



The idea of being prepared is rooted in society. Students prepare for exams, pregnant mothers prepare for labour, political parties prepare for elections and a good scout, of course, is always prepared! Each of us is called to prepare, One might ask – prepare for what? There are two key events that we need to get ready for – both of which no human being past, present or future can avoid. These are our own death and the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Both are as certain as the air we breathe.

Jesus, expert in humanity that he was, knew that we needed help to think clearly on these issues. Our inclination is more towards negligence, towards being consumed by things of this world. The Lord expressed this tendency succinctly and directly: 'but take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down the dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare' (Luke 21:34). If dissipation and drunkenness aren't our thing then the 'cares of this life' almost certainly are! Most of what we encounter in our day-to-day lives conspires to keep us rooted to the things of this earth.

Money, worries, anxiety, the pace of life and then the demands of the tyrant we call time close in on us daily. It doesn't matter who we are, most of us are at times overwhelmed by life. Jesus describes this predicament as a trap or snare. Why? Because in an instant these realities could be surpassed by God, eternity and judgement. In a moment our lives could be over. We don't like to dwell on this, but it's the truth. In the same way in a moment, an instant, the twinkle of an eye, the Lord could return.

How are we to prepare? The best thing to do is to take Jesus' advice – which is to watch and pray. We are on the eve of the season of Advent. During this time we are encouraged to watch and pray – especially for the Second Coming. If we grasp the significance of the first coming we shall groan and long for the second. The Holy Spirit is the One who enlightens us. He is the One who shows us how brief our lives are. He is the One who prompts us to pray and set aside the time to retreat and be still with God. The Holy Spirit is the One who longs most of all for return of Jesus.

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20)

Revelation 22:1-7 • Psalm 94(95):1-7

Luke 21:34-36



Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come' (Mark 13:33). During Advent we naturally focus on the birth of Jesus – his first coming. The Church, however, asks us to look beyond his birth at Bethlehem and reflect on his coming again at the end of time in order that we might better understand and appreciate the fullness of the redemption he has gained for us.

The birth of Jesus inaugurated our salvation and fulfilled many, but not all, of the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the long-awaited Messiah. Some prophecies will be fulfilled only at his Second Coming. The fullness of our redemption will not be ours until then. Therefore we await that day with hope: 'Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near' (Luke 21:28).

The Lord's return will be glorious. The powers of the heavens will be shaken (Luke 21:26). He will complete the new creation, vanquishing all evil and removing all sorrow and pain. Jesus came the first time in weakness and his glory was hidden; the second time he will come with power and great glory

(Luke 21:27). All will bow before him and worship. He will reign forever. Our redemption will be complete. If we are not ready, the Second Coming of Jesus could fill us with dread since he will come as our judge (Matt. 25: 31-46).

Instead, however, since his coming again will bring about the fullness of our salvation, it should impart to us an urgency to get ourselves ready: 'For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thess. 5:9). If we are eagerly watching and waiting, we can greet the Lord without fear. Yet we are often so engrossed in everything we have to do that we neither prepare for Jesus' return nor long for it!

How shall we best make ourselves ready? One way is to make Advent a time for extra prayer, focusing on the truths of his two comings. This will stir up our hearts. Another way is to make a good examination of conscience. This will show us where we need to amend our lives. We should not make Advent a time of penance. Instead, it should be a season of expectancy and hope as we joyfully wait and watch for the Lord's coming. 'Come, Lord Jesus!' (Rev. 22:20)

Jeremiah 33:14-16 • Psalm 24(25):4-5, 8-10, 14

1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 • Luke 21:25-28, 34-36



Jesus was amazed at the centurion's faith. Nowhere in Israel had he found such faith as in this Gentile, a representative of a hated foreign oppressor. What was it in the centurion's behaviour that so impressed the Lord? The disposition with which he approached Jesus can be summed up in two words: faith and humility. He had complete confidence in Jesus' ability to heal his servant, and he was so humble that he did not consider himself worthy to have Jesus come into his house.

These two attitudes are also the feelings with which we should approach Jesus during the season of Advent. We need to be humble enough to see our weakness and neediness, and we need to have complete faith in Jesus to heal us and cleanse us from our sins. So perfectly do the centurion's words sum up the way we should approach Jesus that they have been incorporated into the liturgy of the Mass. We say them just before our most important encounter with Christ, our reception of his body and blood. Advent is a time when we prepare for the coming of Christ into our lives in a special way, and we can take these words to heart as we begin this season.

What did the centurion see in Jesus that gave him faith, when many of the Jewish leaders were not open to Jesus' message? He was a man in authority and recognized Jesus' absolute authority over sickness and evil. But this was not just his own shrewdness: only the work of God's grace in his heart could have brought him to such a position in faith. The same is true for us. Only God can bring us to see who Jesus really is and our need for him, and we have to be open to his work within us.

If we approach Jesus with faith and humility this Advent, inviting him into our lives, we shall find that he is able to work powerfully within us and give us more than we expected. By his cross and resurrection he has conquered sin and death: he is the Lord, he is the one who only has to say the word and we shall be healed. Let us be expectant that he will do great things for us in the coming weeks.

Lord Jesus, we are not worthy to receive you but we know that if you say the word we shall be healed. Show us our need for you this Advent, and give us faith in your power to work within us and bless us abundantly.

Isaiah 2:1-5 • Psalm 121(122):1-9
Matthew 8:5-11



Lord, so many of your teachings contain a paradox. The last will be first, those who give up their lives for you will find it, and the mysteries of the kingdom are hidden from the learned and revealed to mere children. In a way, your whole life on earth was a paradox when viewed from a worldly perspective. You, the King of Glory, coming to your kingdom as a helpless baby in poverty. The Lord of the universe crucified to redeem the sin of ungrateful humanity. God's only Son, giving his life freely in exchange for the lives of those enslaved by sin. Goodness and obedience victorious over violence and evil.

How can this be? It seems so strange, that everything so familiar in the world order has to be turned upside down. The things that we esteem in our daily lives, like wealth, learning and power, are in fact completely worthless in the eternal kingdom. You pointed out this very thing to us, in the parable of the man who built bigger and bigger barns to house his worldly goods and yet found them overnight to be useless to him.

No wonder, then, that you were filled with the joy when you saw the disciples returning to you after you had sent them out to preach your

word of truth, and they had found that even the demons submitted to them. For you saw the whole panorama of the Father's plan, that the evil vein that ran through humankind from the fall was to be overthrown. The perversity of the evil one was to be exposed, and the chains of sin and guilt were to be released. The prodigal sons and daughters were to be restored to the arms of their loving Father. And, Lord, it is marvellous that even though our society is still governed by strength and selfishness, your eternal kingdom is built on love. And the timeless mysteries of the knowledge of God are made accessible to all who love God.

What love must have passed between you and the Father, when you saw the perfection of his plan and he saw his beloved Son in the process of its fulfilment! And you love us so much, in our sinfulness, our apathy and our rebelliousness, that you want us to be included in your eternal kingdom!

Lord, fill me with the knowledge of your love for me. May that love kindle in me a longing to serve you in your kingdom.

Isaiah 11:1-10 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17
Luke 10:21-24



In the feeding of the four thousand we see something of Jesus and his concern for us. Many people in our age, even many Christians, are uncomfortable with the idea of miracles, and try to explain away the miracles in the Gospels. However, both scripture and the teaching of the Church are clear that Jesus did work miracles, and the evangelist says clearly that Jesus multiplied the food to feed four thousand people.

Jesus had been teaching the people before this miracle, so we can see that he was concerned with both their spiritual and physical needs. The miracle sprang from his compassion for the crowds, and we can be sure he has the same concern for us. But the feeding of the multitude has a deeper meaning than just giving them bread – it symbolizes Jesus giving himself to feed us in the Eucharist, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: 'The miracles of the multiplication of loaves, when the Lord says the blessing, breaks and distributes the loaves though his disciples to feed the multitude, prefigure the superabundance of this unique bread of his Eucharist' (CCC 1335).

Today in the West, though we are materially richer than ever before, there is a great spiritual hunger and impoverishment. Many are empty and lonely, but do not know the remedy. Jesus longs to feed all people with himself: the cure for all our neediness and hunger is growing closer to Jesus through prayer, reading scripture and receiving the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharist above all that we receive Jesus into ourselves. In this Advent season, when we are eagerly awaiting the coming of the Lord, let us try to receive the sacrament with a new awareness of the wonderful gift it is to us.

The baskets of scraps taken up at the end show that Jesus provided more than enough for the crowd. He longs to pour out abundant life on us if only we see our neediness and turn to him in prayer. We can also see in this miracle a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, when we shall be fed by the Lord for all eternity.

Lord Jesus, you are a compassionate Lord who cares for our needs. This Advent, come to us and feed us with yourself, for you are the only food that can satisfy our hungry hearts.

Isaiah 25:6-10 • Psalm 22(23)

Matthew 15:29-37



Today's Gospel is the ending of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He warns his listeners that it is not enough just to hear his words – it is also necessary to put them into practice. Most people admire Jesus moral teachings, but not many attempt to put them into practice. They can easily remain just beautiful ideals that have no significance in our actual daily living,

Jesus emphasises the importance of the point he is making by a parable about wise and foolish builders. The wise man builds his house on the rock, but the foolish man builds on sand. When the storms come, as they must for all of us, the foolish man's house is washed away, while the wise man's remains standing. What does it mean to build in such a way that we can withstand all the difficulties and suffering of life?

The essence is to build on a firm foundation. All of us try to base our lives and our security on something: it may be our work, money, possessions or family. These may be good things, but they are not sufficient foundations to sustain us in trouble. Jesus is the only true, firm foundation for our lives.

To base our lives on him we must carry out his commandments. Religious knowledge is not enough: it is no good being an expert in theology if we are not trying to follow the Lord.

To base our lives on him we need to repent of our sins, put our faith in Jesus and ask him to pour out his Spirit into our hearts. We need to pray regularly, read scripture and receive the sacraments. Only so can we receive the grace to do the will of God. The commands of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are impossible for us to fulfil by our own strength; but the more we allow the Lord to work in us, the more his Spirit will guide us in what to do and give us the power to do it. If we are doing these things, taking practical steps to come closer to Jesus and sincerely trying to base our lives on him, we shall have the strength to face trials and sufferings. We shall not be protected from difficulties, but if we are looking to the Lord he will help us in all our troubles, and they will not overcome us.

Lord Jesus, you are the only true, firm foundation for our lives. May we be not only hearers of your words, but those who put them into practice, for then our lives will be founded on rock.

Isaiah 26:1-6 • Psalm 117(118):1, 8-9, 19-21, 25-27

Matthew 7:21, 24-27



Two blind men followed Jesus as he went on his way, calling out, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David' (Matt. 9:27). The title they used shows that they had faith in Jesus as the Messiah. However, Jesus did not respond at once, but waited until they came to him in the house where he was. Then he asked them if they believed that he was able to heal them: when they said they did, he healed them.

The story illustrates truths about our relationships with God. Like the two blind men, we have to see our own need for healing and call out to God for help. This is something that is not always easy for us, as we like to think we are not in need of help, and the world encourages us to be independent and stand-up for ourselves. We also have to be persistent: the blind men could have given up when Jesus seemed to ignore them, but instead they followed him into the house.

Jesus asks us the same question that he asked the blind men: 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' (Matt. 9:28). Faith is the vehicle through which we encounter the living Lord, and throughout the Gospels Jesus makes it clear that faith is necessary for people to receive his healing.

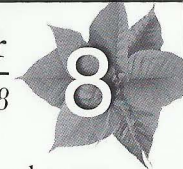
Today and every day we can come before the Lord asking him to show us our neediness and increase our faith in his healing power. The more we see our need, the more fervently we shall ask Jesus to have mercy on us. We should not have low expectation of what God can do for us, but believe that with faith all things are possible. There is no problem or suffering in our lives that is too great for God to heal.

In this holy time of Advent we can deepen our faith and confidence in God's love and goodness. We can pray that he will set us free from our own blindness. We may be blind to many things in our lives: to our own sin, to the suffering of others, to the glory of Jesus, to the work of the Spirit, to the many blessing and graces we have already received from the Lord. As the Lord touches our lives more and more deeply, our eyes will be opened in these and other areas of blindness, and our tongues will be set free to sing the praise of our great God and Saviour.

Lord Jesus, we believe that you are able to heal us. As you once had mercy on the blind and dumb, open our eyes to see you more clearly, and fill our hearts with words of praise.

Isaiah 29:17-24 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14

Matthew 9:27-31



Every relationship has its own measure of drama – moments of loyalty and distrust, uncertainty and security, rejection and reconciliation. In the great drama of creation, God our Father was generous and loving, but man and woman responded with an ingratitude and distrust that left humanity in a sullen state of gloom that characterizes a life of disobedience and sin. An agonizing question lurked in the human heart. Did God still care for his people? God's resounding 'Yes' broke forth in the Annunciation.

The Virgin's name was Mary – one of the chosen people, growing up in the small, remote village of Nazareth. The angel came to her, assured her of God's grace and favour, and presented her with the new plan of salvation – by the power of the Holy Spirit the child to be born of her flesh was to be the Son of God. God was coming to save his people by becoming flesh. 'How can this be?' she asked. Mary's inner conflict was a genuinely human reaction. God would do this if she trusted and believed. What was Mary to do?

The early Fathers of the Church saw this moment as a time of hushed silence and hopeful anticipation in heaven. Could the

prison of disobedience be broken open by Mary's obedient surrender and trust? All creation waited for an answer. Mary offered herself as the handmaid of the Lord and allowed God's deepest desire to be made flesh in her. The holiness of God met human fragility and in the person of her son we are for ever bonded by grace to God.

In the thirteenth century Duns Scotus, a Franciscan friar in Oxford expressed the mystery of Mary's immaculate beginning. 'She was redeemed by way of being preserved from sin. Mary remains highly favoured, yet stands in unity with each human person needing the saving work of her son. She is a model of what it means to be a Christian. When we find it hard to trust God, Mary shows the way forward – obedience to him brings new, divine life to ourselves and others.' Let us listen to the word of God, actively seek out his plan and fan our desire to let him live in us and transform us. If we are faithful the world will know that God still loves his people.

Mary, I love you as the one who trusted the word of God and yielded your whole person to the plan of our eternal Father.

Genesis 3:9-15, 20 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12 • Luke 1:26-38

Luke carefully sets the historical scene at the start of John the Baptist's ministry. Pontius Pilate, Herod and his sons, and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas all failed to respond to God's word and its messengers. None of them welcomed Jesus; some were implicated in his death. Yet it was precisely into this unwelcoming world that God sent John the Baptist to inaugurate an age of mercy and salvation. God saves his people, despite their perversity and hardness of heart. God has the last word, not man.

John's mission was to prepare the way of the Lord by 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Luke 3:3). John was a bridge who brought people to Jesus and his kingdom. He demanded from them both repentance and a renewal of their lives. He prepared their hearts to receive Jesus and his gospel.

The main emphases of John's preaching – repentance, change and renewal – still remain the way to Jesus and his kingdom. His message invites us, as individuals, to take on the same spirit of repentance, change and renewal:

'Man is the first agent of all social and historical change, but to be able to carry out this role he himself must be renewed in Christ, in the Holy Spirit. This is a direction that holds great promise for the future of the Church'. (Pope John Paul II)

The message of repentance and renewal always speaks powerfully to the human heart, for it offers the possibility of forgiveness and a release from a burden, as well as the promise of healing, change and a new start. Into our world of sin, failure and broken promises, the Lord's word still comes with conviction and power, as it did in the time of John the Baptist, to set us free and save us. The gospel of mercy invites us into a new time of grace.

During Advent God's word challenges us to repent and be renewed: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight... the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth' (Luke 3:4-5). As we respond with sincerity, we shall 'put on the robe of righteousness from God' (Baruch 5:2).

Lord, I come before you with a humble and contrite heart.

*Baruch 5:1-9 • Psalm 125(126)
Philippians 1:3-6, 8-11 • Luke 3:1-6*

Luke gives us a graphic account of one of Jesus' healings. He describes the crowds around the house where Jesus was, the men climbing on the roof and letting their friend down, Jesus' debate with the Pharisees, and his dramatic command to the paralysed man to get up and walk.

The paralytic's friends must have had great faith in Jesus, since they were determined enough not to be put off by obstacles. If they had not been sure that Jesus could help, they would not have taken so much trouble to get to him. Jesus was impressed by their faith and persistence. However, his first words may surprise us: instead of telling the man he was physically healed, he told him his sins were forgiven. Jesus knew that this man needed forgiveness even more than physical healing. However, he did not ignore the physical illness: when the Pharisees challenged him, he told the man to get up and walk. Anyone can say the words 'Your sins are forgiven', but only someone with authority from God can tell a paralysed man to get up and walk.

We are as much in need of healing as the paralytic, even though our needs may not be so obvious. Jesus wants to bring us all healing and forgiveness, but we have to

approach him in faith and ask. In our case, too, our greatest need is to have our sins forgiven, and Jesus will not turn us away if we turn to him with repentant hearts. Like the paralytic's friends, we may have to show the determination to overcome obstacles, but if we understand our need for Jesus nothing will keep us from him.

The crowds were amazed by the miracle and gave praise to God. Familiarity with the gospel stories can lead us to lose our sense of wonder at these miracles. In this holy season of Advent we can pray that we may have something of the feeling of these crowds as we ponder the great works of God. It is a wonderful miracle that we can turn to God and have our sins forgiven! Let us pray that we may be filled with excitement that Jesus has come into the world to save and heal, driving away darkness and bringing peace to our hearts. We can see remarkable miracles in our lives as we come before him in prayer.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for coming into the world to save sinners. This Advent, may we know more deeply the forgiveness of our sins and rejoice in your healing presence.

*Isaiah 35:1-10 • Psalm 84(85): 9-14
Luke 5:17-26*



Sheep do not enjoy the reputation of being the brightest members of the animal kingdom. Rather, we imagine them to be docile and foolish. Nevertheless, modern day shepherds say that they recognize different personalities amongst a flock, and whilst instinct keeps the flock together, it is not uncommon for one to wander away into danger, out of ignorance or waywardness. We may thus see how apposite is the image that Jesus has chosen, for the latter characteristics provide an obvious comparison with ourselves!

Jesus' parable used a scenario familiar to his listeners in the first century Palestine. What was revolutionary was the message of the parable, that God has such love and care for each member of this people that he takes the initiative to seek out the lost, and is prepared to take risks. Some might say that to leave the ninety-nine was to take an excessive risk, but it underlines the overwhelming concern that God has for even one who is lost. And each one of us may at times be counted among the lost. We may have heard this parable many times, perhaps since early childhood, and we may therefore be in danger of failing to appreciate the power of its message.

It is nothing short of outrageous that God would love us in this way. It is clear that God's love for us has a passionate dimension which may only imperfectly be associated with human love. In the love of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, we see a love for us for which he was prepared to undergo the most extreme abasement, mockery and suffering. Truly, our God is a jealous God – jealous for our love in some small measure of return for his immense love for us.

Perhaps we may ask the Lord this Advent to give us deeper insight into his burning love for us. Let us put our trust in the depth of his compassion and forgiveness.

*Me Lord? Canst thou misspend
One word, misplace one look on me?
Call'st me thy love, thy Friend?
Canst this poor soul the object be
Of these love-glances, those life-kindling eyes?
What? I the centre of the arms' embraces?
Of all thy labour I the prize?
Love never mocks, truth never lies.
Oh how I quake: hope fear, fear hope displaces:
I would but cannot hope: such wondrous love amazes.
(Phineas Fletcher, 'The Divine Lover')*

Isaiah 40:1-11 • Psalm 95(96):1-3, 10-13

Matthew 18:12-14



Two African women boarded a train. Each one carried an enormous basket of goods on her head. On being seated, one woman laid her basket on the floor. The other woman continued to carry it on her head for the entire journey. The train journey ended. One woman, refreshed and rested, gladly lifted her burden and peacefully resumed her journey. The other woman, tired and disgruntled, wearily plodded along.

Jesus invites us to lay down our burdens and come to him for rest. The rest he offers is not only physical refreshment, but that inner lightness of heart that comes to one who has learned to trust him. Jesus recognises that life is often beset with stress, conflict and daily pressures. When he invites us to come to him he does not promise a magical formula. He means that he has come to us and welcomes us into friendship with him. When we let him speak to us in the scriptures, when we listen, when we know that he listens to us in prayer, then the solitude of pain is eased and the endless whirring of the mind is stilled. Like the wise woman on the train, we see how to leave our burden aside and gain a new perspective.

The problem may not got away, but we find new strength and courage. We create many of our own burdens when we are imprisoned in fear, resentment, anger and anxiety. The teaching of Jesus and his new law of love offer another kind of wisdom for life and free us from our own bondage. His healing presence in the sacrament of reconciliation softens our inner reactions and gives us peace and hope. When we come to Jesus in the Eucharist, he gives himself as heavenly food that satisfies the deepest, unspoken hungers of our heart. We learn to be united to him and to be like him in his gentleness and humility. Coming to Jesus refreshes our hearts and makes them like his.

Today's Gospel was St Francis de Sales' favourite one about Jesus. Constant reflection on this scripture shaped his character. In spite of many painful and difficult responsibilities he always maintained a peaceful disposition and very fruitful ministry.

*Lord Jesus, attract me to yourself,
teach me to be still before you, to
look upon your gentle, humble face.*

Isaiah 40:25-31 • Psalm 102:1-4,8,10

Matthew 11:28-30

When we celebrate Advent we are encouraged to recapture the ancient longing for, and promise of, the Messiah present in the Old covenant. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of this: 'By sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for this second coming' (CCC 524). Jesus' words about John the Baptist in today's Gospel give us the opportunity to reflect upon the distinction between the Old and the New Covenants, although what lies hidden under the letter of the Old Testament is what is revealed in the New: 'the mystery of Christ' (CCC 1094).

John the Baptist belonged to the age of the Old Covenant, anticipating the coming of Christ. Jesus identifies John as the prophet who is immediately the forerunner, fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi 3:1: 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee' (Matt. 11:10). John went before Jesus 'in the spirit and power of Elijah' (Luke 1:17), bearing witness to Jesus in his preaching, his baptism of repentance and especially through his martyrdom.

He was the greatest among the prophets and holy men of old, for he saw what they longed for and rejoiced in being 'friend of the bridegroom' (John 3:29). However, Jesus teaches us today that the least member of the Church has a higher privilege in Christ that John ever had. The Church is called the bride of Christ, and how much closer the bride is to the bridegroom than the friend can be! This gives us reason to rejoice and express our gratitude to God.

The kingdom of heaven established by the Christ is expressed in our lives each day through the choices we make. These choices are often difficult: they may involve resisting our own selfish desires, or forgiving others who wrong us, or may bring us into conflict with the world around us. This requires great inner fortitude, which the Holy Spirit imparts to us as we trust him. Living the Christian life requires courage and determination. God assures us of his help: 'Fear not, I will help you' (Isa. 41:13), and gives us all the equipment necessary for our flight (Eph. 6:10-20).

God our Father, we thank you for letting us see and know Jesus, for whom all the prophets and holy men of old longed.

Isaiah 41:13-20 • Psalm 144(145):1, 9-13

Matthew 11:11-15

Jesus addresses rather unpleasant qualities in our human nature – immaturity and contrariness. Contrariness is born of a mean-spirited and narrow approach to life and new situations: it breeds a tendency to resist new ideas, irrespective of the evidence, in order to hang on to the beliefs that we prefer. If we are in that frame of mind, we reject almost anything in order to avoid the discomfort of change. John the Baptist, a model of abstemious living and self-denial, had brought the news of the imminence of God's kingdom, foretold for centuries by the prophets. He did so in a sombre style, calling the people to repent, turn away from their sin and be baptized. But many, perhaps using the excuse of his appearance, preferred to believe he was possessed and could be ignored.

Although he proclaimed the inauguration of God's kingdom with the good news of salvation and was supported by the witness to his authority of his miracles, Jesus was also rejected. This time the excuse might have been that, as he had dined with the worst of sinners, he must be a drunkard and a poor judge of character.

The effect of this contrary thinking was to blind the crowd to the awesome events that were unfolding before them. God's great work of salvation, the fulfilment of all his familiar promises, was the dazzling fulcrum of creation and human history: but in the event their response amounted to 'O come, let us ignore him'! Small wonder, then, that there is a note of exasperation in Jesus' comparison of them with the wilful, contrary children who refuse to dance to the music of either joy or sorrow: they would play neither weddings nor funerals.

But we too can be immature and contrary, and we need to guard against this attitude of mind. We can, for example, choose to concern ourselves so completely with the domestic preparations for Christmas that we fail to appreciate what a momentous event it truly is and do not accept the abundant graces poured out by the Holy Spirit at this time. Today let us seek a new openness of heart and mind to the work of Holy Spirit in the world and within each of us as we approach the glorious celebration of the coming of our Lord and Saviour.

In this joyful season of Advent, open my mind to the wonder and glory of your incarnation.

Isaiah 48:17-19 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6

Matthew 11:16-19

The expectation that Elijah would return before the coming of the Messiah was based on the prophecy of Malachi: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes' (Mal. 4:5). That interpretation rested on the idea that the coming of the Messiah was the same event as the 'day of the Lord'. When speaking to John's followers earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus referred to John the Baptist as the greatest of all the prophets and identified him with Elijah: 'And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who is to come' (Matt. 11:14). For Jesus, therefore, Elijah and John were the same; his disciples accepted that view (Matt. 17:13).

But Jesus' main purpose in today's reading was to warn his followers that the wilful blindness and rejection that had led to the murder of John would also be turned against himself. This was very much in line with the history of God's relationship with his people. Time and again they had rejected, persecuted and sometimes killed the prophets he sent to bring them back into this covenant.

A similar fate awaited many of Jesus' disciples and many thousands of his followers since then. In our own day Christians who live in societies where freedom of belief is a reality might view persecution and martyrdom as an evil of the past, but it is a sobering fact that more Christians died for their faith in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* rightly acclaims those who have not withheld their lives in serving the Lord:

The Church has painstakingly collected the records of those who persevered to the end in witnessing to their faith. These are the acts of martyrs. They form archives of truth written in letters of blood. (CCC 2474) We may not be led to the martyr's crown but we are called to witness to the Lord and live life in the power of the Holy Spirit. In a world which largely rejects (sometimes violently) the teaching, example and life-giving presence of Jesus, we should expect, in our own lives, to encounter suffering and even persecution.

Holy Spirit of God, fill in the hollows of my weakness with your grace and strength, so that timidity and feebleness in times of trial do not overcome my desire to be a true witness for my Saviour.

Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4, 9-11 • Psalm 79(80):2-3, 15-19

Matthew 17:10-13

Today's Gospel contains the heart of John the Baptist's preaching. His message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord resonated with the crowds who flocked to see him. Just as it stirred his hearers to long for the coming Messiah, so it moves us to worship. Jesus said of John, 'among those born of women there has arisen no one greater' (Matt. 11:11). The effect of John's holiness on the crowds can be seen in the response even in hardened soldiers and cunning tax-collectors.

We might think that John had cause to be humbly satisfied at the success of his mission – what more could be asked for than genuine repentance and new-found faith? But John stressed that he was only the messenger sent ahead of the Messiah – his baptism in water was to be surpassed by a new baptism. John came to understand that the promised Messiah was at hand, who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29), the Son of God (John 1:34) who would 'baptize... with the Holy Spirit and with Fire' (Luke 3:16).

Water has a purifying role in the Old Testament. The law imposed many ritual washings before worship and the Pharisees baptized Gentile converts to symbolize the cleansing of their hearts and their joining to the people of Israel. John baptized people in the Jordan to symbolize their repentance, but he knew that something more than a symbol was needed to rescue humankind – they needed to be immersed in the Spirit of God.

Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit. This gift from the Father empowers us to respond to our call and vocation to live our life in the Spirit. Once more we are able to know God's love and to love God and others. We can press on each day in hope, knowing the Spirit will form the character of Jesus within us.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the gift of our baptism. Give us a deeper grasp of the glorious gift we have received. Help us to understand the gift of your Spirit as John did. May we be filled with hope so that, like John, we will tell others of this good news of new life.

Zephaniah 3:14-18 • Isaiah 12:2-6

Philippians 4:4-7 • Luke 3:10-18

O Wisdom, you come forth from the mouth of the Most High. You fill the universe and hold all things together in a strong yet gentle manner. O come to teach us the way of the truth.

A family story may not appear a very interesting way to begin the most amazing story ever told. The litany of the familiar and obscure names from the Old Testament can be a bit of a turn-off. Most of us have heard of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but what about Jehoshaphat, Jotham and Jeconiah! Matthew was writing specifically for Jewish believers and was especially keen to show how Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. He wanted to illustrate how Jesus' Jewish pedigree was in fact second to none – Jesus was both a child of Abraham and a true son of David.

Matthew's readers would have been both comforted and shocked by his genealogy. Comforted because of Jesus' obvious Jewish roots, but shocked by the inclusion of women (not a done thing in the genealogies of the time). To add insult to injury, the women were rather interesting characters. Tamar, for example, had disguised herself as a shrine prostitute. Then there is Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho

whose life was spared because she provided a safe house for Joshua's spies. The inclusion of Bathsheba (who committed adultery with King David) and Ruth (an alien) made Matthew's genealogy rather racy, to say the least.

Matthew was not trying to provoke, but wanted to establish from the start a profound truth about Jesus, namely that Jesus came to identify with us in our sinfulness and weakness. Although perfect himself, he shared our human nature, becoming like us in every way except sin. His righteousness was revealed not through being aloof to our predicament but in uniting himself to our fallen humanity. Through his incarnation he joined the human family and in his flesh the very Word of God became one of us.

In Advent we can grow in our knowledge and understanding of the One who humbled himself by becoming one of us. Jesus witnesses to a wonderful aspect of holiness, which is its embrace, love and acceptance of sinners.

Lord Jesus Christ, during Advent fill me through a new joy with of a new understanding of the meaning of your incarnation.

Genesis 49:2, 8-10 • Psalm 71(72):1-4, 7-8, 17

Matthew 1:1-17

O Adonai and leader of Israel, you appeared to Moses in a burning bush and you gave him the law of Sinai. O come and save us with your mighty power.

Lord, it is for your own wisdom and counsel that I now fall on my knees and pray. Help me to think about the circumstances that I now find myself in, so I may act justly.'

'My thoughts have been close to despair, I have run through so many scenarios in my mind, and it's so difficult for me to submit my emotions to your wisdom. But I don't know what to do, having found today that Mary is pregnant.'

'To whom can I turn, from whom can I seek counsel without causing scandal? I can't discuss my suspicions with the synagogue, for that would be to sentence Mary to death. I can't bring myself to be separated from Mary, for that too would seem like death.'

'I will leave Mary to be judged by you alone, and will commend her life and her child to you, Lord. I will, for my part, quietly seek a divorce, bearing heavily the weight of responsibility for what has happened. Grant that I may sleep in peace if this be your will, Lord.'

'Joseph, Son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.' (Matt. 1:20)

'What words are those that recognize so piercingly the turmoil of my heart that seeks to settle the storm, to cast out fear? They are spoken as from a dear friend. This consolation must come from God alone, for who else knows the deliberations of my heart? Yet this truth far exceeds my imagination, no reasoning on earth could have dared to think what has been unveiled. God with us, the saviour of my people, is conceived in the womb of Mary! Salvation has come, so quietly, so unexpectedly, whilst so eagerly desired. O Lord, what is it that you have entrusted in me? May my hands and my heart serve as yours, may my thoughts never be separated from your wisdom and counsel as I do what you command.' (Our writer imagines the anguished and heartfelt prayer of St Joseph as he wrestles with the news of Mary's pregnancy)

Lord, may I learn from the example of St Joseph, who in humility submitted his thoughts to you, and waited upon your counsel.

Jeremiah 23:5-8 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 12-13, 18-19

Matthew 1:18-24

O Stock of Jesse, you stand as a signal for the nations; kings fall silent before you whom the peoples acclaim. O come to deliver us, and do not delay.

Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were deeply devout Jews, both descended from the priestly line of Aaron. The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions and each division served in the temple for two weeks in the year: one of the most privileged responsibilities was to offer the morning and evening incense in the holy place in the temple, the closest any priest could come to the Holy of Holies, where God was present. It was rare to be chosen more than once a lifetime for this service, so we can imagine Zechariah's joy and awe when he was selected.

What Zechariah could not have expected was the archangel Gabriel to appear to him and announce the miraculous news that he was to have a son, John, who would lead a revival in Israel to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah. But Zechariah was unable to accept the news without further proof: perhaps his prolonged sadness over being childless and the years of seemingly unanswered prayer had eroded his faith so that, though he was

devoted in his service, he could not believe God would act powerfully here and now.

Gabriel rebuked him for his unbelief, but punishment of becoming dumb turned into blessing. The next nine months of his life were transformed: the enforced silence must have helped him, together with Elizabeth, to ponder on the angel's message, to pray, to read the scriptures with fresh faith and excitement concerning the promised Messiah and to come to understand God's plan of salvation.

We can often identify with Zechariah's sense of duty but lack of expectancy in his spiritual life. We may, like him, have a long-standing disappointment to contend with, perhaps ill-health and redundancy or family difficulties. The Spirit wants to do the same work in us as he did in Zechariah's life: as we set aside time to pray, to read scripture and celebrate the sacraments, then the Holy Spirit will give us understanding so that God's word comes to life for us. This inner conviction will set our hearts on fire and give us courage to seek out what the Spirit is calling us to do to build God's kingdom here and now.

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25 • Psalm 70(71):3-6, 16-17

Luke 1:5-25

O Key of David and sceptre of Israel, what you open no one else can close again; what you close no one can open. O come to lead the captive from prison; free those who sit in the darkness and in the shadow of death.

God chose a young and innocent virgin to reveal the momentous plan of our salvation. This was a sublime and unique moment. So much depended upon the consent of this young woman. God never forces or coerces: he willed that Mary should consent freely and willingly to his plan of salvation. It is important that we should grasp that this moment was holy and precious. The embrace of the divine will by Mary allowed the plan of salvation to unfold and develop – in her womb!

The Holy Spirit can give us a new insight and understanding into the glory and beauty of Mary's 'Yes' to God. Her witness of graceful co-operation and participation in God's plan of salvation serves as an example and model. The Church has always had a profound understanding of the importance of Mary in co-operating with God in his plan of salvation – this was expressed beautifully and movingly by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council:

'The Father of mercies willed that the incarnation should be preceded by assent on the part of the predestined mother, so that just as a woman had share in bringing about death, so also a woman should contribute to life. This is pre-eminently true of the Mother of Jesus, who gave to the world the life that renews all things, and who was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role... Thus the daughter of Adam, Mary, consenting to the word of God, became Mother of Jesus. Committing herself wholeheartedly to God's saving will and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under and with him, serving the mystery of redemption by the grace of Almighty God.'

(Lumen Gentium 56)

Heavenly Father, I praise and rejoice in your plan of salvation. As Mary gave consent to your divine plan, empower me also with the same love and humility to pray 'let it be done according to your word'.

Isaiah 7:10-14 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Luke 1:26-38

O Rising Sun, you are the splendour of eternal light and the sun of justice. O come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

C.S. Lewis observed that joy is the serious business of heaven. In today's Gospel we see the infectious nature of true joy. Mary's haste to get to Elizabeth is a very moving and deeply human image. Good news has this effect on us – we want to share it at the earliest opportunity. Indeed, part of the fun of having good news is in sharing it with others. Mary's presence has an electric quality. The mere sound of her voice causes the babe in Elizabeth's womb to leap for joy, and Elizabeth herself is infused with God's Holy Spirit. Elizabeth can hardly contain herself as she expresses her sense of praise and blessing.

We are invited into the exciting drama of God's unfolding plan of salvation. The events occurred two thousand years ago, but during Advent we are invited to immerse our minds and hearts in the depth of the Christmas mystery. Like Mary we are called to carry Christ in our hearts so we can give birth to him in the world. Like Mary, as this glorious truth is grasped in

ever-increasing depth we shall find a joy welling up inside. A hallmark of one who is close to God and walking in fellowship with him is the possession of great joy.

We can't fabricate or manufacture this kind of joy (God knows we try to). Drugs, alcohol, possessions, worldly success have some power to give us a form of joy, but it is brief and passing. It leaves no lasting sense of well-being and in fact can leave a profound sense of disappointment. Joy is not an external quality but one that is forged inside us – deep within the recess of our hearts and minds. As we allow the Holy Spirit to help us probe and plumb the depth of his revelation unveiled in the Incarnation and expressed most perfectly through Jesus' death and resurrection, we shall discover and experience great joy. Its heavenly strain means that it can only be possessed by those who bow humbly before the mystery unfolding in front of us.

Lord Jesus, we rejoice that you were born as one of us. Like Mary, fill us with joy at the good news of your coming among us. Through your Holy Spirit, may we share this great joy with the world.

*Song of Songs 2:8-14 or Zephaniah 3:14-18
Psalm 32(33):2-3, 11-12, 20-21 • Luke 1:39-45*

O King whom all the peoples desire, you are the cornerstone which makes us all one. O come and save man whom you made from clay.

The Magnificat is Mary's prayer. Luke affords us a wonderful glimpse into the personality, indeed the very heart, of Mary – her lively awareness of God as both her Lord and Saviour; her humility and her own sense of poverty and nothingness; her bold awareness and proclamation of the wonderful things God had done for her and her acceptance of her role in God's plan of salvation. As we reflect and ponder on Mary's qualities we find we grow in our personal love for her. We realise that God not only chose her to be the mother of his Son, but has also given her to us as our mother and a model of the Christian life.

Mary, as a daughter of Israel, had a keen sense of the importance of God's people in his divine plan. Mary's prayer in the Magnificat is not her prayer alone but is also the prayer of Israel. We can discover the spirit of the Magnificat in numerous prayers in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 2:1-10; Pss. 34:1-3 and 98:1-3). In this sense Mary's prayer is not unique but rather reflects how the wisdom of

the Old Testament finds its fullest and most perfect expression in the events and circumstances of the New. God's unfolding purposes had been gathering momentum since the beginning of time. God had intended from the dawn of time that the Incarnation of his Son would bring healing and eternal life to the fallen and wounded human race. He chose Israel, his beloved people, to be the place where this momentous meeting between God and humankind would take place.

Israel was formed over many centuries. God and his people were bound by the ties of covenant love. Despite their sin and rebellion, Israel has remained God's chosen, special and beloved people. In Mary God found a woman who was a living embodiment of all that Israel had aspired to be – humble, receptive and obedient to the Lord of heaven and earth. Mary fulfils perfectly Israel's role as the place of welcome for the coming of God's Son, and her prayer today expresses beautifully her sense of being right at the heart of God's plan for her own life and his people.

Lord Jesus, put in my heart Mary's prayer of love and her gratitude. Grant me during Advent a glimpse into the mystery of the events unfolding before me in the liturgy.

*1 Samuel 1:24-28 • 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-8
Luke 1:46-56*

O Emmanuel, our King and Lawgiver, the Expected of the nations and their Savior. Come and save us, O Lord our God.

Part of the joy of good news is sharing it! Mary rushes to Elizabeth to relate her news. Her amazement and sheer wonder at being chosen must have consumed her as she journeyed to her cousin's home. The meeting between the two women is a touching scene. The sense of joy, anticipation and hope between Mary and Elizabeth is palpable – so much so that even the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps with joy. Elizabeth, unable to contain herself, proclaims with bold and confident assurance: 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!' (Luke 1:42)

This can be our prayer as we consider the mystery of the virgin birth and the glory of God's unfolding plan of salvation. We can be hopeful and expectant that the Holy Spirit wants to fill us with the same sense of joy, hope and confident assurance. This joy cannot be purchased, it cannot be

manufactured or fabricated, but it is born from within as we reflect on our salvation. So often we seek joy from that which is temporary, transient and fleeting – despite the sense of well-being and comfort we seek from external things, the joy they give does not last and can often leave us feeling empty. In contrast the joy of the Holy Spirit is secure, durable and lasting. God will convince us that his truths are not mere cold or sterile propositions but living truths which impart his life and power. It is as these truths are pondered that we can penetrate the mystery of the Incarnation. They impart a living joy which will strengthen us as we move through this busy and hectic season.

Heavenly Father, let my heart leap for joy as I rejoice in the events surrounding the Incarnation. Protect me from losing a sense of perspective and being overwhelmed by the detail of preparations. Lift my heart and mind up into the heavens so that I can know the joy and light of your salvation.

*Micah 5:1-4 • Psalm 79(80): 2-3, 15-19
Hebrews 10:5-10 • Luke 1:39-44*

Silence, so they say, is golden. It appears Zechariah discovered this during the nine months of Elizabeth's gestation. Zechariah, although upright and devout (Luke 1:6), displayed a resistance to God's plan. He asked what appears to be a reasonable question given his circumstances, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years' (Luke 1:18). It wasn't that his questioning was unreasonable: the problem was, it was almost too reasonable – his reason (God-given as it is) got the better of his faith.

The appearance of an archangel on a mission from God with a mandate about God's plan for us and our family would bolster the faith of most of us. Zechariah, it would seem, found it difficult to accept. However, the penalty of his silence bore great fruit and in the process gave the Church the Benedictus. The Syriac Church Father and poet Ephraem wrote, 'Fish are both conceived and born in the sea; if they dive deep, they escape those who would catch them. In luminous silence within the mind let prayer recollect itself, so as not to stray.'

Silence inspired the prayer of Zechariah. His insight into and understanding of God's plan of salvation grew and matured as he

grappled and wrestled with the events unfolding before his eyes. His eloquent expression of his son's ministry must have filled him with a deep sense of privilege. He captures in an inspired yet succinct way the very essence of the role of the Baptist in God's plan (Luke 1:76-79). It is clear that in the silence of the calm composure of his mind Zechariah understood. We too need to still our minds if we are to grow in our understanding of the Lord. Our minds naturally race and are easily distracted by the immediate demands that so easily impinge on us.

We can, like Zechariah, respond to God's call with questions: 'How can I find time to pray? I'm too busy at the moment.' As reasonable as this objection is, why don't we let our faith overwhelm our reason and carve out some time and space to be still and know the presence of the Lord, allow him to subdue the scattered thoughts of our minds? From the silence of Zechariah's heart came a song of praise: so too from the calm of our own minds let us ring out with heartfelt thanks a song of praise to our God.

Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel.

*2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16 • Psalm 88(89):2-5, 27, 29
Luke 1:67-79*



The birth of a child is an exciting event. We are familiar with that unspeakable sense of exhilaration when a child is born. Parents speak of 'walking on air', so great is their happiness. Mothers, exhausted and weary, witness to an infectious delight (no doubt a combination of joy and relief). Words fail to express this natural and very human joy.

God's plan of salvation is intricately linked with birth. God the Son created our world and entered it as one of us. He clothed himself in our humanity and was born of Mary, born under the law (Gal. 4:4). All our pride, our posturing, our thirst for self-importance are recognition and silenced as we ponder Jesus the Son of God as a needy and helpless baby, dependant for life upon his mother.

Today's Gospel presents St John's wisdom on this most sublime mystery. His piercing insight that God took upon himself the burden of our nature – with all its limitations and weaknesses – is a masterpiece of both praise and theology. All births are special. This birth, however, is the most special.

Despite embracing our humanity fully and totally, Jesus was nevertheless fully and totally divine. His humanity did not corrode his divinity nor his divinity overwhelm his humanity. He was like us in all things except sin. His brief life gave witness to how a child of God should live.

Today we can marvel at the incarnation, contemplate its glory, meditate on its beauty and emulate its humility. However, today we also celebrate our own birth. St John has penetrated the truth that we who receive him by believing in him are reborn. We have become a new creation, born not of human decision or human will but of God. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the regeneration of baptism we are born again and partake in the new humanity.

Lord Jesus, today I glory in a truly marvellous exchange. You, the Redeemer, came to complete your wonderful work. We through our sin had broken the bond that made us children of God. We needed to be reconciled and this needed a new branch, healthy and noble. I rejoice and praise you for your humility and love. May my heart give you glory and honour on this most holy of days.

Isaiah 52:7-10 • Psalm 97(98):1-6

Hebrews 1:1-6 • John 1:1-18



Today also, Christmas goes on exerting its salutary and bracing influence. I wish to venerate St Stephen together with you, as the Church honours him, the first Christian martyr, on the day after the Solemnity of the Nativity.

'Yesterday we celebrated the birth in time of our eternal King. Today we celebrate the glorious passion of one of his soldiers. Yesterday indeed, our king, vested in the noble robe of his flesh, came out from his royal dwelling in the womb of the virgin and deigned to visit the world. Today, one of his soldiers leaves the tent of his body and ascends in triumph into heaven.' These moving words are those of a saint of the ancient Church, St Fulgentius. They keep their meaning intact because they give not only the core of a relationship of liturgical continuity between the feast of the Nativity and that of the proto-martyr but also and above all a relationship of intrinsic linking in the order of sanctity and grace.

'Christ, King of history and redeemer of man, puts himself at the centre of that itinerary towards

perfection to which he calls every human being. We venerate St Stephen and imitate his example as the testifier for Christ he showed himself to be, with his spirited words, his concern in service to the poor, his constancy during his trial and, above all, with his heroic death. While we do so, we see that his figure is lit up and rendered giant-like in the light of his Lord and Master, whom he willed to follow as the supreme sacrifice. A valuable lesson comes from that for us. As we look at Stephen in the light of the Nativity, we ought to take up his example and teaching. We are called to live as children of God; we too shall be crowned as was Stephen above, in the homeland, if we are faithful.' (Pope John Paul II)

Love, indeed, is the source of all good things; it is an impregnable defence, and the way that leads to heaven. He who walks in love can neither go astray nor be afraid: love guides him, protects him, and brings him to his journey's end. (St Fulgentius of Ruspe)

Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59 • Psalm 30(31):3-8, 16-17

Matthew 10:17-22

‘St John, one of the great apostles of God, one of the great lords of the kingdom of God, one of those very rich in love, loving God and loved by him, the richest in love of those whom God loves. John, wealthy with such blessed riches, and rich with such blessed wealth. See, here is a soul that is wretched but Christian, poor and in need of those riches with which you are rich. Hungry I plead at the gate of your clemency, a beggar I ask alms of your rich store.

‘Out of that which is able to satisfy you and many without being diminished at least share with me as much as will enable me to live. Rich friend of God, grant to the soul of a poor servant of God who loves you from the wealthy store-room of your heart that which is little to you but great to me, easy to you, vital to me; give me alms that my Lord who has been pleased to enrich you in order to make many rich may deign through you to receive even this dying life.

‘My soul is poor, beloved of our Lord; I am forced to confess it and blush to do so. It is poor in the love of God in both ways – it loves God so much less than it ought, and it

has so much less of the love of God than it needs. Of course, I confess that on the one hand I am most unjust and on the other that God is just; in both ways I know myself to be very much wretched in the just judgement of God. St John, dear to Jesus Christ, my Lord, the servant of your friend begs you according to the name of his Lord, your beloved, to obtain for him that twofold love of God. Get for me, I beg you, grace so that I may be worthy to love him and be loved by him.

‘For surely, friend of God, if he loves us because of you, he will pay our mercy to us; and if we love him through you, he will repay that with grace. Surely, sir, if you turn him to loving us, you make us that much more your debtors, and if you bring us near to loving him, you yourself repay our debt. And surely, blessed John, however much you do to make him love others, there will be no less love for you; and whatever you do to make others love him, so much more you repay that debt. Then have mercy, sir, upon your suppliant, so that I may be indebted to you for so much good and you may restore to God a soul.’ (St Anselm)

1 John 1:1-4 • Psalm 96(97):1-2, 5-6, 11-12
John 20:2-8

It seems amazing that a powerful ruler felt so threatened by a tiny child, even if the latter was the infant King of the Jews. Herod's action described in today's reading was, however, characteristic. Herod the Great began his reign over Palestine in the year 37 BC. He was an athlete and a schemer, using the early years of his reign to eliminate anyone who might challenge his authority. He was very ambitious and directed new buildings and cultural improvements. His domestic life was stormy; he had ten wives and there was rivalry among his offspring. Herod's action would have resulted in the deaths of about twenty children and immense grief, as the words from the prophet Jeremiah express (v. 18).

This horrifying event in the shadow of joyful Nativity stories can lead us to consider these children as martyrs, as the Church asks us to do. They witnessed to Jesus by shedding of their blood, albeit silently and probably without ever knowing the infant Saviour in their midst. It was Herod's hatred of Jesus which caused the death of these children, so in a very real way they died so Jesus could live. Herod would never have imagined that Jesus would escape to safety by virtue of Joseph's complete

obedience to God's command in a dream.

Today's reading can also help us pray for all tragic ways in which power is abused in our world today, especially against children. Some examples are the illegal use of child labour in parts of the third world, child prostitution, physical and emotional neglect of children in our own country, and abortion.

Jesus leaves us in no doubt about his attitude to children: ‘...unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven...Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea....See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven’ (Matt. 18:3, 5, 6, 10). ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God’ (Luke 18:16).

Lord, we seek your mercy for all the harm inflicted on children in our world, in the past and in our own times. Amen.

1 John 1:5-2:2 • Psalm 123(124):2-8
Matthew 2:13-18

Simeon was a prophet. Devout and righteous, he was governed by the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit who comforted him, gave him revelation and moved him to act. He was docile and sensitive to the Spirit's leading and prompting. He knew immediately that the child of Mary and Joseph was the Messiah – the consolation of Israel. As a prophecy, his heart was attuned to the work of God in his generation: as God's plan unfolded his heart leaped in joy and adoration at the glory of God's wisdom and revelation. St Ambrose marvels at the work of God in Simeon:

Behold the just man, who is as it were shut up in the prison of this earthly body, desires to be set free that he may begin to be with Christ; for to be dissolved and to be with Christ is far more perfect. He then that desires to be free, let him come to Jerusalem, let him look for the Anointed of the Lord, let him receive into his hands the Word of God, and let him embrace it with the arms of his faith. Then let him be dismissed; as he sees not death who has looked upon life.

Simeon is a wonderful model for us as one who was truly governed by God's Holy Spirit. We, like him, are called to learn to live so as to respond to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the Son and to deepen within us a longing for his return – the comfort and the consolation of the Church. Simeon was able to be an instrument of prophecy because he was not dominated by his own thoughts and ideas about the Messiah. The humility and obscurity of Jesus' coming did not offend him and he embraced God's revelation with a glad and willing heart. A prophet is concerned with the plans and purposes of God, willing and disposed to be taught by the Holy Spirit. Every prophet desires to know what God is saying to his or her generation and is eager to usher in the kingdom of heaven. The cry and prayer of the prophet in this, the age of the Church, is: 'Come, Lord Jesus, Come!'

Heavenly Father, create in me the heart of a prophet. Grant me a spirit of humility and service and make me sensitive and docile to your guidance and leading. Make me, like your servant Simeon, prepare and long for your coming.

*1 John 2:3-11 • Psalm 95(96):1-6 • Luke 2:22-35
(In England only: Col 1:24-29 • Ps 22(23)
Lk 22:24-30 or Mt 10:28-33)*

Losing a child in a crowd is a parental nightmare! A combination of panic, guilt and desperation makes it a horrifying experience. Mary and Joseph, like all parents, would have struggled hard to keep their imagination and anxiety in check throughout their frantic and fretful search for Jesus. Mary expresses relief, frustration and love when she finds him in the temple after a three-day search: 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously' (Luke 2:48).

This incident allows us to glean that the Holy Family had to face the same kind of pressures that every family faces. The environment in which we have been raised and in which we raise our children is essential in our formation and development. A family is a very human environment – the joy, the pain, the drama and the ordinary nature of our lives are lived within its confines. God chose to mould and form his Son within the environment and culture of a family: this reveals how highly God considers the family as a place of holiness, love and formation.

Today, the hope and fervent desire of the Church is that every human family may be permeated by the mystery of the Holy Family, in which God became man. This mystery offers many points for reflection: Christ spent his childhood and youth with his family, thus showing us that God's greatest work is carried out within the family; he wrought our redemption and salvation in the context of his family life; and it is thanks to it that all of us are saved. This is why today's feast is of such universal significance. The light of the Holy Family shines out to anywhere where there is a human family – which is in fact everywhere.

Lord God, you chose to form and mould your beloved Son within a human family. Grant me the insight and understanding to grasp that each human family is a domestic church. Teach me to nurture and cultivate within my own family an obedience to your commandments, a love for your Church and a devotion to your beloved Son.

*1 Samuel 1:20-28 or Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6, 12-14
Psalm 83(84):2-6, 9-10 or Psalm 127(128):1-5
1 John 3:1-2, 21-24 or Colossians 3:12-21 • Luke 2:41-52*

The most profound questions of the human heart speak to each one of us. What is the purpose of my existence? What happens after death? Why does suffering seem cruel and arbitrary? Does God care? Is there eternal life? Such questions strike at the heart of our being and demand an answer. The key to the mystery of life and death is revealed in the revelation that in the beginning was the Word. The Word was God and through the Word everything was created and has its being. The very pulse of life has its source in the Word who gives both life and light to the world.

The wonder, beauty and glory of Christian revelation is that the Word broke into human history as a human being. The eternal entered into time. The first born clothed himself with our frail humanity. The meaning, purpose and goal of our existence were revealed. God became man in order that we might be raised to a new and glorious life, enjoying and partaking in the divine life.

The truth of the Incarnation liberates us from despair and hopelessness. Its light illuminates

the darkness. Our lasting inheritance is that through and in Christ we have become children of God. In this truth we stand with dignity, joy, confidence and hope. As we contemplate and consider the beauty and wonder of the Incarnation, our faith is strengthened and our hope renewed. On the eve of a new year it is good both to look back and to look forward. We can look back in thanks and look forward in hope. We can rejoice in God's goodness and grace to us and thank him for all the circumstances and events that unfolded in 2012. October 2012 – November 2013 has been dedicated as a Year of Faith. We can be expectant and hopeful that we shall discover and plumb new depths of God's grace and wisdom with the help and power of the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father, your wonderful plan of salvation, the mystery hidden in ages past, has now been revealed in all its splendour and truth. Your Son, the Word, the Light and the Life, entered into human history and rescued us from the grip of sin, Satan and death.

*1 John 2:18-21 • Psalm 95(96):1-2, 11-13
John 1:1-18*
