

Saturday 1 August

Matthew 14:1-12 • St Alphonsus Liguori (Memorial)

It sounds as though the death of John the Baptist haunted the thoughts of King Herod. Why else would the rumours about Jesus and his activities have led him to think that John had risen from the dead? It is not surprising that this might have happened to Herod given the circumstances of the Baptist's death. Herod seemed to have had a certain admiration and fascination for John, even though John was critical of his behaviour. In other circumstances, Herod would probably not have tolerated such criticism, but there was something about John that made him withhold his hand. In the end, however, Herod was lured into bringing about the prophet's death by his own pride and probably his sexual appetites.

What made Herod make such extravagant promises to Herodias' daughter in the presence of his guests and officials? Tradition suggests that there were lustful thoughts in his heart which caused him to throw reason to the wind. Promising 'even half my kingdom' sounds like an unconsidered emotional reaction (cf. Mark 6:23). One wonders what he would have done if Herodias' daughter had actually asked for half the kingdom. Reason might tell us that Herod would have said, 'Don't be silly, girl, I was using a figure of speech – I want to be generous to you, but don't take what I said literally.'

Sometimes we might find ourselves saying, 'I'll do [or I'll give you] anything you want!' We usually mean 'within reason'! But Herod had an eye also on his guests and officials. He was afraid that if he backed down he would be diminished in their eyes. So he let his decision be ruled, not by reason and good judgement, but by pride, fear of what others would think and his emotions. He agreed to have John beheaded in prison and, in accordance with the dancer's bizarre request, delivered his head on a plate. Ultimately, Herod was giving in to the revengeful desire of his wife Herodias, but he was also in a bad place even before the violent request.

Can we recognize in this scene something of the patterns of sin in our own lives? For example, are we inclined to depart from right behaviour because of the fear and pressure of how others see us? Do we allow strong emotional desires, be they sexual or other wants, to overcome our reason and moral sense?

Father, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

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

Matthew 14:1-12

Sunday 2 August

John 6:24-35 • Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Jesus is the bread of life. Every Sunday at Mass Jesus makes himself present in our midst in the Eucharist. But there is a question about the way that the Eucharist actually nourishes us. Do we feel satisfied in such a way that we continue to keep on hungering for the Eucharist, or do we settle simply into the habit of receiving Communion without much sense of its effect?

Today's Gospel can really throw some light onto this dilemma. The account of the people crossing the lake to seek for Jesus and the subsequent dialogue is remarkably similar to the event in John 4 where a Samaritan woman, seeking water, enters into conversation with the Lord. In both cases it seems that the key element is the difference between seeking for something material and earthly and seeking for something spiritual and heavenly. Jesus wants to lead and encourage the Samaritan woman, and the people in today's reading, to realize their deeper need for what is spiritual, and then to open their eyes to see that it is Jesus himself who fulfils that need.

Initially, it seems that Jesus is there to miraculously supply an earthly need. He has just fed thousands of people through a multiplication of bread and fish. He also claimed to be able to give the woman so much water that she would never thirst again. The people clearly recognized the miracle – they even suspected that there was something miraculous about the way that Jesus had crossed the lake. However, they failed to recognize who Jesus really is. They asked if Jesus was greater than Moses who provided bread (manna) for thousands of Israelites during their many years of wandering in the desert. The woman asked if Jesus was greater than Jacob who provided a continuous source of water from a well.

Jesus replied that neither the manna in the wilderness nor the water from Jacob's well was a truly heavenly gift. Rather they were signs of the heavenly gift that the Father really wants to give. This heavenly gift would nourish their spirit and their spiritual life. It would open their eyes to the working of God in their lives and to a deep personal relationship with God. Sin and our fallen nature can prevent us experiencing this. Jesus reveals that he himself is the heavenly bread, and the water he gives is the Spirit who nourishes our spiritual lives.

Lord Jesus, give us this bread and water always.

Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15 • Psalm 77(78):3-4, 23-25, 54

Ephesians 4:17, 20-24 • John 6:24-35

Monday 3 August

Matthew 14:13-21

We return today to the Gospel of Matthew and interestingly read the account of the feeding of the five thousand that had preceded the events of yesterday's Gospel. The focus today is on the actual miracle and, perhaps more significantly, on the heart of Jesus in his dealings both with the people and with the disciples. Matthew tells us that when he saw the vast crowd, 'he had compassion on them' (v. 14). On one level, his pity was for the sick among them. The text simply says: he 'healed their sick' (v. 14).

Several times in the Gospels we read that Jesus was moved with pity (or compassion) – for example, towards the widow from Nain, who walked beside the body of her dead son (Luke 7:13). Compassion also filled the Good Samaritan at the sight of the beaten man on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:25ff.). The word 'pity' or 'compassion' describes the divine compassion mentioned on numerous occasions in the Old Testament. The divine compassion has become incarnate in the person of Jesus, not least in his willingness to heal the sick and to feed the hungry.

The compassion of Jesus goes beyond that of the disciples, who, in their concern, want him to send the crowds away so that they can go to the local villages, before nightfall, to find food for themselves. But, strangely, Jesus says: 'you give them something to eat' (v. 16). At this point, Jesus is turning his compassion towards the disciples, in order to draw out in them a deeper faith in him. The people need not go somewhere else to satisfy their needs, but can be fed by the disciples! Is Jesus here preparing the disciples for their future mission as the Church, and not least for an appreciation of the grace of the Eucharist? Certainly, several elements in the text – the people recline (see v. 19 Aramaic Bible), Jesus looks to heaven, says the blessing, breaks and distributes the bread – capture elements from the Last Supper.

The heart of the matter is that when the people were fed on loaves and fish, when the disciples received the body and blood of Jesus at the Last Supper and when they make the Eucharist available throughout the world (through their successors), they, and we, are being deeply touched by divine compassion, of which Jesus is the embodiment.

Open my heart, Lord, to receive your love, especially in the Eucharist.

Numbers 11:4-15 • Psalm 80(81):12-17

Matthew 14:13-21

Tuesday 4 August

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

The short passage we read today in Matthew has so much to reveal. First of all, about Jesus himself and then about the way that our own relationship with Jesus may grow stronger or weaker. Initially, we read of Jesus sending his disciples off in a boat to cross the lake, while he remains to go up the mountain to pray. We can only guess at the experience of Jesus as he spent time in his Father's presence! But in these precious times, his human mind and will learned how he was to carry out the Father's will and to be the very embodiment of the saving love of the Father for humanity.

Meanwhile, the disciples are in the boat and battling a storm. It is a sharp contrast with the serenity of Jesus which he draws from his communion with the Father. As Jesus approaches the storm-tossed boat, there is so much more going on than appears at first sight. The language that follows in the text describing the situation of the disciples is lifted from the Old Testament account of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites, led by Moses, in Exodus 14. The wind, the waves and the storm, Jesus stretching out his hand, the watches of the night: all suggest the context of the mighty intervention of God in the greatest event in Israel's history, when the Israelites were rescued from the threat of the pursuing Egyptians. Two things suggest that an even greater intervention is now taking place. Matthew mentions that it was the fourth watch of the night. The exodus took place in the third or morning watch! This is a new and later intervention of God. And to emphasize this truth, when the disciples cry out in fear, Jesus says: 'it is I'. These are the very words God spoke to Moses at the burning bush in answer to Moses' request to know God's name. Jesus is the incarnation of God come among us to bring about an even greater salvation.

Peter is the first to see! And is willing, if the Lord so commands, to step out in faith onto the water. Peter's problem came when he took his eyes off Jesus and paid attention to the storm. But with compassion, and gentle chiding, Jesus lifted him up again.

Jesus, let me keep my eyes always on you. Lift me up again when I focus on the storms that assail me.

Numbers 12:1-13 • Psalm 50(51):3-7, 12-13

Matthew 14:22-36

Wednesday 5 August

Matthew 15:21-28

The big problem with today's Gospel is Jesus' seemingly hurtful reaction to the pleas of the Syrophenician woman! It seems to grate upon our ears, and surprises us that Jesus would use a metaphor that categorizes the woman as a 'dog'. The statement would hardly be acceptable today and would very quickly be labelled as racist.

To appreciate what is happening is to enter into Jesus' understanding of himself and his mission from the Father. He saw his life in terms of God's choice of Israel as the means by which humanity might be restored to a right relationship with God. By establishing a covenant with Israel, God wanted to reveal to the world his purpose for us all. But Israel was also part of the problem, sharing the same fallenness as the rest of humanity. It would require a new covenant and a suffering servant who would bear within himself the sin of Israel (and of humanity) and by a sacrificial death would bring about God's salvation.

Jesus knew that he himself was the promised Suffering Servant. He was to call all of Israel to himself and bear their sins in a sacrificial death. Until this happened, he saw his daily ministry in terms of being sent for Israel. It was not yet time for the mission to extend to the rest of the world. There was a death to be accomplished! This was surely the background to the apparent reluctance of Jesus to respond to the woman, who was not part of the Israelite nation.

But children's food not to be given to the house dogs? That's a bit strong! It seems to be lacking in humanity. Was Jesus simply testing the woman to see how persistent and faith-filled she would be? Perhaps he was wanting to help her understand who he really is and his true mission. Not simply to be the healer of ills, but to be the one who gives his life as food for God's children. The woman, amazingly, enters into the metaphor without any sense that it was racist, and seems to have the insight that what Jesus will do for the children of Israel will also benefit those outside Israel. And Jesus marvelled at her faith and understanding and rewarded it. As Jesus will reward us, if we see beyond the racist question and allow ourselves to glimpse more deeply the amazing mission our Lord came to fulfil.

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

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

Thursday 6 August

Mark 9:2-10 • Transfiguration of the Lord (Feast of the Lord)

The Transfiguration was described by C.S. Lewis as a 'new creation miracle'. Along with the resurrection and, interestingly, Jesus walking on the water, it is a glimpse of the life to come for all of us: we are promised glorified bodies completely suffused by the Spirit. As Pope Benedict once wrote, it will be a new evolutionary step, unforeseen, except for the glimpses of it given by Jesus in his Transfiguration and post-resurrection appearances.

There are several features that help us to understand both its meaning and the process by which this transformation will take place. Mark has situated his account between two predictions by Jesus of his forthcoming death in Jerusalem. The full revelation of the glory of Jesus and the transformation of all humanity must come precisely through his sacrificial death. In fact, Luke's account of the same incident records that Moses and Elijah were speaking with Jesus about 'his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem' (Luke 9:31).

The presence of Moses and Elijah is also significant. They stand as representatives of the whole Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets), looking to Jesus for fulfilment. They are two people who themselves experienced a partial revelation of God's glory on other mountains. They experienced only a partial revelation because, as the Old Testament affirmed, 'man shall not see [God] and live' (Exod. 33:20). The whole Old Testament has been waiting for the full glory of God to become visible in the human face of Jesus. But even this was only a momentary experience. For it to become permanent Jesus had to 'accomplish' his sacrificial death. In Jesus, sin and fallen human nature had to be overcome and put to death so that a new humanity could 'look on the face of God'.

Peter wanted to keep hold of the experience by setting up three tents, perhaps as shrines, but the Father intervened and spoke. They are to know Jesus as the Father's beloved Son and are to listen to him, not least by hearing what he has to say about the death he would undergo. In John's Gospel the glory of Jesus is precisely seen in his exaltation on the cross.

'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.' (2 Cor. 3:18)

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

Mark 9:2-10

Friday 7 August
Matthew 16:24-28

There is a striking connection between our Gospel today and the one we read yesterday, in which we saw the link between Jesus' death on the cross and his and our final transfiguration in glory. In this passage from Matthew, Jesus invites whoever would be his disciple to 'deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (v. 24). We have become familiar with the notion of 'taking up our cross' as a way of describing an attitude towards the daily difficulties and setbacks we experience in our lives. Accepting these trials, we have learned, is a way of denying self, so that the life of Jesus can shine forth more clearly in us.

But we might ask ourselves whether this was, in fact, the way that the first disciples understood what Jesus was saying. How might they have perceived his words? The mention of 'the cross' at that moment in time would not have had the same resonances as it does for us. A cross was purely and simply a vicious Roman means of torture and death. Why would anyone want to take up a cross? And after Jesus' crucifixion, the radical nature of discipleship would have become even more clear. The cross was brutal and final. In this context, the notion of taking up one's cross contains something more drastic than putting up with daily trials. It involves a death, a total separation from the 'life of self'.

What is Jesus asking? The truth is that every act of self-denial, of acceptance of penance, of embracing our trials, is predicated upon being immersed into the very death (and resurrection) of Jesus. Our Christian lives began with baptism. Paul says: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead..., we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6:3-4). There is something very radical about dying with Christ. It is something that has happened. But as Paul goes on to say: 'So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11). Is this how we consider ourselves? This is our baptismal position. We can take our stand on this truth each day.

Lord, my fallen self-life is dead and buried with you. Let me live in your power today.

Deuteronomy 4:32-40 • Psalm 76(77):12-16, 21
Matthew 16:24-28

Saturday 8 August

Matthew 17:14-20 • St Dominic (Memorial)

How much faith do we really have? Paschal Uche, delivering a talk about the experience of the 2010 UK papal visit, said that it was easy to be a Catholic in Britain during that time. With crowds of people welcoming Pope Benedict XVI, the outpouring of joy was such that the press – negative in the lead-up to the visit – could do nothing but report on how successfully it was proceeding. Being a Catholic is easy in the good times, having faith is easy in the good times. But what about in the bad times?

In today's Gospel Jesus tells the disciples that if their faith was the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains. A mustard seed is tiny. Jesus is telling us we don't need a lot of faith to achieve great things. But faith isn't easy. The disciples lacked faith when Jesus was physically with them – what hope is there for us? It is the father in this Gospel story who demonstrates the most faith. He comes to Jesus utterly confident that he can heal his son after the disciples failed to do so. This raises interesting questions about faith and illness.

Some people become very angry with God when they, or someone they love, become terminally ill. They get frightened and lose hope. But others find their faith grows stronger during this time. Their relationship with God enters a new phase. When David volunteered to fight against Goliath, he said, 'The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and...the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine' (1 Sam. 17:37). David knew God had sustained him through dangerous situations in the past and, as a result, he had developed a fearless faith.

Illness forces us to admit the fragility of life and confess our dependence on God. This is perhaps what gave the father in this Gospel reading a fearless faith. 'Lord,' he said, 'have mercy on my son...I brought him to your disciples but they could not heal him...' (vv. 15-16 NIV). He is not meek and mild when he approaches Jesus: he is demanding and demonstrates a complete conviction that Jesus can do what they could not.

'As your faith is strengthened you will find there is no longer the need to have a sense of control, that things will flow as they will, and that you will flow with them, to your great delight and benefit.' (Emmanuel Teney)

Deuteronomy 6:4-13 • Psalm 17(18):2-4, 47, 51

Matthew 17:14-20

Sunday 9 August

John 6:41-51 • Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

‘I am the living bread which came down from heaven’ (v. 51). It is worth meditating on this statement. What does it say to you? Perhaps that Jesus is what you need to be sustained? But he is more than that too. He isn’t just the bread of life, he is the living bread. He, not the manna which Moses gave the Israelites in the desert, is the true bread from heaven.

If you look up ‘living’ in the dictionary, you find that the noun is defined as ‘an income sufficient to live on’ and ‘the pursuit of a particular lifestyle’. As an adjective, ‘living’ means to be alive. So Jesus is our spiritual means of support and nourishment and he is also our way of life, and since he is living bread, he is alive in us.

It is from chapter 6 of John’s Gospel that we gain much of our understanding of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist: ‘I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh...For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed’ (vv. 51, 55). At the time of his conversion St Augustine said, ‘It was as though I heard a voice from on high: I am the food of the strong; eat then of me and grow. But you will not transform me into yourself like food for the body, but rather you will be transformed into me.’ Indeed, Pope Leo the Great said that ‘Our sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ has no other purpose than to transform us into that which we receive’. This is perhaps the meaning of the living bread.

Fr Jim McManus has written about how to truly become the Eucharist we celebrate. He challenges us to reflect on: How will this impact on my life? What will it do to my relationships with others? ‘Others’ includes God. Through the Eucharist we become a living member of the body of Christ.

‘Your life must be woven around the Eucharist. Direct your eyes to him, who is the Light; bring your hearts very close to his Divine Heart; ask him for the grace to know him, for the charity to love him, for the courage to serve him. Seek him longingly.’
(Blessed Teresa of Calcutta)

1 Kings 19:4-8 • Psalm 33(34):2-9
Ephesians 4:30–5:2 • John 6:41-51

Monday 10 August

John 12:24-26 • St Lawrence (Feast)

Today's Gospel is particularly apt for the feast of St Lawrence. Jesus says: 'If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also' (v. 26). St Lawrence is the epitome of service. He was one of seven deacons who were in charge of giving help to the poor and needy in Rome during the reign of Emperor Valerian. In 257 AD Valerian commanded Christian clergy to perform sacrifices to Roman gods or face banishment. The following year he ordered Christian leaders to be executed. It was during this persecution that Pope Sixtus was martyred. As Pope Sixtus was led to his execution, it is said that Lawrence followed him, weeping, 'Father, where are you going without your deacon?'

If we choose to follow Christ, we are promised a rich reward: 'if anyone serves me, the Father will honour him' (v. 26). Pope Sixtus reassured Lawrence, 'I am not leaving you, my son. In three days you will follow me.' His words filled Lawrence with joy, and he gave his money and possessions away to the poor and needy. This is faith in action, but these actions attracted the attention of the Prefect of Rome, who ordered Lawrence to bring the Church's treasure to him. Lawrence said he would, in three days' time. Then he went and gathered together all the poor and sick people supported by the Church, and took them to the Prefect, saying, 'This is the Church's treasure!' The Prefect ordered Lawrence's death, something Lawrence accepted with peace and good humour.

Prayer to St Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr:

'O Generous patron of the Church's poor, St Lawrence, pray to the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that all the poor of the Church in need in every corner of the world may feel the effect of the love of their brothers and sisters who seek to help them. Deliver the Church from the greed and envy of the powerful and protect her rights and property so that she may serve the needy in freedom, giving them good things for soul and body. May we come some day with all those whom we helped on earth to the bright mansions of heaven where we will enjoy the riches of God's house and the company of the Saviour who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.'

2 Corinthians 9:6-10 • Psalm 111(112):1-9

John 12:24-26

Tuesday 11 August

Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14 • St Clare (Memorial)

What are the characteristics of very young children? Because it is young or 'little' children that Christ wants us to emulate. Little children are trusting, accepting, honest (they cry when they are tired or hungry and have no way of concealing their true feelings). They are also loving, enjoy humour, have a sense of justice, are naturally curious; they want to explore and discover. And if their explorations bring pleasure or success, they will want to learn more. They have an innocent joy! It is those who can make themselves like little children that Jesus says are the greatest: 'the one who makes himself as little as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven' (v. 4 JB). How can we make ourselves 'little'?

Clare did it by following Francis and founding the Poor Clares. She imitated the humble life Francis lived. The sisters wore no shoes and ate no meat. They trusted in God. Although unwell when an army attacked Assisi, Clare had herself carried to the wall of the convent and placed the Blessed Sacrament where the soldiers could see it. Then, on her knees, she prayed for God's protection. The sisters received it. Clare had the trust of a little child. Have we got the same trust in God?

It is hard to be like a young child when you are an adult. We have experience and long memories. We've lost some trust and hope. Although we know we should, we find it difficult to learn in a new and childlike way. We complicate our lives and relationships with each other and with God.

Yet, despite knowing all this, Jesus tells us we need to change. He knows we are not perfect and that it is not easy. We were young children once and, whatever our lives have become, God loves us. In the final lines of today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that God searches for any sheep who have strayed. He is always looking for us, ready to take us back into the fold.

God of Mercy, you inspired St Clare with the love of poverty. By the help of her prayers, may we follow Christ in poverty of spirit and come to the joyful vision of your glory in the kingdom of heaven. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Deuteronomy 31:1-8 • Deuteronomy 32:3-9

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

Wednesday 12 August

Matthew 18:15-20

Earlier in the year, Pope Francis invited Catholics around the world to take part in 24 hours of Adoration. On 13--14 March Eucharistic adoration, prayer and reconciliation were celebrated by parishes, dioceses and communities worldwide, in what is hoped will become a mid-Lent tradition. The theme of this year's 24 hours of prayer was taken from Ephesians (2:4): God is rich in mercy. Speaking in advance of this prayer event, Pope Francis said: Let us not underestimate the power of so many voices in prayer! The 24 Hours for the Lord initiative is meant to be a sign of this need for prayer.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus underlines the importance of communal prayer. He tells his disciples that where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them (v. 20 NIV). Communal prayer unites us: it creates a oneness of mind and heart, and nourishes and sustains our faith community. It is the overflow and expression of God's love in our lives. Jesus also tells us that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven (v. 19 NIV). But prayer is about more than asking for something. We all have a need for prayer.

Speaking about the Pope's call for 24 Hours for the Lord, Cathy Kennedy, the Director of CREDO in Sydney, said, At Sydney Cathedral, although the choir will sing and there will be times of sacred music, we are aware of the importance of silence and in Adoration. We live in a world where everyone is plugged in and there is non-stop noise and communication. That's why silence is so important, and a crucial element in our encounter with Christ the Lord. This is what is so beautiful about adoration: we come together and are united in our communities with Jesus, in the silence of our hearts.

My Lord and Creator, Your goodness encourages me to converse with You. Your mercy abolishes the chasm which separates the Creator from the creature. To converse with You, O Lord, is the delight of my heart. In You I find everything that my heart could desire. Here, Your light illumines my mind, enabling it to know You more and more deeply. Here streams of graces flow down upon my heart. Here my soul draws eternal life. O my Lord and Creator, You alone, beyond all these gifts, give Your own self to me and unite Yourself intimately with Your miserable creature. (Adoration Prayer by St Faustina)

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 • Psalm 65(66):1-5, 16-17

Matthew 18:15-20

Thursday 13 August

Matthew 18:21–19:1

The parable in today's Gospel reading is a wonderful one for us, because what it is essentially saying is that if we are sorry, God will forgive us over and over and over again. Of course, one way we can show God we are sorry, is by imitating his compassion. Which, luckily for us, is infinite.

In this parable the king shows humility and compassion, but this was not replicated by his servant. Do we share God's love for us with those with whom we come into contact as we journey through life? Passionist priest Father Brian D'Arcy has observed:

I become strong only when I embrace my weaknesses; I cannot be a teacher unless I can be taught; Wisdom comes when I learn from my foolishness; I laugh longer and louder when I learn to laugh at myself. So change your mind about that person who irritates you, or the family member who has let you down. Just for a moment see life as they see it; try to understand what life has done to them. In the same way that physical exercise is essential for a healthy body, the challenge to change keeps our brains, our spirits and our emotions healthy. You see how to change when you change the way you see. What I am is God's gift to me; what I become is my gift to God. And it all begins with a simple decision – be humble enough to change.

That is a beautiful line which is worth meditating upon: 'What I am is God's gift to me; what I become is my gift to God.'

G.K. Chesterton wrote, 'If I can put one touch of rosy sunset into the life of any man or woman, I shall feel that I have worked with God.' How will we work with God? What will our gift to God be?

Dear Lord, help us to love one another and let us open our eyes to see all the right and wrong that we have done. Let us open our lips to speak what is right and not wrong. Help us to make good decisions and do the right things in life. Help us to live our lives as you would want by being kind and treating others as we would like to be treated. Help us to be strong and not give up. Let us live our lives as we should, in your image. Amen.

Joshua 3:7-11, 13-17 • Psalm 113(114)

Matthew 18:21–19:1

Friday 14 August

Matthew 19:3-12 • St Maximilian Mary Kolbe (Memorial)

Jesus accused those he was speaking to in today's Gospel of being unteachable. But the same could not be said of the saint who is remembered today. St Maximilian Kolbe demonstrated great faith. He took the word of God to his heart. This Polish Franciscan friar volunteered to die in place of a stranger in Auschwitz a young husband and father. Kolbe was active in promoting the veneration of the Immaculate Virgin Mary. This focus on Mary is apt when it comes to today's Gospel reading, which is essentially a defence of the rights of women. The harshness of Jesus words has to be seen against the backdrop of the way many Jews treated women and marriage.

In his Daily Study Bible Series commentary on Matthew, William Barclay says: The woman in the eyes of the law was a thing. She was at the absolute disposal of her father or of her husband. She had virtually no legal rights at all. To all intents and purposes a woman could not divorce her husband for any reason, and a man could divorce his wife for any cause at all. A woman, said the Rabbinic law, may be divorced with or without her will; but a man only with his will.

So if we try to paraphrase what Jesus is saying in this Gospel, it may be something like: You think all you have to do is give a certificate to a wife you want to get rid of, and that makes your actions legal even though they are totally unjust. You simply tell her she's no longer your wife and throw her out of your house. In doing so, you are nothing but an adulterer and you are causing your wife to be an adulteress.

Jesus was speaking to Jewish men of the time who treated their wives in a horribly unjust way, and that is what Jesus was concerned with: justice.

Through the Militia Immaculata movement, which Maximilian founded, he spread a fervent devotion to Our Lady throughout the world. He gave up his life for a total stranger and loved his persecutors, giving us an example of unselfish love for all men – a love that was inspired by true devotion to Mary.

Grant, O Lord Jesus, that we too may give ourselves entirely without reserve to the love and service of our Heavenly Queen in order to better love and serve our fellowman in imitation of your humble servant, Maximilian. Amen. (Novena Prayer to St Maximilian Kolbe)

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

Matthew 19:3-12

Saturday 15 August

Matthew 19:13-15

After two thousand years of Christian teaching we are now very familiar with the special place which Christianity, following Jesus' instructions, accords children. In this light it is easy to forget, or be unaware, how revolutionary such a stance was in his own times. Jesus is, in fact, unique among ancient religious and philosophical teachers in receiving children as significant. His disciples were unprepared for this. Indeed, however familiar we may be with this doctrine, are we really prepared for what Jesus says in today's reading?

Let's begin at the beginning: was it not fitting that to inaugurate the New Covenant the Son of God should make himself a little child? As an adult Jesus adopts the same attitude to children as God has. Children become, in fact, the symbols of the genuine disciples, as we read today: 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven' (v. 14). We must, in effect, return to the state of children and receive the kingdom in all simplicity, if we are to enter the heavenly kingdom.

The true disciples, then, are the 'babes' to whom the Father has graciously wished to reveal, as he did before to Daniel, his secrets which are kept hidden from the wise (Matt. 11:25). In the language of the gospel, 'little' and 'disciple' seem at times to be equivalent (Matt. 10:42; Mark 9:42).

Adults can easily lose 'the heart of a child' when it comes to faith, whereas, in fact, faith encourages us to nurture qualities which are fundamentally childlike – for example, we are invited as children of God to pray to God as 'Our Father'. Christian discipleship helps us to discover the child within because the impulse of faith draws out the qualities which we need both to enter and belong to the kingdom of God. One of the key qualities of a child is trust. Every Christian needs to grow and mature in trust of God, and in this sense we need to become like children again.

Lord God, teach me to grow in the virtue of trust. Create in me the heart of a child. May I, by your grace, trust the past to your mercy, the present to your love and the future to your providence.

Joshua 24:14-29 • Psalm 15(16):1-11

Matthew 19:13-15

Sunday 16 August

Luke 1:39 • Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Solemnity, transferred)

Jesus ascended into heaven, body and soul, after completing his mission of conquering death and freeing all from death's power. Because he had obeyed his Father by offering his life for our salvation, he was raised out of death, established as the first fruits from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20) and given authority over all his enemies, of which the last enemy is death.

By assuming Mary into heaven, body and soul, Christ exercised his authority over his enemies, for he freed her from death. He did this for Mary because, preserved from sin from her conception and remaining without sin until the end of her life, she had not merited corruption of the tomb: 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom. 6:23). Mary's assumption teaches us that, one day, we too will be raised, body and soul, into heaven to share Christ's victory over death. Although his victory is not yet complete, it will be complete when the Father sends him again at the end of time. Then, definitively, he will vanquish death: 'The last enemy to be destroyed is death' (1 Cor. 15:26). He will lead his people into the glory of eternal life with God: 'the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 6:23).

The Holy Spirit transformed Mary's sinlessness into the glory of holiness as she turned to God in prayer ('my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour', v. 47) and as she obeyed his word ('let it be to me according to your word', v. 38). As we turn to the Lord in prayer and strive to do his will, the Spirit is doing the same work of transforming us into holiness, despite our sinfulness and frailty: 'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:18). The Spirit's work within us is hidden now, and so we are unable to see how he is transforming us. But, when we too are raised into glory, body and soul, we will marvel at the depth of his work within us – it will shine forth as glory! Then, like Mary, we shall share in the completeness of Christ's victory over sin and death.

We thank you, Holy Spirit, for your hidden work of transforming us into holiness.

Revelation 11:19; 12:1-6, 10 • Psalm 44(45):10-12, 16

1 Corinthians 15:20-27 • Luke 1:39-56

Monday 17 August

Matthew 19:16-22

The playwright Tom Stoppard was right when he said: ‘Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, when is it going to end?’ Every religious and ethical system seeks to find an answer to the deep philosophical question and central conundrum of human life: is there life after death? If so, what is eternal life and how does one achieve it? The latter is the very question which, in today’s passage, is preoccupying the thinking of a rich young man. Jesus’ encounter with him offers us one of the most profound, moving and challenging exchanges in the Gospel narrative and addresses head on the issue of eternal life.

A rich, young would-be disciple asks Jesus probably one of the most profound questions in the New Testament: ‘Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?’ (v. 16). When Jesus informs him that we enter life by keeping the commandments, he replies, in effect, ‘I’ve done this, what else do you want me to do?’ Jesus’ response is uncompromising and unambiguous: ‘If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’ (v. 21). Jesus’ words cut our rich young man to the heart – but they wound only to heal. He is unable to confess that possessions have a huge hold on his life and departs dejected and sad.

Salvation is impossible for us but possible with God. This is why Jesus came: as God he could save us – no one else could. Only Jesus could keep the commandments. The rich young man thought he could but he couldn’t – he knew deep down that his heart was captive to his possessions. The dialogue was the dialogue of conversion. Jesus was leading him to confess his need for salvation and look to him to save him. We do not have the power to overcome sin or overcome the hold of the enemy in our lives. We, like the rich young man, have a choice: if we turn to Jesus we can be healed; if we look to ourselves we will be dejected.

‘There are moments when one has to choose between living one’s own life, fully, entirely, completely – or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands. You have that moment now. Choose!’ (Oscar Wilde)

Judges 2:11-19 • Psalm 105(106):34-44

Matthew 19:16-22

Tuesday 18 August

Matthew 19:23-30

Jesus said that ‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’ (v. 24). The camel was the largest animal in Palestine and the eye of a needle the smallest opening! The image would have captured the imagination of its first hearers, no doubt causing them to smile and laugh.

The idea that a rich man would find it difficult to enter the kingdom would have been a little confusing, however, because in the ancient world wealth was seen as a sign of divine favour. Jesus knocked this idea on the head by teaching that entry into the kingdom cannot be earned, achieved or bought! It is a free, unmerited, undeserved and gracious gift from God. This truth can be difficult to accept, but unless we do we fail to understand that the gospel is first and foremost ‘good news’. We can live noble, impressive and very good lives. We can serve others, give to charitable causes and raise wonderful children. But we cannot save ourselves from sin, Satan and death. If we grasp this, we understand Jesus’ saying that ‘With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’ (v. 26).

One day every human being will stand ‘naked’ before God. As the old Celtic saying reminds us, ‘There are no pockets in a shroud.’ We cannot take our wealth, possessions or riches with us when we die. Rich or poor, beggar or thief: all will stand before the judgement seat of Christ. We offer God nothing except the faith we sought to live out, the hope we looked to live by and the love we gave to others. The teaching of Scripture is eternal and sure: what counts is faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. Every human being is in need of salvation – it is, in fact, the deepest need we have. Like the rich young man, we in the West can be extremely attached to our material possessions and need the grace of the Holy Spirit to set us free.

‘Why do you not look at God’s love which could set you free? Why do you not see all the good things that God is doing for you? Why do you not listen when God calls you back from spiritual death? Why do you prefer death to life?’ (Hildegard of Bingen)

Judges 6:11-24 • Psalm 84(85):9, 11-14

Matthew 19:23-30

Wednesday 19 August

Matthew 20:1-16

All day, the landowner has been hiring. At one end of the spectrum are the early birds, who probably stumbled out of bed at the crack of dawn; at the other end are those who probably overslept and breeze in lazily just before closing time. But don't start tapping away on your calculator just yet! Today's parable is not about minimum wages or equal pay; it is about the gift of God's grace.

The early birds, the eleventh-hour slackers and everyone in-between are all paid the same wage. Philip Yancey, in his book *What's So Amazing about Grace?*, refers to this as the 'atrocious mathematics of the gospel'! It reverses the oft-asked question, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' asking instead, 'Why do good things happen to bad people?'

With which category of labourer do you identify? Most of us probably position ourselves towards the 'early' end of the spectrum. And we probably grumble about the apparent 'unfairness' of the wages paid – unless and until we acknowledge the truth of Romans 3:23: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (emphasis added). If we got what we truly deserved, what would you and I get? Romans 6:23 reminds us, 'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Grace means that we don't get what we do deserve, which is spiritual death (separation from God). Instead, we get what we don't deserve – which is forgiveness, salvation, new life.

The problem begins, as so many problems do, when we start comparing. Comparison breeds discontent and envy, and causes us to forget that what we have received is a free and unmerited gift from God. As the landowner asks, 'do you begrudge my generosity?' (v. 15b). From a worldly perspective, the wage distribution in today's parable seems unjust; some might even claim a violation of fundamental rights! But, as the landowner points out, if he chooses to be over-generous with some, that is entirely his business (v. 15a)!

Grace is not our right; it is given *ex gratia*, as a gift. It is always undeserved, seemingly 'unfair', often unexpected, usually unfathomable. We are not called to understand grace, but to enjoy it, to dispense it and, perhaps, to remember to say 'thank you'! Gracious God, thank you for your amazing grace.

Judges 9:6-15 • Psalm 20(21):2-7

Matthew 20:1-16

Thursday 20 August
St Bernard (Memorial)

A word to the wise: read every parable of Jesus carefully, prayerfully and without presumption. This is sage advice because the tendency is to approach the parables with a certain carelessness, a lack of prayer and a somewhat arrogant assumption that we have gleaned the kernel/essence and we have nothing else to learn. We should be clear about one thing: the parables reflect a unique and wonderful mind, the like of which the world had never known before and will never know again.

A key feature of today's parable is the breathtaking and heart-warming generosity of the king. He wants to share the joy of his son's wedding with all his subjects. He is clearly a ruler with a heart for all his citizens. This is, of course, a rich image of the desire at the very core of the Trinity: God longs to share his life with us.

Our vision tends to be dominated by this life – we need God to help us in the here and now. We dedicate little time to thinking about eternity. In contrast God's plan for us extends far beyond the narrow confines of human existence. Jesus was familiar with the Old Testament idea of the banquet as an image of the eternal life to come. Isaiah, for example, writes, 'On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast...He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces' (Isa. 25:6, 8). Jesus develops the idea of the banquet on a number of occasions, not least at the Last Supper where he tells his disciples that he will feast with them again in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:16).

This theme is taken up by John in the book of Revelation: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb' (19:9). The wedding banquet is a time of great celebration and happiness; yet this is just a glimpse of the joy of heaven when we shall be united to Christ and share in the very life of the Trinity. St Augustine, moved by this promise, wrote: '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.'

Lord Jesus Christ, we will raise our heads, look beyond this world and long to celebrate the banquet feast in heaven with you.

Judges 11:29-39 • Psalm 39(40):5-10
Matthew 22:1-14

Friday 21 August

Matthew 22:34-40 • St Pius X (Memorial)

Love, as the song goes, ‘is a many splendored thing’. Love could also be described as the very essence of the Christian life. Paul, in his profound and eloquent eulogy to this virtue in 1 Corinthians 13, proclaimed that even if a person were martyred for the faith, without love such an act would be futile.

It was a common practice among rabbis to summarize the central core of the teaching of the Law and Prophets in a pithy saying. This is what Jesus was doing when he said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (vv. 37-39). When St Augustine had a go he came up with: ‘Here is the rule: Love and do what you will.’ The problem is: what is love?

The love about which Christ spoke is both underpinned by a profound sense of God’s moral and ethical teaching and also rooted in the sense of the dignity and uniqueness of every human person expressed in a spirit of self-sacrifice and total life-long commitment. Gospel love is tough love. This love is patient and kind; it does not envy; it does not boast; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. Gospel love always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres.

Those called to marriage are called to a life of utter faithfulness to one spouse. The nature of married love is one forsakes all others and commits to a life of total dedication and commitment. Our society has lost sight of the demands of marriage and many enter into this most holy of states too lightly or without enough reflection or preparation. At the heart of marriage is self-sacrifice because God calls us to love with agape love, which is rooted in the idea of laying down one’s life – even unto death.

Lord Jesus, you came to show us how to love. Your love never fails – teach me to love as you would have me love. Grant me the wisdom to turn to you for mercy, and to ask for the power of the Holy Spirit who empowers all peoples to live out their vocation in joy and love.

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

Matthew 22:34-40

Saturday 22 August

Matthew 23:1-12 • Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Memorial)

One of the most challenging aspects of the preaching of Jesus is the importance he places on the attitude of our hearts. We may be able to deceive others and even ourselves by the image we portray to the world, but the workings of our hearts are known to God. If our words and actions do not arise out of a spirit of love within us, then our lives will not demonstrate the truth of the gospel. Rather we shall be living in hypocrisy.

This is the type of hypocrisy for which Jesus criticized the Pharisees. They were upheld by society as righteous because of their perceived obedience to the law, and the weight of their learning gave them an authority among the people that made their rulings difficult to contest. However, their motives were often questionable. They tended to equate righteousness with conformity to the letter of the law rather than its spirit. They also relished too much their status in society and the esteem in which they were held. Ultimately, in their hearts they were far from God.

Jesus sought to expose the attitude of the hearts of the Pharisees and preached unequivocally that love matters, the heart matters. He tells us that humility is the safeguard against hypocrisy. Humility is the attitude that will reveal the transforming power of love. Jesus does not condemn the struggle that we have in our hearts to love, but calls us to reject the unloving thoughts and desires that so often threaten to overwhelm us. We can bring these thoughts and desires to light and overcome them through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not hypocrisy; this is God at work in our lives seeking to transform us, and in so doing manifesting his love to the world.

The world knows what we think of God by the way we treat others and ourselves. The witness of our love, our struggles to love, our repentance when we lack love, all proclaim the gospel. We are ambassadors of a message of peace and love. Let us be known for our love.

Lord, I kneel in repentance before your cross, the greatest sign of your love. Forgive me for the times when I have withheld my love from you and my neighbour. Inspire me with the indwelling of your Holy Spirit, that every word on my lips and every thought in my heart may proclaim your love.

Ruth 2:1-3, 8-11; 4:13-17 • Psalm 127(128):1-5

Matthew 23:1-12

Sunday 23 August

John 6:60-69 • Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

It was crunch time for some of the disciples. Many had been swept along and had followed Jesus for a variety of reasons – the miracles, the power, the crowds, the prospect of adventure and excitement. However, when he began to teach about the Eucharist many found his words hard to stomach (literally). Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist, like his teaching on the cross, became a stumbling block. The disciples' response is at least honest: 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' (v. 60). Many of them rejected his teaching and turned their back on him (v. 66). Jesus' question to his disciples elicits a beautiful and profound response from Peter: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God' (v. 68).

Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist is an invitation for us to live by faith. We accept and embrace Jesus' teaching; we believe first and then seek to understand after. St Cyril of Jerusalem wrote, 'Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that, for they are, according to the Master's declaration, the Body and Blood of Christ. Even though the sense suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm. Do not judge in this matter by taste, but be fully assured by faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the Body and Blood of Christ.' This teaching is spirit and life (v. 63). It is the Holy Spirit who gives us his light so we believe and receive.

Today, perhaps more than in any other age, the teaching on the Eucharist is a hard one. If we can't see we won't believe, and if it's not scientifically verifiable we don't believe. Jesus has the words of eternal life, and the Eucharist is food for our spirits and nourishment for our souls: 'As in the life of the body, after a person is born and becomes strong, they require food so that life may be preserved and sustained, so also in the spiritual life, after being fortified, he requires spiritual food, which is Christ's Body and Christ's Blood' (St Thomas Aquinas).

Lord Jesus Christ, you have the words of eternal life. Help me to feed from your Word, be sustained by your Eucharist and nourished through your gift of prayer.

Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18 • Psalm 33(34):2-3, 16-23

Ephesians 5:21-32 • John 6:60-69

Monday 24 August

John 1:45-51 • St Bartholomew (Feast)

Nathanael, like all devout Jews, was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. He would have prayed for it, longed for it and immersed his mind in the Torah and prophets to prepare for it. But, despite his state of readiness, he was quick to dampen Philip's enthusiasm. He was sceptical about Nazareth's ability to produce anything good! Nazareth, in Jesus' day, had become a synonym for that which was despised and reviled. Philip, untroubled by this objection, did what every effective evangelist should do: he invited Nathanael to see for himself (v. 46).

Nathanael's encounter with Jesus changed his life. Jesus identified in him the qualities of a true Israelite. What were these qualities? One of them was that he was alert to the coming of the Messiah. He took seriously his call to prepare for it and to interpret in its light the signs and events of his own life. Another quality he had was faith. It took no more than Jesus' display of spiritual insight (v. 48) to convince him that Jesus was indeed the King of Israel, the promised Messiah.

We can learn much from Nathanael. We, like him, are preparing for the coming of Jesus. We are living in the age of the Church and await Christ's return. Our sense of anticipation and expectancy will be heightened as we immerse our minds in the Scriptures and seek to interpret the signs of the times. Jesus' return is a key truth of our faith. It's not for cranks or wide-eyed fanatics, but is grounded in the blessed hope of the Church that Jesus is the Lord of both history and the universe. Our faith finds its fullest expression in the prayer of the Spirit and the Bride (the Church) who cry, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

The figure of Nathanael in John's Gospel is commonly identified with the apostle Bartholomew in the other Gospels. Little is known about him except that he was one of the twelve. Tradition has it that he ministered in India and Armenia and was martyred (by being flayed alive and then beheaded) at Derbent on the Caspian Sea.

Lord Jesus, you raised up Bartholomew to live and die for you. He was a true Israelite in whom there was no guile. Lord, I want to be a true believer too, who with simple faith longs for your return.

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

John 1:45-51

Tuesday 25 August

Matthew 23:23-26

Many Pharisees were devout men who did their best to follow God, but Jesus reproached them for losing sight of the heart of religion. They became so concerned with interpreting the law and keeping it down to the smallest detail that they forgot it was only there to help people serve God and live holy lives.

We probably all know people in our daily lives who are obsessed with keeping rules to the letter, but those who are wise know when to keep human rules and when to break them. While the Pharisees were meticulous about their tithes, they could at the same time be self-righteous, judgemental and worldly. They condemned sinners rather than trying to help them, and they liked being admired by others. They were only concerned with the externals of religion. They may have performed all the correct religious actions but their hearts were far from God. The prophets had told the Jews in the past that love and mercy were more important than burnt offerings, but the message was easily forgotten.

We should not be too hasty to condemn the Pharisees. We can easily dispute over rituals and minor rubrics, and lose sight of our shared mission to build God's kingdom. We can be legalistic, self-righteous and judgemental. We can judge by appearances, and think that being religious consists of doing the right actions rather than having hearts that love God and our neighbour. Jesus always focused on what is in the heart as the crucial thing, and if our hearts are put right, then our outward lives will also be renewed.

Let us spend time every day in prayer, so that we may know God's forgiveness, and his love may be poured into our hearts. Let us try to cleanse our hearts and minds of sinful desires, so that we can live as God wants us to. Jesus reminds us that the essence of what God wants is simple: it is 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic. 6:8).

Lord, help us not to be legalistic and self-righteous, and to remember that justice, mercy and faith are what matters. Renew and strengthen our hearts, so that we may be people who bring your love to the world.

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

Matthew 23:23-26

Wednesday 26 August

Matthew 23:27-32

Hypocrisy is difficult to discern because it's a charade. Hypocrites deceive both themselves and others. It can be hard to identify the hypocrite or indeed the influence of hypocrisy in our own lives. The poet John Milton, with great insight, observed: 'For neither man nor angel can discern hypocrisy, the only evil that walks invisible, except to God alone'.

Jesus is the enemy of hypocrisy. He exposes it, condemns it and conquers it. He clearly saw that the Pharisees had a particularly good dose of it. The Torah taught that one became ceremonially unclean if one unwittingly stepped on a grave (Num. 19:16). To avoid this possibility, tombs were commonly whitewashed. Jesus' comparison of the Pharisees with such whitewashed tombs would not have endeared him to them! The problem with hypocrites is that they have no insight into their own behaviour and are devoid of a sense of humour – at least when it comes to themselves!

Jesus challenged the assumption of the scribes and Pharisees that if they had lived in the times of their forefathers they wouldn't have persecuted the prophets. He chastised their tendency to assume such moral high ground with biting irony: 'Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' (v. 32). In effect he was saying: 'I wouldn't be so sure about how you'd have behaved in the past; in your midst you have me, and I know you will persecute and kill me.' Their hypocrisy deprived them of a healthy understanding of what they were capable of.

We must be on our guard against the hypocrite in us. Watch how easy it is to adopt the moral high ground and come down hard on others. The truth is, we simply don't know what we're capable of. If we are remotely in touch with our own hearts, we should be slow to judge others. St Gregory the Great, a great pastor of souls, offered a remedy against hypocrisy. Instead of judging others we are to examine ourselves: 'I shall speak in such a way that the sword of God's word can pass through me and pierce the heart of my neighbour. I shall speak in such a way as to be a mouthpiece for God's word, even when it is aimed against myself.'

Lord, help me to know myself. Let your light so shine in me that I may be free from all taint of hypocrisy and reflect your glory to the world.

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 • Psalm 138(139):7-12

Matthew 23:27-32

Thursday 27 August

Matthew 24:42-51 • St Monica (Memorial)

Tomorrow we celebrate the feast-day of St Augustine; today of his mother, St Monica. It is remarkable that we have two saints from the same family who follow each other in the liturgical calendar. This highlights how the family is the anvil on which the iron of holiness is forged.

We know little about St Monica apart from what we glean from her wayward son's Confessions. St Augustine makes mention of the fact that he and his mother used to engage in philosophical and theological discussions at the dinner table. Unlike St Augustine, who strayed from the path of righteousness, St Monica was a devout believer all her life. She shared with St Augustine that she had a great thirst for the life to come. As she grew in holiness and sanctity she became less impressed and attracted by the things of this world: 'Son, as far as I am concerned nothing in this life now gives me any pleasure. I do not know why I am still here, since I have no further hopes in this world. I did have one reason for wanting to stay a little longer: to see you become a Catholic Christian before I died.' Remarkably, a few days after saying this she became very sick with a fever and lay dying. Since they were some way from home St Augustine was concerned about her final resting place. She retorted, 'Bury my body wherever you will; let not care of it cause you any concern. One thing I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be.'

St Monica is a wonderful model for us all – whoever we may be – bishop, priest, deacon, married or single. She was rooted in this world but had her heart on the world and life to come. She gave birth to and helped to convert one of the Church's greatest sons, a towering figure and intellect whose teaching richly informs the Catechism of the Catholic Church even today. St Monica is the patron saint of intercessors and surely it was her heartfelt prayers for her son which worked in him his most wonderful conversion to Christ.

Heavenly Father, the tears of Monica moved you to draw her son to yourself. We pray with confidence that you will hear the prayers of all mothers who long for their children to turn back to you and know your mercy and love.

1 Thessalonians 3:7-13 • Psalm 89(90):3-4, 12-17

Matthew 24:42-51

Friday 28 August

Matthew 25:1-13 • St Augustine of Hippo (Memorial)

The parable of the Ten Virgins (or the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids as it is sometimes known) is unique to St Matthew's Gospel. Matthew splits the bridesmaids down the middle – five are wise, five are foolish. The measure of wisdom they have is gauged by the preparations they have made for the occasion in furnishing themselves with a supply of oil to replenish their lamps while they wait for the bridegroom, who in the custom of the day could arrive at any time. In Jesus' parable the bridegroom is delayed and does not arrive until midnight, and by that time all the lamps are going out.

Whenever you read anything in Scripture and it jars with you, that is the verse to take seriously and ask the Lord why you are reacting or responding in the way that you are. What jars with most of us on reading this parable isn't that the foolish virgins have forgotten to bring more oil with them to fill their lamps: it's more the attitude of the wise young women towards their foolish counterparts. Given that it's a wedding and a time for goodness, kindness and generosity, it seems odd that the wise virgins are, well, let's say it, rather harsh. They reply, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves' (v. 9).

Why did they react this way? We need to ask the Holy Spirit but it will aid our understanding to know that traditionally the lamps are seen as symbolizing the gift of faith and the oil as symbolizing the gift of charity or love. St John of the Cross taught that at the eve of our lives we will be judged on the love we have shown to others. As much as we might like to, we cannot borrow or lend or claim the love and service of others as our own.

The other overarching or undercurrent theme of the parable is the reality of death and judgement. It seems fitting that, on the feast-day of St Augustine, we should leave the final word to him:

'For indeed we know not the day or the hour neither of that future time when the Bridegroom will come, nor of our own falling asleep each of us; if then we be prepared for this latter, we shall also be prepared when that voice shall sound, which shall arouse us all.'

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

Matthew 25:1-13

Saturday 29 August

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

St John the Baptist truly prepared the way for the Lord. Whenever any of the four Gospel writers refer to him it is because they want to draw attention to Christ, not the Baptist per se. Through the witness of John the Baptist we come to Jesus.

Mark's account of the brutal death of John the Baptist sheds light on the forthcoming death of Christ. It is as if Mark foretells the death of Christ through the death of John. This requires a careful reading but he gives us many clues. When we read the Scriptures we have to become a kind of faith detective. Herod is wrong about John the Baptist being 'raised' (v. 16) but Jesus would indeed be raised (16:6-8). Like Herodias, who wanted John dead, the chief priests and Pharisees want to kill Jesus but have to go about it by devious means for fear of the people (see 11:18; 14:1-2). Herod is just like Pilate: he has John put to death, but he is uncertain what crime he has committed (see 15:14). Finally, just like Jesus' disciples, John's disciples recover his body after his death and lay it in a tomb (v. 29; 15:46). We see the same mirroring technique in the account of the martyrdom of St Stephen, again reflecting the death of Christ (Acts 7). No servant is greater than his master (John 15:20).

What can we learn then from today's Gospel? Mark simply seems to be recording a tragic historical event, but the Scriptures are never simple: there is always a jewel or pearl of grace waiting to be retrieved and valued by us. The Spirit is always leading us to see how the Scriptures relate to our own life. Through baptism we were immersed in Jesus' death and resurrection; we are united with him in his death and joined to him in his resurrection. The life in the Spirit is always an invitation to die and rise with Christ. St John the Baptist paid the ultimate price for his faith and we, too, are called to be courageous in witnessing to the gospel of life, relying on God for words and wisdom to be eloquent defenders of our faith.

Lord, teach me to be a joyful and courageous witness of faith. Teach me that you always bid us to come and die with you that we may witness in turn to the new life of the resurrection.

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

Mark 6:17-29

Sunday 30 August

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 • Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Second Vatican Council opened up a new way of thinking towards the Jewish people, correcting the previously held, misguided view that they were in some way responsible for the death of Christ. In *Nostra aetate* the bishops wrote:

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ. (Para. 4)

It is good to bear this in mind as we approach the thorny issue of the Pharisees and their relationship with Christ. It is manifestly clear from passages such as the Gospel we read today that Jesus came into sharp conflict with them. The tension between them was focused on the interpretation of how faith in God should be lived out. The Pharisees were less concerned about the state of their heart and more concerned on giving an impression of piety. They were focused on the exterior, rather than the interior. Jesus' teaching always stressed the importance of the heart, the interior life, and that external expressions of faith should be a reflection of what is happening on the inside.

We can appear holy and righteous by fulfilling our religious duties but our hearts can be far from God. We can also be harsh and judgemental towards those who do not practise faith in the way that we do. The Pharisees were not alone in the way they thought. We can be like them ourselves and we can, in the hidden depths of our hearts, think of ourselves as more righteous and holy than others. It was this attitude which Jesus attacked, because we are all sinners and we all fall short of the glory of God. Furthermore, our faith should make us compassionate, kind and forgiving towards others.

Lord, teach me that I am a sinner in need of your mercy. May the prayer of my heart be, 'Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner.'

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 • Psalm 14(15):2-5

James 1:17-18, 21-27 • Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Monday 31 August

Luke 4:16-30

In our Gospel today Jesus returns to his home town. It is a story of hero to zero in what appears to be a comparatively brief period. In the first instance Jesus was received with open arms and warm embrace. He was, after all, one of their own – a son of Nazareth, a brother and friend. But how quickly things changed and in no time these feelings were replaced with jealousy and suspicion leading to a serious threat on his life.

As an observant Jew Jesus would have customarily worshipped in the synagogue and from time to time would have been called upon to assist with the readings for the day. There would be two readings, the first from the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and the second from the Prophets. On this occasion Jesus was allocated the second reading from the prophet Isaiah regarding a promise of the restoration of Israel (Isa. 61:1-2). Those who listened to Jesus read that day could not have anticipated that he would conclude by declaring that in him this prophecy was fulfilled (v. 21). This is a remarkable incident in Jesus' life in which he identified himself not only with being the Lord's prophet foretold by Isaiah (Isa. 11:2) but also with the promised Messiah, the One who would usher in a new age of divine blessing.

There are two ways our minds can receive divine truth: from a horizontal perspective or a vertical one. If we receive it horizontally, we see it from a limited point of view and struggle to get our minds and hearts around it – this is what happened to those in the synagogue that day. To them Jesus was 'Joseph's son' – not the Messiah or a prophet. The Spirit, however, always moves us to understand Scripture vertically, whereby we lay down our own thinking and ask him to lead and guide us and reveal the deeper or hidden meaning in Scripture. The Old Testament is pregnant with Christ and it is a work of the Spirit in us to lead us to understand and marvel at the way God was preparing his chosen people for the coming of the Messiah.

Lord, fill me with a fresh outpouring of your Spirit so I may live out in my own life the calling of my baptism to be a priest, prophet and king in proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 • Psalm 95(96):1, 3-5, 11-13

Luke 4:16-30