' primary mission was to gather all the faithful together into God's kingdom so that they would become a people covenanted to God and each other and so be a light to the nations (Isa. 49:1-6).

What a shame that we only know this courageous woman by her nationality and not her name! She does not give up but cries out one more time: 'Lord, help me!' Jesus' response to her plea is hard for us to hear but bear with us and light will be shed. He says: 'It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs' (v. 26). In using the word 'dogs' Jesus is drawing on a popular stereotype used by Jews in contempt of Gentiles, but he in fact adopts a kinder term which might be translated 'pups'. He is continuing his theme of his mission to minister to the Jewish nation. In her response, the woman reveals no resentment, just profound faith: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table' (v. 27). Identifying immediately her 'great faith' Jesus duly rewards her with her daughter's healing.

This woman's witness of courageous perseverance and utter determination to cling to the Lord holds out hope to us all. We can too easily become despondent and lose faith if our prayers are not answered immediately or we perceive that life is just not fair. We must ask the Holy Spirit to keep increasing our measure of faith. As Blessed John Henry Newman once said: 'I may love by halves, I may obey by halves; I cannot believe by halves: either I have faith or I have it not.'

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 • Psalm 66(67):2-8

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 • Matthew 15:21-28

Monday 18 August

Matthew 19:16-22

We try to find formulas for success; God looks for faith in action.

The young man in today's Gospel approaches Jesus with a question: What magic formula will guarantee him a ticket to heaven? What must he 'do' to gain eternal life (v. 16)? Jesus shifts the focus away from 'good deeds' to God, the embodiment of all goodness (v. 17). Christianity is not so much a religion as a relationship; it is not about rules or rituals, but about entering into and enjoying a love-relationship with the living God. The call to 'come, follow me' (v. 21) lies at the heart of Jesus' ministry. We can obey rules and regulations, but surrender is possible only to a person. Jesus wants us to yield to him, to hand over the reins, to allow him to wield the steering wheel of our lives.

In Management Studies, a distinction is made between efficiency and effectiveness; efficiency has been described as 'doing things right', while effectiveness is 'doing the right thing'. In our relationship with God, it is possible to do things right (to observe rules and regulations scrupulously) and yet to fail to do the right thing (to give God first place). 'What do I still lack?' the young man asks (v. 20). Heart-surrender is the answer. Jesus said, 'For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Matt. 6:21). The young man's greatest treasure was not God, but 'great possessions' (v. 22). God doesn't want our possessions; he just doesn't want our possessions to possess us. God doesn't want to prevent us from enjoying what money can buy; he just wants to make sure we enjoy what money cannot buy. Faith is an action word. As James writes of Abraham, 'faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works' (Jas. 2:22). Jesus' prescription to the young man: 'go... sell... give...' paves the way for what comes: entering into and enjoying an ongoing love-relationship with Jesus.

For the young man, wealth was a barrier to surrender; for you and me, the barrier may be something else: fame, comfort, pleasure, approval... Let's ask, as the young man did: Lord, what must I do? What we do with Jesus' reply determines whether we go away sorrowful or stand rejoicing.

'All to Jesus I surrender. All to him I freely give. I will ever love and trust him. In his presence daily live.'

Ezekiel 24:15-24 • Deuteronomy 32:18-21

Matthew 19:16-22

Tuesday 19 August

Matthew 19:23-30

Speaking in a society which believed that prosperity was a sign of God's blessing, Jesus proclaims how hard it will be for a rich man to enter God's kingdom. A London newspaper put it like this: 'Money is an instrument that can buy you everything but happiness and pay your fare to every place but heaven.' No wonder the disciples reacted as they did – they had thought the rich guys were the lucky ones! Jesus makes it abundantly clear that all the riches in the world cannot secure us a place in God's kingdom; in fact, riches can become a barrier to trusting in Jesus, who is the only 'Way' to the Father (John 14:6). The conversation between the disciples and Jesus offers food for thought – several courses of it!

First course: the disciples exclaim wonderingly, even sceptically, 'Who then can be saved?' (v. 25). None of us reach God by our own efforts. Jesus himself confirms that this is impossible.

Second course: salvation is God's initiative. We enjoy salvation because God loved us enough to stoop low and literally embrace sinful humanity. In God, we rise from the realm of the possible to the reign of the impossible.

Third course: Peter hits the nail on the head when he declares, impulsively, 'Lo, we have left everything and followed you' (v. 27). The disciples have left behind everything (every material, social and intellectual treasure) to follow someone. The group Air Supply sing a song that goes, 'Girl, you're every woman in the world to me'; the singer has left behind every other woman in the world for the girl of his dreams – and he sings that she is worth it!

Fourth course: whatever we leave behind – family, friends, fame, fortune – the One for whom we leave all these behind is not only the giver of all these good gifts and more, but the One who offers us the precious and priceless gift of eternal life. 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose,' said Jim Elliot, a missionary who gave his very life (he was murdered) in his attempts to take the good news of Jesus to the Auca tribe in Ecuador.

'The rich man is not one who is in possession of much, but one who gives much' (St John Chrysostom). According to this definition, how rich are you?

Ezekiel 28:1-10 • Deuteronomy 32:26-28, 30, 35-36

Matthew 19:23-30

Wednesday 20 August

Matthew 20:1-16 • (Memorial) St Bernard

Jesus teaches us about the grace of God. The employer who generously paid his workers far more than was due represents God the Father, who gives without reserve to his creation. Jesus' teaching is that we do not earn salvation by our good deeds; rather we are saved by reliance on God's grace.

In the Old Testament God revealed himself to Moses as 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...' (Exod. 34:6). The Jews gradually came to understand and rely on this gracious love of God: his goodness in choosing them from all other people to be his own, his gift of the land of Canaan – their whole history was proof to them. The prophets came to realize that the deepest demonstration of God's grace was his promise of interior renewal, the gift of a new heart and the forgiveness of sins that he would accomplish by the gift of the Messiah.

Paul constantly preached the truth that we are saved not by our own righteousness but through faith in God's loving plan of salvation accomplished by Jesus. 'But God, who is rich in mercy...even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...For by grace you have been saved through faith...not because of works, lest any man should boast' (Eph. 2:4-5, 8-9).

Rather than rejoicing in the generosity of their employer, the workers who had laboured for the whole day became jealous and resentful and forgot the initial gratitude they had in finding employment. They had worked hard and earned a just wage, but they began to demand a share in the generosity of their employer as a right.

Jesus is warning us not to fall into this self-righteousness, thinking our own moral efforts are more important than God's grace and that they earn us priority. This leads to pride and envy and kills any love we have for God and others. As we remind ourselves of how much God has done for us, the sins he has forgiven, the consolation and help he has given us, our hearts will begin to fill with gratitude. Then we shall not care so much who is last or first, or how long we have been working, because we shall know the Father's faithful love for us.

'Every day I will bless thee, and praise thy name for ever and ever.' (Ps. 145:2)

Ezekiel 34:1-11 • Psalm 22(23)

Matthew 20:1-16

Thursday 21 August

Matthew 22:1-14 • St Pius X (Memorial)

A central theme of today's parable is the generosity of the king who longs to share his joy over his son's marriage with all his citizens. This is a rich image of the Father's longing for all people to share in the eternal joy of the Trinity.

The eternal happiness which God desires for his people was illustrated in the Old Testament as a banquet: 'On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast...He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord will wipe away tears from all faces' (Isa. 25:6-8).

This image is also present in the New Testament, where it is interpreted as a marriage banquet for Christ and his Church. Jesus indicated at the Last Supper that he would feast with his disciples again in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:16, 18, 30), and in Revelation John was told: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb' (19:9). The image of a wedding evokes a time of great celebration and happiness; yet this is just a glimpse of the joy of heaven when we shall be united with Christ to join with him in the life of the Trinity. St Augustine describes it thus: 'There we shall rest and see; we shall see and love; we shall love and praise. Behold what shall be in the end and shall not end.'

Another theme in the parable is that the king invites those from the 'thoroughfares' to the wedding – this would include beggars, tax collectors, prostitutes and all those marginalized by society. Jesus is teaching us of God's love for the poor and for sinners – those who suffer hardship in this life are especially loved by him. We are called to recognize that they have a special place in the kingdom.

Pope Francis has said, 'When we are generous in welcoming people and sharing something with them – some food, a place in our homes, our time – not only do we no longer remain poor: we are enriched. I am well aware that when someone needing food knocks at your door, you always find a way of sharing food; as the proverb says, one can always "add more water to the beans"! Is it possible to add more water to the beans?...Always?...And you do so with love, demonstrating that true riches consist not in material things, but in the heart!'

Ezekiel 36:23-28 • Psalm 50(51):12-15, 18-19
Matthew 22:1-14

Friday 22 August

Matthew 22:34-40 • (Memorial) The Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The rabbis loved to dispute with one another over the question of which was the greatest commandment. In an attempt to test Jesus, they pose this question to him. In his reply Jesus compresses the entire teaching of the Law and the Prophets into two commandments. Drawing on the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9) and adding Leviticus 19:18, he teaches that love of God and love of neighbour are, in effect, the same commandment and that it is impossible to have one without the other. We can't love God without also loving our neighbour, and we can't love our neighbour without also loving God. Both the Hebrew faith and the Christian faith can be reduced to these two governing principles.

Christian faith is, then, fundamentally about these two issues: love of God and love of neighbour. It is rare for a human being not to love someone. In general, we love our nearest and dearest; we love those who support us and hold similar views to us; we love those within our own circle, shall we say. Love gets altogether more difficult when we have to consider loving those we don't get along with naturally, those we don't like, those we find rude or offensive or simply have nothing in common with. This is when love of God and love of neighbour enters much choppiest waters.

It is at times when we are called upon to love the unlovely that we need to get hold of the truth that love is not an emotion but a virtue. Our emotions recoil from people we don't much care for, but virtue overrides this impulse and teaches us to love as Christ loved. St Basil the Great once said: 'What is the mark of love for your neighbour? Not to seek what is for your own benefit, but what is for the benefit of the one loved, both in body and soul.' To love our neighbour, who may even be our enemy, is to seek what is for their benefit.

Perhaps the beginning of love, both of God and neighbour, is to learn to offer up to God our often abject inability to love those we find most difficult. It is in this prayer, this offering up to God, that we will find the grace to love as Christ would have us love.

'We are born to love, we live to love and we will die to love still more.' (St Joseph Cafasso)

Ezekiel 37:1-14 • Psalm 106(107):2-9
Matthew 22:34-40

Saturday 23 August
Matthew 23:1-12

The Hebrew for ‘Pharisees’, perusim, means ‘the separated ones’. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were an elite group within Israel consisting of approximately 6000 members. They were the religious equivalent of the military storm trooper, maintaining the high ground of religious purity. Without a doubt the Pharisees had their strengths. They were zealous, eager to uphold the law and committed to the traditions of their forefathers.

Their fellow Jews acknowledged their devotion and held them in high regard because of it. However, like many things in life, as well as these bright spots there were shadows in the Pharisees’ attitude and approach to life. Jesus identified an underlying arrogance, an intolerance of others and an elitism rooted in the delusion that they were in some way more pleasing to God than other people.

The Pharisees’ problem was that they failed to grasp some basic principles of the spiritual life. One principle that they should have been very aware of from their reading of the Hebrew Scriptures is that God is first and foremost interested in the state of our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7). It is with the heart that we love and worship God, and it is with the heart that we repent, express sorrow for our sin and become aware of our need for God’s grace and mercy. The hearts of the Pharisees had become hard. Ironically their religious practice and enjoyment of the esteem and recognition afforded to them caused them to give way to the sin of arrogance and conceit, and lose sight of the importance of the heart and the grace of humility in living out their faith.

Jesus’ teaching pointed to a different way, the way of the Spirit, the way of humility and service. We all have one heavenly Father – we are all brothers and sisters. True greatness is found in true humility. Truly great people are truly humble people. Humble people don’t think less of themselves, they just think of themselves less. We need to cultivate a healthy sense of self-knowledge. Knowing ourselves is a gift of the Holy Spirit, as is the ability to laugh at our perceived self-importance or fleeting sense of superiority.

Lord, teach me to walk in justice and humility. Grant me the grace to pray from my heart, ‘Lord, have mercy on me a sinner’ and so protect myself from conceit and arrogance.

Ezekiel 43:1-7 • Psalm 84(85):9-14

Matthew 23:1-12

Sunday 24 August

Matthew 16:13-20 • (A) Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Hebrew for 'Pharisees', perusim, means 'the separated ones'. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were an elite group within Israel consisting of approximately 6000 members. They were the religious equivalent of the military storm trooper, maintaining the high ground of religious purity. Without a doubt the Pharisees had their strengths. They were zealous, eager to uphold the law and committed to the traditions of their forefathers.

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Ezekiel 43:1-7 • Psalm 84(85):9-14

Matthew 23:1-12

Monday 25 August

Matthew 23:13-22

We know that Jesus was always merciful and loving towards sinners. He welcomed all who repented and came to him, and he spent time with those regarded as the dregs of society. Surprisingly, he reserved his most angry reproaches for those who seemed the most devout members of society: the scribes and Pharisees who guided others in how to keep God's law.

Jesus took issue with them on several matters. As teachers of the people and those with most knowledge, they had a great responsibility, but they had become obsessed with rituals and the details of the law. By expecting people to keep a multitude of petty regulations, they burdened them and prevented them from finding God's kingdom. They did not accept the teachings of Jesus and actively discouraged others from doing so. Many scribes and Pharisees were men who sincerely tried to follow God's law, even if they were misguided, but Jesus said that there were also many hypocrites, who made an impressive display of piety so that they could gain status and power in society. The word 'hypocrite' comes from the Greek for 'actor' and means someone who consciously plays a part. We are not hypocrites if we sincerely try to do God's will but fall into sin. If our hearts desire to please God, we can repent and be forgiven.

The Pharisees' teaching about oaths is an example of how they had become corrupted. While Jesus taught that it was better not to swear oaths at all, the Pharisees developed a system according to which some oaths were binding and others were not. They wanted to circumvent the law but still look as if they were keeping it! If we examine our own hearts, we may find that we are quite clever at doing this ourselves. We are good at excusing our own behaviour and finding reasons why it is OK for us to break the rules when we want to. Let us make every effort to be honest and humble in our dealings with God and with others. Let us never forget that all our religious apparatus is there to lead us to God and to give glory to him.

Lord Jesus, we pray that you would free us from all pride and hypocrisy. May we not be self-righteous, but people who are thankful for your mercy, and try to spread your love and forgiveness to others.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 11-12 • Psalm 95(96):1-5

Matthew 23:13-22

Tuesday 26 August

Matthew 23:23-26

A fastidious Pharisee would carefully strain his drinking water through a cloth to be sure he did not swallow a gnat, the smallest of unclean animals. Such attention to detail was not in itself condemned by Jesus: what angered him was their neglect of the

more important matters of the law (mercy, justice, truth, love for neighbour), which they overlooked in their attention to the increasingly complex and involved rules of the Mishnah.

One of these rules was that anyone who stepped on a grave became ceremonially unclean (Num. 19:16), so headstones were daubed with whitewash to make them easily visible especially at night. Jesus compares the Pharisees and teachers of the law to these very whitewashed tombs: clean and beautiful on the outside but full of dead men's bones and unclean on the inside (v. 27).

It is easy to think that, to use a modern expression, Jesus was 'down on' the Pharisees, but this is not true. He loved them a great deal and went to a great deal of trouble to point out their sin and steer them away from the destructive path they were on. However, he rebuked the way they lived out their faith because it misrepresented God and was a gross misunderstanding of the core message and principle of the Torah, which is to love God and love our neighbour. A word to the wise: rather than condemning the Pharisees, we need to watch and learn, and allow the spotlight to shine on our own lives for we too can easily fall prey to the same kind of weaknesses and sin.

The remedy for all of this is a gift the Holy Spirit is only too willing to pour out upon us: the gift of self-knowledge and self-awareness. St Teresa of Avila, that great Doctor of the Church, was, of course, right when she said, 'The truth is, we never really know ourselves', echoing a view St Augustine had voiced many centuries before, 'O Lord, my God, I am a riddle to myself.' Let us heed the wisdom of another Doctor of the Church, St Catherine of Siena, who counselled, 'Dwell in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know God's goodness.'

Lord Jesus, grant me the grace of self-knowledge and make me aware of how you and others see me. May I walk in the path of repentance, striving to love God and love my neighbour.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 11-12 • Psalm 95(96):1-5

Matthew 23:13-22

Wednesday 27 August

Matthew 23:27-32 • St Monica (Memorial)

It is often said that behind every great man there is an even greater woman! A light-hearted version of the same one-liner suggests that behind every great man there is an astonished mother-in-law! Joking aside, history bears witness to the truth that behind many a great saint there is an extraordinary mother, and one such mother was

St Monica, the mother of St Augustine.

Monica was born in Tagaste (modern-day Souk Ahras, Algeria) in around 332 to 338. She was raised in a Christian home but married Patricius, a pagan, who proved to be an unfaithful and violent husband (although he never beat Monica). Despite her unhappy marriage Monica persevered and loved her husband as best she could. Although our age may find this counsel difficult to accept, she advised other women going through marriage difficulties: 'If you can master your tongue, not only do you run less risk of being beaten, but perhaps you may even, one day, make your husband better.' The advice paid off in her own life as Patricius underwent a conversion and from that time on led an exemplary Christian life.

Monica bore three children. Although proud of her son Augustine in many ways (he was a very successful rhetorician and scholar), she was deeply ashamed of his rejection of her Christian faith and his debauched way of life. Distraught and at the end of her tether she approached St Ambrose, who was so moved by her witness of a mother's love that he said: 'It is impossible that the son of so many tears should perish.' He was right and, at the age of twenty-eight, Augustine was received and baptized by St Ambrose himself.

As Monica lay dying, aged fifty-six, she said to Augustine: 'There was indeed one thing for which I wished to tarry a little in this life, and that was that I might see you a Catholic Christian before I died. My God hath answered this more than abundantly, so that I see you now made his servant and spurning all earthly happiness. What more am I to do here?'

On this her feast day we pray to St Monica, who is patron saint of patience and of all wives and mothers, and we ask for her intercession for all those called to the noble vocation of marriage and motherhood.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-10, 16-18 • Psalm 127(128):1-5

Matthew 23:27-32

Thursday 28 August

Matthew 24:42-51 • (Memorial) St Augustine of Hippo

St Augustine is one of our greatest saints. He is a model of conversion for Christians of all ages, but his witness speaks in a special way to men and women today. Prior to his conversion, St Augustine was steeped in a lifestyle which did not bring him the kind of joy, peace and happiness he craved.

Living with his mistress who bore him a child, he was in every sense 'a man of the

world'. Nevertheless, he had all his life been on a quest for truth and was deeply attracted to the person of Jesus. In the spiritual and literary masterpiece we know as his Confessions St Augustine writes that prior to his conversion he never stopped trying to find out 'where we come from, where we are going and how we can find the true life'. His life is an eloquent witness to the patience of God and the ongoing (indeed life-long) process of conversion.

In his public preaching after his ordination as a priest St Augustine had to wrestle with translating his profound and complex thought into language that could be understood by ordinary people. This required a conversion, a change of thinking, which he undertook humbly and obediently. Indeed, as a bishop, having earlier in his life written copiously on many subjects of the day, he had to correct and change his precious works. Again this was a process of conversion which he embraced by God's grace.

For St Augustine the gospel of Christ is fundamentally rooted in knowing that God is love and that we are loved by God. Serving Christ then becomes essentially a question of returning God's love through acts of charity, with special attention to the material and spiritual needs of others. The Church exists to educate people in love and bring them to spiritual maturity.

Pope Benedict, who wrote his doctoral thesis on St Augustine, said that for this great saint: 'The Church was not a simple organization of collective events or, on the contrary, the sum of individuals who live a private religiosity but a community of people who believe in the God of Jesus Christ and who commit themselves to implement in the world the commandment of charity which he left them.'

Lord Jesus, I commit myself to a process of ongoing conversion. May your love transform and melt away any hardness or resistance to your work in my life.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 • Psalm 144(145):2-7

Matthew 24:42-51

Friday 29 August

Mark 6:17-29 • The Martyrdom of St John the Baptist (Memorial)

Considered by many to be the artist Caravaggio's greatest work, 'The Beheading of St John the Baptist' is housed in St John's Co-Cathedral of La Valletta in Malta. In this painting the artist captures both the brutality of the execution of St John the Baptist and the sanctity and holiness of the man who proclaimed, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29), only to become himself a lamb led to the slaughter.

Today we remember one of Christendom's greatest saints and martyrs and celebrate his life and witness, which speaks so eloquently of one who was called to pay the ultimate price for his faith. From its very beginning the Church has had a special devotion to St John the Baptist. His courage and conviction rings out to every generation, proclaiming that if we want to follow Christ, we need to be prepared to come and die with him that we may be raised with him to new life.

John the Baptist can be seen to be on the cusp of the Old Testament and the New. The Lord himself bore witness to this when he said that 'the prophets and the law prophesied until John' (Matt. 11:13). Thus he represents times past and is the herald of the new era to come. As a representative of the past, he is born of aged parents; as a herald of the new era, he is declared to be a prophet and, while yet unborn, leaps in his mother's womb at the arrival of blessed Mary. The angel who foretells his birth reveals that John is to be Christ's precursor, preparing the people to receive him (Luke 1:16-17). These are divine happenings, going beyond the limits of our human frailty.

While preaching about the Lord's coming in the desert, John the Baptist was asked, 'Who are you?' He replied: 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness' (John 1:23). We can compare John the Baptist's description of himself as a 'voice' with John's description of Jesus Christ as 'the Word' (John 1:1). John was a voice that lasted only for a time; Christ, the Word from the beginning, is eternal.

Lord Jesus, may I decrease and may you increase. May I by God's grace give witness to the gospel with the same courage and conviction that St John the Baptist showed.

1 Corinthians 1:17-25 • Psalm 32(33):1-5, 10-11

Proper of Saints: Mark 6:17-29