

Advent is a season of light. It is a time in which the light of Christ shines forth into our lives and onto our world, and we receive a great gift: 'to us a child is born, to us a Son is given' (Isa. 9:6). In John's Gospel, Christ says of himself: 'I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness' (John 12:46).

The season of Advent has its roots in the pagan festival of the winter solstice. The word 'solstice' is derived from the Latin *sol* (sun) and *sistere* (to stand still). The pagan world hungered for light and worshipped the sun god *Sol Invictus*, who was invoked each day at sunrise. As bright and as powerful as the sun is, we know it cannot cast its light on the greatest mysteries of our existence or penetrate the darkness of sin and death. The prophet Isaiah declared hundreds of years before the birth of Christ: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined' (Isa. 9:2). Advent then is an opportunity for us to come into this light, see with the light of Christ and walk our pilgrim way such that we let our light shine.

Advent literally means 'coming' and the Church has always sought to remind us during this holy season of the three comings of Christ: his first at his birth, his second at his return to earth in glory, and his third when he comes into each of our lives. The work of the Spirit in our lives is twofold: he compels us to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father, and he also moves us to pray with heartfelt longing, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

Jesus is the meaning of Christmas. He is the meaning of human existence. The baby born in the stable, in poverty and helplessness as God made man, is our light and hope. We lift up our hearts in praise and thanksgiving for Jesus who is the Light of the World, the light which darkness could not extinguish or overcome.

Lord Jesus, in this Advent season we invite your light into our lives and come ourselves into the light so that by the grace of repentance and a deeper conversion we may walk as children of the light.

Isaiah 2:1-5 • Psalm 121(122):1-9
Romans 13:11-14 • Matthew 24:37-44

Soldiers of any era are tough, disciplined and tested men. They are intimidating and know how to intimidate. A Roman centurion in Jesus' day would have been a force to reckon with. A commander of one hundred men, he would have been battle weary, battle scarred and a killing agent for the highly effective Roman army. How ironic, then, that in sharp contrast to this, in today's Gospel, in a remarkably tender moment, we discover a man with a huge heart, great humility and profound faith.

The centurion, who was probably Syrian, would have been stationed at the military garrison in Capernaum. Interestingly, Luke depicts him communicating with the Lord through intermediaries whereas in Matthew's account he engages with him directly. What is striking throughout is his humility and faith. He refers to Jesus as Lord (v. 8) and is respectful of the Jewish purification ritual (a Jew defiled himself by entering the house of a Gentile). And, furthermore, as a military man he knows the force of a verbal command and believes that merely one word from Jesus is powerful enough to heal his suffering servant. Jesus is truly astonished by his faith, in effect

saying, 'This is what faith looks like and I have yet to find this quality of faith among God's own chosen people.'

So powerful an incident was this in Jesus' life that even today, thousands of years later, it is incorporated into the Eucharist as an essential prayer and response. In the new missal we say, 'Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.'

What do we learn from this incredible witness of faith? We learn that at the heart of faith is humility. It is as if faith and humility are bedfellows: the person of faith is humble; the humble have faith. There is a way in which today meekness, humility and faith are seen as weaknesses. The world invites us to be proud, arrogant and unbelieving. But this is an illusion because in humility, meekness and faith we discover who we really are and who God really is. Humility is, in fact, one of the major ingredients of faith. As T.S. Eliot said: 'The only wisdom that we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility.'

'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.'

Isaiah 4:2-6 • Psalm 121(122):1-9
Matthew 8:5-11

What gives you joy? Where does your joy come from? Can we live without joy? Joy is a fruit or outcome of happiness and what makes us happy gives us joy. The things that bring us joy and happiness are common to us all: it could be a holiday, more money, good health or a delicious meal. Today we discover what gave Jesus joy. Consider this, if you will: our faith teaches us that Jesus was the perfect human being – sinless, holy, truly human, fully alive. It is, then, vital that we discover what it was that gave him joy.

Jesus' joy and happiness came from his disciples receiving divine revelation from his heavenly Father into the mysteries of faith. There are, of course, some truths for which divine revelation is not required. For example, Scripture tells us that the beauty, glory and wonder of the created world are enough to convince us of the existence of God: 'Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made' (Rom. 1:20). We can know God through the God-given faculties of our human reason.

There are other truths, however, for which we need the gift or grace of revelation. Understanding of them cannot come from mere 'flesh and blood' because we do not have the faculties to grasp these mysteries. This revelation is the gift of the Father (Matt. 16:17). It was this gift poured out upon his disciples that gave Jesus an inexpressible and glorious joy. The disciples were in some way having a foretaste of God. St Basil the Great put it like this: 'When we contemplate the blessings of faith even now, as if gazing at a reflection in a mirror, it is as if we already possessed the wonderful things which our faith assures us we shall one day enjoy.' Jesus delighted and rejoiced in the gift of revelation poured out upon his disciples. In the same way, heaven not only rejoices when we repent but when we too receive God's lavish and abundant gift of insight and light into the truths of our faith.

Lord Jesus, lead me by the hand into the grace of revelation, so that I may receive greater insight into the mystery of God made man in the crib and on the cross, and in so doing come to know the deep joy of Christ.

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

Matthew has two accounts of Jesus feeding a huge crowd of people (see also 14:13-21). The two accounts, whilst similar on the major detail (the feeding of a multitude), differ on the minor. Were there seven or five loaves? Were there seven or twelve baskets of leftovers? And precisely how many people were present – was it 4,000 or 5,000? Why are there two accounts of the same miracle?

Scholars are not entirely sure but it is likely that the two accounts record the same event. The Gospel stories, whilst entirely authentic eyewitness accounts, were passed down through an oral tradition and, rather like first-hand witness accounts of anything (an accident, a historical event), some of the detail gets lost in this process. What is not in doubt is that this was a miracle in which Jesus miraculously multiplied bread and fish in order to feed a multitude of hungry people. Rather like the changing of water into wine at Cana (John 2), the feeding of the multitudes highlights God's care and concern for our physical as well as spiritual needs.

Did this miracle happen? Or was it, as some Scripture scholars

suggest, a miracle of sharing in which, overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus and his witness of love and service, a huge crowd of hungry and harassed people decided to share their bread and fish with each other?

Thankfully the Church has always resisted any attempt to give a rational explanation of Jesus' miracles. The Evangelists are authentic and reliable witnesses we can trust in completely. Jesus, the Son of God, performed miracles through the power invested in him by his heavenly Father. The Church, however, has always sought to seek out the deeper meaning behind the 'signs' of Jesus and sees in this miracle a foretaste of the gift of the Eucharist (CCC 1335). We do not live on bread alone. Our needs are deep and complex. Jesus meets these needs, comforts us and brings us the consolation of the Spirit in the gift we know as the Bread of Heaven, the Living Body of Christ, the Eucharist.

'The Eucharist is a precious nourishment for faith: an encounter with Christ truly present in the supreme act of his love, the life-giving gift of himself.'
(*Lumen fidei* 44)

Isaiah 25:6-10 • Psalm 22(23)
Matthew 15:29-37

The Sermon on the Mount finishes with a parable contrasting a wise builder with a foolish builder. The parable's message is self-evident. A building built on a solid foundation will withstand the force and onslaught of the elements; one that is built on sand will not.

Any self-respecting builder or architect understands this to be true. However, sometimes the self-evident is not always that evident, rather in the same way that common sense is not always that common. Whenever a powerful earthquake hits a region where building regulations were lax or builders cut corners, the inevitable happens: buildings are not able to withstand the force of the shock and they collapse. The moral or punch line of the parable is straightforward enough: practise what you preach; live what you profess; faith is proved by actions, not simply by words. As Thomas à Kempis once said, 'The loftier the building, the deeper must the foundations be.'

But what does it mean to build this foundation? How do we go about it? At a fundamental level, we must strive to practise the harder and less attractive virtues: obedience, faithfulness and

perseverance. Without a doubt this takes courage and a certain quality of character.

It is also very important to nurture our relationship with the Lord. One of the vital lessons we learnt during the Year of Faith which ended recently, is that while faith without deeds and actions is certainly dead, equally faith without prayer, or reading Scripture, or growing in Eucharistic wonder and awe, is simply external and mere social justice. We say 'mere social justice' because people indifferent to faith or anti-faith can be very self-giving and self-sacrificing in their love and service of others. The foundation on which we build is first and foremost Christ himself. He is the rock, he is the cornerstone, he is the foundation. Our lives, if they are to withstand 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', must be firmly established on the solid foundation of Christ Jesus himself, not on the sand of our shifting emotions and how we think or feel in any given moment.

Lord, help me to build my life on the rock of your Word, the foundation of prayer and the sure cornerstone of the teaching of the Church, so that my life is deeply and firmly rooted in you and can withstand whatever storms I have to face.

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

Matthew 7:21, 24-27

We learn a lot from the blind men about what it means to be a disciple of the Lord. They might have been blind but they possessed persistence and doggedness in bucket loads. Their encounter and exchange with the Lord reveals how they clung to faith, confident that the Lord could and would heal them. Jesus asked, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' (v. 28 NIV). 'Yes, Lord,' they responded.

Pope John XXIII, that great prophet of the Church, said, 'You can't help feeling the fascination of a soul that knows what it wants, and lives by faith.' This is a good description of the blind men. They knew what they wanted – their sight – and they knew how to go about getting their heart's desire. They possessed a simplicity and humility that we are called to emulate and imitate in our own lives.

Faith, however, is never a blind leap into the dark but an assent of our whole person to the promises of Christ. Although faith is truly a gift of God and the fruit of God's grace, it always requires our consent and co-operation. As the apostle Paul taught, 'The righteous will live by faith' (Gal. 3:11 NIV),

and the righteous are full of faith, hope and expectation. One of our problems today is that we can have low expectations about what God can do in our own lives and in the world.

When Pope John XXIII came to office, many said that he was too old, not especially gifted and really just a caretaker of the Church until someone more talented came along. Pope John, however, was a man of great faith and foresight, whom God was able to use mightily. He was responsible for the Second Vatican Council and will soon be made a saint alongside his worthy successor Pope John Paul II. People say that the child abuse scandal has so damaged the Church that young people are losing their faith. Yet Pope Francis celebrated Mass for 3 million young people in Rio over the summer at World Youth Day. We believe in miracles. We believe in God's promises. We believe in the authentic and reliable witness of the four Gospels.

Lord, open my eyes to the miraculous and help me not to give in to cynicism and despair but to be filled with the joy, hope and confidence of the Holy Spirit. Help me to live by faith in God's promises.

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

Matthew 9:27-31

This is a story about three great saints, Monica, her son Augustine and the great preacher Ambrose. Back in the fourth century – a long time ago – Monica was very worried about her son. Augustine had gone off the rails and was shacking up with his girlfriend, and they had a child together. Yes, the great saint we know as St Augustine of Hippo fathered a child out of wedlock! Anyway, longing for her wayward son to come to faith, Monica sought the advice of a wise and holy man. Enter Ambrose, who was then Bishop of Milan. Ambrose met with the wastrel Augustine but came to the conclusion that talking to him was a waste of time – the younger man was, to use the bishop's word, 'unteachable'. Over time, however, Augustine began to listen to Ambrose's sermons and teachings, which prepared the ground for his conversion.

Ambrose was a powerful evangelist with great insight into the human condition and understood that human beings are naturally prone to be 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (v. 36 NIV). He knew also that the only remedy for the human condition is Jesus

Christ, and he dedicated his life to preaching the gospel, becoming one of the outstanding saints of the early Church. His life and teaching would make a fascinating study because he was someone who modelled for us what it means to be a worker in God's harvest-field.

Pope Francis recently exhorted the young people at World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro to go back into their dioceses and, to quote him directly, 'mess things up'. The Pope understands that young people have a natural passion and courage which makes them want to witness to their faith. It is the following through on this which can be messy, because the rest of us in the Church are largely very conservative when it comes to handing on our faith. We tend to slap people down whom we regard as overly keen in this regard. On the feast of the great proclaimer of the gospel, St Ambrose, let's commit ourselves to being heralds of the Good News in our home, our work-place and our parish.

Lord, the message of the gospel is hope to the world. May I always be prepared to give a reason for my hope in the life-giving message of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26 • Psalm 146(147):1-6

Matthew 9:35-10:1, 6-8

Perhaps people of every age have struggled with the stern and somewhat harsh message of John the Baptist. Living and preaching in the wilderness, dressed in rough clothing woven from camel hair, and eating locusts and wild honey was pretty strange and outlandish even then! Most people would run a mile from John the Baptist and his message of repentance – or so you would think! Yet Matthew tells us that, on the contrary, people flocked to him to confess their sins and undergo a ritual cleansing in the Jordan.

What made the people behave in this way? Was the message of repentance, confession and reconciliation more attractive then than it is now? What was it about the Baptist that created this reaction? These questions encourage us to reflect on this most important aspect of the Christian life. Nowadays we seem to have moved away from sin, repentance, confession and conversion, perhaps judging this kind of emphasis to be not 'on message' any more. But, in doing so, we are making a great mistake because examination of our lives, confession and repentance are crucial to living the Christian life.

The season of Advent is a wonderful, God-given opportunity

to discover the gift of repentance and the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When was your last confession? Some people go more regularly than others. The Church invites us to make a sacramental confession at least once a year, but many have not known the grace of this sacrament for a considerable number of years. To anyone in this situation God's hand of mercy and compassion is extended. Because our confession of sin is mediated through the priest in the confessional it does require a special grace and some courage to open up our lives in this way. It is important to understand, however, that we are not confessing to the priest: we are laying down our burden before God. If a priest has received faculties to hear confession (and this is not automatically granted by the bishop) we hope and pray that he has the necessary pastoral wisdom and maturity to facilitate this sacrament so that the penitent comes to know in a deeply personal way the mercy, forgiveness and compassion of God.

Father, have mercy upon me according to your unfailing love; purify and cleanse me from sin and put a pure and contrite heart in me.

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

Romans 15:4-9 • Matthew 3:1-12

Luke 1:26-38 • Transferred Solemnity of the Immaculate
Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Some years ago we landed ourselves in deep trouble with this Gospel passage and this feast day! The writer we asked to write the daily reflection had a special devotion to our Lady and wrote with deep enthusiasm and love. So enthusiastic and effusive was this individual, in fact, that, straying into language that should be reserved for God alone, they wrote: 'and so we venerate and worship Mary, our Mother in faith, our Queen of Heaven.' We didn't pick this up and neither did our Censor Deputatus, a trained theologian whose role is to spot doctrinal error before the magazine goes to press. Many readers wrote in, rightly pointing out that whilst we venerate Mary, we do not worship or adore her. The writer was mortified and the Censor Deputatus frustrated that this had been missed, but in publishing, as in many areas of life, errors are made and mistakes happen but through that lessons are learnt.

In matters of faith there is a fine line between enthusiasm/love and heresy, and on that occasion we strayed over the line. Worship and adoration are reserved for God and God alone. Because while the Church teaches that Mary is, outside of Jesus, the highest form of

a human being and she is venerated as 'the highest honour of our race', she is never to be worshipped or adored.

Mary's Immaculate Conception (born without stain of sin) was first introduced as a feast day by the English Crusaders returning from the East in the eleventh century. Thus, by the time Pope Pius IX solemnly proclaimed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 – in doing so exercising his power of infallible teaching – Mary's freedom from original sin had long been acknowledged. The Church understands this preservation from original sin as a fruit of divine grace and a special privilege conferred by God.

Luke's Infancy Narrative reveals the touching and powerful beauty of God's choice of Mary. She was frightened, and yet full of grace and faith. Mary's 'yes' to God made possible the gift of our salvation – through the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord and Saviour. God be praised.

Lord God, in the fullness of time you sent your Son to be born of a virgin and to carry out your plan of salvation. Today we venerate Mary, his mother and our mother in faith.

Genesis 3:9-15, 20 • Psalm 97(98):1-4
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12 • Luke 1:26-38

Matthew 18:12-14

Are you familiar with 'kingdom logic'? Kingdom logic is fun – it turns the world's logic upside down. The great are the humble; it is better to serve rather than to be served; to gain life we must die; turning the other cheek is better than retaliation; we must love our enemy and do good to those who hurt and offend us. These are just a few examples of kingdom logic. God's way is not the way of the world. The world's way is dog eat dog, take care of number one, kick a man when he's down, and so on.

In the world the good of the majority outweighs the good of the minority, but God cares about each individual. His heart reaches out to those who stray and those who are far away. Some years ago a professional golfer was jailed for manslaughter. At the golf club he had drunk a few pints of beer on an empty stomach and decided (against his better judgement) to drive home. On the way home he had knocked a man off his bike and killed him. On his release from prison he explained that his jail term had changed his view of people forever. He said that he had learnt not to judge, not to condemn, but to seek to understand

the predicament and horror that people can get themselves involved in. He said that through his own experience in prison he understood darkness and blind rage, and felt nothing but pity and compassion for those whom he previously had judged crudely and harshly.

Pope Francis recently caused a little storm – as his wonderful sound bites are prone to do – when, speaking about homosexuals, he said, 'Who am I to judge?' Perhaps this is part of a significant renewal in the Catholic Church which will mean that, rather than being known as a harsh and judgemental Church, we become known for our kindness and compassion to all and any who stray from the path of righteousness. When Cardinal Keith O'Brien fell from grace there was talk of his being exiled from Scotland, rather as would have happened in medieval times. Such talk is unbecoming of the Christian community! Perhaps the test of how truly Christian we are is the measure of our kindness, patience and mercy towards those who stray from Christ's path.

Who among us can cast not just the first stone but any stone?!

Isaiah 40:1-11 • Psalm 95(96):1-3, 10-13
Matthew 18:12-14

Most forms of addiction are rooted in pain – alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling, to mention only a few modern-day compulsions. They all serve to kill some kind of inner pain the addict is experiencing – the pain of loneliness, failure, low self-esteem, rejection, depression and so on. However, the truth is that we all seek comfort, consolation and affirmation in one form or another. This is part of the human condition. No matter who we are or how stable and seemingly secure our lives are, we all long to know that we are loved, that there is someone we can turn to who loves and cares for us, no matter what we have done and no matter what predicament we find ourselves in. Most of us find this unconditional acceptance in our marriages and families and indeed extended families. Others are not so fortunate.

Loneliness can be a terrible anguish and even those within fulfilling relationships can experience a sense of being isolated, alone and in need of affirmation and consolation. We could call this 'the God-shaped hole' or the 'divine itch' which simply will not go away. How many of us turn to

the Scriptures as the living Word of God when we are down, lonely and depressed? It is in the Scriptures that we encounter the risen Christ and hear him speak to us.

Mercifully the Scriptures are full of comforting and consoling words. And, truly, today's three verses from Matthew's Gospel are among its most comforting and consoling. They are spoken to every human being and they reveal Jesus' divinity. For what mere human being could say, 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'? Only God can utter these words and only God can offer this gift. Jesus holds out to every human being the promise of peace. Not an absence of war or freedom from difficulty, trouble or strife, but to know the peace of God which transcends understanding (Phil. 4:7).

What is the way of peace? To know peace, God's peace, we need to know what it is that robs us of peace. The most common reason we lose our peace is because we allow the immediate, the urgent, the here-and-now to dominate and overwhelm us. We could call this 'the tyranny of the urgent'. The remedy to this is to carve out some time – no matter how small initially – to pray, be still and be with the Lord.

Isaiah 40:25-31 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 8, 10

Matthew 11:28-30

There is a tradition that the prophet Elijah will appear before the coming of the Messiah. To this day, whenever the Passover meal is celebrated in a Jewish household, an empty chair is kept in readiness for him. Jesus explained to any who were prepared to listen or accept his interpretation that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come (v. 14).

John the Baptist had been given the mission of preparing the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah. He was to preach a message of repentance, conversion and contrition. And, even today, anyone who proclaims the same message of repentance, conversion and repentance is continuing the ministry of the Baptist. The Christian faith will always involve this call to change, this urgent invitation to reform our lives. Conversion is not simply a once-in-a-lifetime event but a continual and daily call.

Repentance sets us free. It is a radical reorientation of our whole life; a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, turning away from our sin and feeling true repugnance and sorrow.

The problem is that we don't often experience this. We often

think others might need to change – particularly those caught up in more serious sin – but not us. We may gossip and be spiteful, mean-spirited and hurtful; we may curse and swear and treat other people with contempt; we may neglect to pray, or read the Scriptures, or be distracted and somewhere else during Mass. We rarely recognize, however, that this is precisely the kind of behaviour that should call us to feel sorrow for our sin and seek forgiveness from our heavenly Father.

We need to cultivate a way of thinking about repentance which is positive and life-changing. The grace of the Holy Spirit can enable us to change our lives and overcome patterns of sin and darkness which undermine our witness to Christ. We can recover and rediscover the gift and grace which is repentance. We are not those who resist this blessing, but we are those who, with new hearts and uplifted spirits, turn to God, the Father of compassion and mercy.

'Let us fix our eyes on Christ's blood and understand how precious it is to his Father, for, poured out for our salvation, it has brought to the whole world the grace of repentance.' (St Clement of Rome)

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

Matthew 11:11-15

We can all be contrary or moody. We say one thing one day and another the next; we are inconsistent and our thinking on any number of topics can vary depending on the mood we are in. We are all affected by or infected with this to some extent and very few are immune – except perhaps for the saints!

It is this contrariness and moodiness that we meet in today's Gospel. It's one of those situations in which the person under attack just can't win. John the Baptist lived such an ascetic lifestyle and his message was so harsh that he was accused of being possessed. Jesus, on the other hand, was accused of being a drunkard and glutton because he dined with unsavoury characters. In the face of this criticism Jesus concluded: 'wisdom is proved right by her actions' (NIV). This is a saying that we aren't generally very familiar with, but it is, of course, very profound. Another way of expressing the same truth would be, 'By your fruits you will be known.'

Those who made these statements about Jesus and John the Baptist are dead and gone but Jesus' name continues to be proclaimed and the witness of the Baptist

continues to speak to us today. Those people were wrong, and wisdom was indeed proved right by her actions! However, the purpose of this Scripture is not simply to highlight how wrong they were, it is to continue to challenge us to ask ourselves what its meaning is for us today.

A deeper reading of Scripture always involves us shining the spotlight on ourselves. So back to contrary and moody human beings. We don't tend to think of ourselves in this way: we like to think of ourselves as balanced and easy-going. But the truth is never quite as rose-tinted as we might like. For example, we often complain that young people are falling away from the practice of faith in droves, but when an initiative springs up which is creative and dynamic and aimed at reaching out to young people we complain and resist – the music may not be to our liking, the informality may irritate, and so on. The people who complained in Jesus' day were resisting the work of God in their very midst. May we not make the same mistake!

Lord, help me to welcome and support the work of the Holy Spirit with an open and joyful heart.

Isaiah 48:17-19 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6
Matthew 11:16-19

St John the Baptist and St John of the Cross had a lot in common: they both preached repentance and reform, they were both imprisoned, and they both suffered for their message and for proclaiming Christ. The prophet Malachi prophesied: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes' (Mal. 4:5). John the Baptist was this second Elijah, and John of the Cross, whose feast we celebrate today, followed in his footsteps.

John of the Cross (1542–91) was a truly remarkable man. He is honoured as a saint, Doctor of the Church and a mystic. He was a close friend and the spiritual director of St Teresa of Avila (herself a Doctor of the Church) and worked with her for the reform of the Carmelite order to which they both belonged. The Carmelites were no different than anybody else: when confronted with change and renewal they dug their heels in. Quite remarkably for men who had dedicated their lives to God's service, the brother Carmelites not only imprisoned John of the Cross, but tortured and mercilessly maltreated him. He was kept in solitary confinement and frequently lashed in front of the entire

community. During this time the saint composed his famous poem *The Spiritual Canticles*. A literary genius in so many ways, he also wrote *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. John of the Cross once said, 'In the midst of trial, suffering or tribulation draw near to God with confidence and you will receive strength, enlightenment and instruction.'

For John of the Cross (as for John the Baptist) Christ was everything. He said, 'First, have habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life in order to know how to imitate him and behave even as he would.' He also had a great sense of God's presence living in every human being: 'To understand the nature of this union one should first know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. The union between God and the creature always exists.'

St John of the Cross said, 'In the evening of our lives we will be judged on our love.' Teach me to love, serve and lay down my life for the gospel as he did.

Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4, 9-11 • Psalm 79(80):2-3, 15-19
Matthew 17:9, 10-13

It is popular in this rather atheistic age to complain that the Evangelists, the Gospel writers, were simply propagandists. In other words, they wanted to put themselves and those caught up in the drama of our salvation in the best possible light. They wanted, so this theory goes, to gloss over any human weaknesses and reveal the devotion and commitment of the first believers in Jesus. We know, however, that the Evangelists were authentic witnesses and reported real, historical events, involving real people with real issues and real flaws.

Take John the Baptist, for example – a prophet held in high esteem by the Church. Jesus said of him that he was the greatest man ever born of a woman but that the least in the kingdom is greater than he (v. 11). Yet in today's Gospel we see John basically doubting who Jesus was. He wasn't sure and wanted to be convinced. Some suggest that his incarceration was taking its toll. Lack of light, lack of sleep and lack of food and water soon break even the strongest of men. Also, Jesus was confounding the Jews' expectation of the Messiah. For most Jews, and to an extent even John the Baptist, his coming was very much connected with political

and economic upheaval and victory for the Jewish people over their brutal oppressors.

Jesus was indeed 'the one who was to come' (cf. Ps. 118:26; Mal. 3:1). He was, however, a different kind of Messiah from the one they were expecting. He was ushering in a different kind of kingdom – not a political or economic kingdom but a spiritual one with values different from the world and its kingdom. The signs of the kingdom were that the blind received sight, the deaf heard, the dead were raised, and the gospel of life was preached and proclaimed.

Today people still ask whether he was truly the Messiah. Were the miracles real or were they simply made up by the disciples? Did the resurrection actually happen? Blessed are those who remain faithful to the teaching of Christ. Blessed are those who believe although they do not see. Blessed are those who believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Lord's Anointed, the promised Messiah.

Lord Jesus, you are the blessed hope of the Church. We pray for your return as the King of Glory, when every knee will bow in heaven and on earth.

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10 • Psalm 145(146):6-10
James 5:7-10 • Matthew 11:2-11

Such is the criminal justice system these days that criminal lawyers will advise their clients to say nothing when questioned by the police. In fact, they will be instructed by their advocate to use the tried and trusted phrase 'No comment' when asked an incriminating or difficult question. Once a police interview has reached this stage, then it's a cat and mouse game: the police out to prove guilt, lawyers to protect their clients from incriminating themselves any further. In effect, the 'We don't know' of the chief priests and teachers of the law was their 'no comment'. It was met by Jesus' brilliant riposte, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things' (v. 27).

The religious leaders wanted to box Jesus into a corner and the issue they chose on this occasion was authority. By whose authority did Jesus act? Jesus did not decline to answer their question: he simply wanted them to answer his first. His question about whether John's baptism was from heaven or from men clearly flummoxed them and rendered them, in effect, silent – no comment! They were worried lest they incriminate themselves further!

Authority is a kind of litmus test in the religious life because

our lives need to be rooted first in God's authority and specifically the authority of Jesus. The people knew that among them was one who spoke with a new authority: 'he taught as one who had authority, and not as their scribes' (Matt. 7:29). Jesus declared himself to be the holder of all authority, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Matt. 28:18).

The Lord never ceased to amaze the people with his God-given authority: 'The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching – and with authority"' (Mark 1:27). In addition to Scripture, the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church, provides us with a solid foundation for our lives. The Church is a kind of expert in humanity and if we study her teaching, especially the documents from the Vatican Council and the teaching of the recent popes, including those of Pope Francis, we learn to live lives that are pleasing to God.

Lord, we pray for all those in positions of authority, bishops, priests, deacons, teachers and parents, that they may wield their authority with the wisdom and compassion of Christ.

Numbers 24: 2-7, 15-17 • Psalm 24(25):4-9
Matthew 21:23-27

Let's be honest, not the most scintillating of reads. Any writer will tell you that the first few sentences of any work need to grab the short attention span of the reader. That hardly seems possible with a genealogy – until we take a closer look and delve deeper. Matthew wanted to root Jesus of Nazareth deep in the soil of Israel and in his Jewish heritage. He wrote his Gospel exclusively for Jewish Christians and it was with this readership in mind that, following convention, he began his work with a genealogy.

The intention of most genealogies is to convey pedigree, status, distinguished family line and so on, and Matthew's genealogy does indeed show that Jesus, as a son of Israel, is related to Abraham and King David. However, this is a genealogy with a difference: unlike other Jewish genealogies it includes women, and women of ill repute at that! Matthew drops a bombshell by including one woman who pretended to be a prostitute, one who was a prostitute and one who was an adulteress. This would have been enough to get any faithful Jew hot under the collar with embarrassment and shame. Tamar (v. 3) disguised herself as a prostitute and conceived her sons

by Judah, her father-in-law (Gen. 38); Rahab (v. 5) was the prostitute in Jericho who hid the spies sent out by Joshua on a reconnaissance mission (Josh. 2:6); Bathsheba was the woman with whom King David committed adultery (2 Sam. 11). Matthew even includes the Moabitess Ruth (v. 5), who became part of Israel when she married Boaz.

What was Matthew doing by defying genealogical convention in this way and mixing the bad in with the good, the unrighteous with the righteous? He was preparing the ground to illustrate that Jesus, God made man, the perfect human being, identified himself wholly and completely with sinful humanity. Matthew's genealogy witnesses to the scandal of grace. Jesus' righteousness is not revealed by him being above us or aloof or removed or remote, but by him being completely immersed in our humanity. What a Saviour we have! What a Lord! What a King!

'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 truth.'

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

Both C S Lewis (Chronicles of Narnia, Mere Christianity) and Tolkien (Lord of the Rings) as professors of English literature and language at Oxford and Cambridge, understood the genre of myth. They had devoted their lives to the study of it, after all, and taught at the two most prestigious universities in England, if not the world. Tolkien was born a Catholic and his faith rested easily with this towering intellect of the 20th Century. C S Lewis was an atheist for a while; rejecting Christianity for this childlike adherence to myth and miracles.

He was contemptuous of the virgin birth, arguing that a virgin giving birth was not uncommon in pagan literature and folklore. His conversion to belief in God (Deism) preceded his conversion to the revealed truth of the Christian revelation. Part of this conversion involved him coming to the realization that the difference between pagan myth and the Nativity Story, for example, was that pagan myth was just that, a myth, whereas the story surrounding the birth of Jesus and the Virgin birth was true. In other words the birth of Jesus is that incredible oxymoron – a truth myth, a myth which is true.

It may have crossed St Joseph's mind that Mary had perhaps been seduced or at worse, raped. He clearly loved Mary, despite his understanding of the event. It would take God's intervention in his life to convince him that what was conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit. We should and we must immerse ourselves in the human drama surrounding the birth of Jesus.

It is incredibly exciting and shows how God works and moves and reveals himself in a way that we could not imagine. For who could have imagined a virgin birth except God? For, surely, what is impossible for us humans, is possible for God. The Spirit is the One who brings us ever more deeply into the mystery of God made man, God made flesh, God among us. The Spirit is the One who leads us to revere and approach the truths of our faith with awe, humility and wonder, and the virgin birth is just such a mystery.

Lord, Mary conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the Eternal Word, the Word made flesh in the baby in the manger.

Jeremiah 23: 5-8 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 12-13, 18-19
Matthew 1:18-24

Having a child is not always as easy as many think. The blessing and joy of conceiving a baby is not a divine right nor, sadly for many couples, a natural one. Luke begins his account of the nativity of Jesus by relating the story of a couple who had lived with the pain of not being able to conceive for many, many years. Subtly Luke makes a connection between the plight of Elizabeth and Zechariah and that of Abraham and Sarah, who were also advanced in years and childless (Gen. 17:15-20). Barrenness in the ancient world was considered to be a curse from God or the gods, and those afflicted were acutely aware of a sense of shame and disgrace. What we do know for sure is that this holy couple prayed that God would intervene and help them, since the angel Gabriel says: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard' (v. 13).

If the Scriptures that we hear or read in the liturgy were a meal, then today's Gospel reading would be one of the most tasty and filling on the menu. It is so deep and layered that it is hard to know where to begin, which is why we must, of course, ask the Holy Spirit

to lead us. God teaches different things to each one of us. However, one of the striking aspects of Luke's account is the importance of silence. Zechariah was rendered silent by the angel, unable to speak until the birth of his son. Furthermore, Elizabeth 'became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion' (v. 22 NIV). The theme of silence and retreat looms large.

What can we learn or surmise from this? One of the greatest challenges we face in the build-up to Christmas is carving out time and space to be silent, to retreat, seek seclusion and pray. But as we determine to do so, we will be richly rewarded and will know the joy and delight of our salvation. Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the Lord. In our silence and prayer we will rediscover the message of the Baptist – to repent, turn back to God and prepare for the coming of the Saviour on Christmas Day.

Lord, teach me to be still before you, and in this retreat and seclusion bring forth in me the life and light of the gospel which brings light and life to the world.

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25 • Psalm 70(71):3-6, 16-17
Luke 1:5-25

Angels play a major role in our salvation history. They are spiritual beings created to serve God, and throughout the Bible we find angels communicating God's truth or a message from him. For example, in Judges 13:2-3 an angel visits the barren wife of Manoah to tell her that she will bear a son (Samson) and, in the book of Tobit, the angel Raphael explains to Tobit that 'God sent me to heal you and your daughter-in-law Sarah. I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Holy One' (Tobit 12:14-15).

The message that the angel Gabriel brings to Mary is unique and extraordinary because he announces a virginal conception. His words of greeting – 'Hail, O favoured one' – can, according to the Latin Vulgate translation, also have the sense, 'Hail, full of grace...' The drama of this moment cannot be underestimated. Mary's reaction, like Zechariah's, produces a question: 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?' (v. 34 NIV; literally, 'since I do not know a man'). Whilst Zechariah's question (1:18) expresses disbelief and causes the angel to strike him dumb until his

son is born, Mary's is an expression of genuine enquiry. She responds to the angel's reply with humble acceptance.

Of course, fear is the only proper response before the awesomeness of God, and angels as his divine emissaries also have the power to strike human beings with a sense of dread and wonder. Mary was no different, but she was reassured by the angel's explanation that the extraordinary news that he brought was God's plan not only for her but for the whole world. This moment was rather like that at the beginning of time when the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. The same creative and dynamic process was involved in the conception of the Son of God. The Holy Spirit was overshadowing his servant Mary with his saving presence. We learn today that nothing is impossible for God: sanctity of life, fullness of life and the hope of eternal life, once impossible for us, are made possible because of the virginal conception of Mary of Nazareth.

Lord, you call each one of us to give birth to Christ in the world. We pray for the grace to say yes to your call and yes to your invitation to serve you and your kingdom.

Isaiah 7:10-14 • Psalm 23(24):1-6
Luke 1:26-38



Scholars tell us it was over 100 miles from Galilee in the north of Israel to the hill country of Judea. In those days that was an incredible distance for a young pregnant woman to travel to visit her relative. Mary wasn't told by the angel Gabriel to visit Elizabeth but did so because of her eagerness to share her good news – which was, in fact, good news for the whole human race. A theme running throughout Luke's Gospel is the idea of responding to God's grace and then embarking upon a journey. For Luke this always requires a leap or step of faith.

Mary's leap of faith was met, we are told, by a leap of joy from the baby growing in Elizabeth's womb. The forerunner of the Lord, who would be known for his ascetic lifestyle, his tough-love message of repentance and conversion, and his utter commitment to the truth of the gospel, began his ministry bathed in the joy of Christ.

Joy is a resounding theme of Luke's Gospel and, of all the blessings and fruits of the Holy Spirit, this is the one we seek to recover and renew as we move closer and closer to the birth of the

Saviour. Consider these examples of joy from Luke's Gospel: 'The angel said to them [the shepherds]: "Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour" (2:10-11); 'The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name"' (10:17); 'Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' (15:7); 'they returned to Jerusalem with great joy' (24:52).

The Christian life is about joy, joy, joy, deep in our hearts. This joy is the fruit of God's grace penetrating our hearts so that they are warmed by the gospel and its message of hope and new life. This is the joy that filled the baby in Elizabeth's womb causing him to leap, and this is the joy that we can know and experience in our own lives.

'Study always to have joy, for it befits not the servant of God to show before his brothers and sisters the sadness of a troubled face.'
(St Francis of Assisi)

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



Marriage in Israel took place in stages. There was engagement, betrothal and then the marriage. The betrothal was the point when the engagement became legal. It took a divorce to break it. Mary and Joseph were at the betrothal stage. On discovering that Mary was pregnant two possible scenarios must have presented themselves to Joseph – neither of which would have been the possibility of a virginal conception! He must have thought that his beloved Mary must either have been seduced (which was bad enough and a real wound) or, worse, that she had been violated and raped. Matthew informs us that, as Joseph saw it, the only option available to him was to divorce her quietly (vv. 18-19). As a devout observer of the Torah (the Old Testament law) Joseph could not take Mary as his wife – the discovery of her pregnant state categorically prevented this and was against the law. The law was brutal and uncompromising regarding sexual infidelity and demanded the death penalty for both parties involved in the transgression (cf. Deut. 22:23).

We learn so much about Mary and Joseph from this situation. Just as God's plan for his Son was that he

who had no sin would become sin for us, so Mary, who was herself immaculately conceived and born without original sin, was through no fault of her own counted among the most heinous of sinners. We learn that Joseph, a devout Jew, was rooted and grounded in love for Mary and acted in compassion towards her. Matthew tells us, 'her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly' (v. 19). Joseph protected Mary from the very beginning.

Although Mary and Jesus are rightly the focus of the Christmas story, today we reflect on Joseph's mature wisdom and holiness and his embrace of God's plan of salvation. In a few days' time we celebrate the birth of Jesus, but today we sing a hymn of praise and thanks to God for the gift of Joseph – the man of faith, the protector and servant of his beloved wife Mary and the child she bore in her womb.

Lord God and Father, today we give you thanks and praise for the witness of St Joseph, who teaches us so much about how to respond to the Spirit and how to be obedient to God's will whatever the cost, whatever the price.

*Isaiah 7:10-14 • Psalm 23(24):1-6
Romans 1:1-7 • Matthew 1:18-24*

In birth as in ministry John the Baptist was a forerunner – he was born, as it were, to prepare the way for the Lord. How astute were the peasants of the hill country of Judea, who, stunned by the miracle of the restoration of Zechariah's ability to speak, asked concerning John's birth, 'What then will this child be?' (v. 66). We know what they did not know, that many years later God would raise him up as the last of the Old Testament prophets. In the spirit of Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, his mission was to hold out the message of conversion and repentance in order that times of refreshing and renewal would come.

We live in a radically different culture from our forefathers in faith – an age of flight, space travel, modern technology, the Internet, the worldwide web and so on. We have mobile phones and Skype and Twitter and Facebook. However, despite progress, despite all our advancements and enhancements, one thing has not changed, and that is the human condition and our need for repentance and the call to conversion. As we move ever closer to celebrating the birth of the Saviour, let us invite the Spirit to give us a life-changing understanding of the message of the

Baptist. Let us prepare to welcome our humble Saviour by embracing the way of humility, which is always the way of repentance and contrition.

As the ancient manuscript *Shepherd of Hermas* taught, 'Repentance is deep understanding.' We understand that we need a Saviour. We understand that we are fallen and wounded. We understand that by taking responsibility for our sin and confessing, 'I repent' and 'I turn away from my sin', we enter through the gateway to life and freedom from sin. We understand that sin has to be brought into the light.

Prepare the way for the Lord in your life. Take courage and go to the sacrament of reconciliation. Pour out your heart to the Lord who in turn pours out his love, mercy and forgiveness upon us in this sacrament of healing, of grace and of every blessing.

Lord, in the spirit of St John the Baptist we prepare to receive the Lord by seeking the grace and blessing made so abundantly available to us in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24 • Psalm 24(25):4-10, 14

Luke 1:57-66

Today we can thank Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, for the hymn of praise we know as the *Benedictus*. This holy and anointed prayer is prayed every day in the Divine Office and has been deeply cherished by the Church since the beginning. It can be safely assumed that this prayer is the fruit of silence: Zechariah's enforced and divine silence, a sweet punishment for his human and quite understandable statement of unbelief, 'How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years' (Luke 1:18).

Zechariah's *Benedictus*, like Mary's *Magnificat*, weaves together traditional Hebrew quotations and hymns to form this canticle of praise. It is really both a prayer and a prophecy given under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Prophecy in this fundamental biblical sense does not mean a foretelling of the future as we might understand prophecy, but rather a divinely enlightened proclamation of the meaning of the events unfolding before his very eyes. In the birth of his son John, Zechariah saw God's remembrance of his covenant promises to David (2 Sam. 7:8-16) and the salvation of Israel. The salvation he hopes

for in the first part of the canticle has echoes of an understanding of the Messiah as the one who would overthrow national enemies, but as the song of praise unfolds, it becomes richer and deeper, involving freedom from sin and the receiving of God's mercy and forgiveness.

On this holy night we prepare ourselves to come to a greater knowledge of our salvation and discover anew and afresh the tender mercy of God. As those who once lived in darkness and the shadow of death we discover that the dawn of Christ's light shines on us to guide us into the path of peace. As we ponder the mystery of our salvation, we like Zechariah can compose our own canticle, peculiar and special to us and the circumstances of our lives. God has intervened in our lives in the same way that he intervened in Zechariah's. We too can sing a canticle of praise as we look back on our lives and see God's saving mercy at work.

'Celebrate the feast of Christmas every day, even every moment, in the interior temple of your spirit, remaining like a baby in the bosom of the heavenly Father, where you will be re-born each moment in the divine Word, Jesus Christ.'
(St Paul of the Cross)

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

Luke 1:67-79

On this day when we are celebrating the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, it is fitting that we should read the Prologue of St John, as the first eighteen verses of John's Gospel are called. Today is the day on which Jesus of Nazareth humbled himself and became one of us. Today is the day on which Jesus of Nazareth was born into this world and became subject to the vagaries and frailty of being human – in all ways except one vital and remarkable way, namely that he was without sin.

This very simple yet profound truth at the heart of our faith is in so many ways shocking, even scandalous. It is shocking that the God who is love was prepared to enter this world and suffer and die in order to seek and save the lost. It is shocking that the all-mighty, all-powerful and all-knowing God entered into time and space as a tiny, vulnerable baby, born in a stable and wrapped in swaddling clothes. Just before he stepped down, Pope Benedict said that it was unlikely that the stable in which the Saviour was born housed cattle or other animals, but this fact of history is unlikely to deter the faithful from continuing to imagine

them with the baby in the stable, since it captures the idea that the Saviour King truly embraced the poverty of our human condition.

No matter what tragedy we may have faced this year, no matter how overwhelming our lives are at this current time or what challenges we face, the good news today is that the Eternal Word made his dwelling with us. St Athanasius, a great proclaimer of the incarnation, said, 'He became what we are so that man might become what he is.' Because Jesus was born, our future is secure and our destiny certain. The Saviour came to save us from our mortal enemies – sin, Satan and death. Only God could save us. Today we sing a hymn of gratitude and praise in love and adoration of the baby in the manger, from whom we have received every spiritual blessing, but especially God's love lavished upon us, his children.

'The Virgin today brings into the world the Eternal. And the earth offers a cave to the inaccessible. The angels and shepherds praise him and the magi advance with the star. For you are born for us, Little Child, God Eternal.' (Kontakion of Romanos the Melodist)

Isaiah 52:7-10 • Psalm 97(98):1-6
Hebrews 1:1-6 • John 1:1-18

From crib to cross; from birth to blood; from deacon to death. St Stephen, whose feast we celebrate today, is recognized by the Church as the first martyr, the proto-martyr. No sooner has the liturgy immersed us, even bathed us, in the waters of the birth of Christ than we are awoken to the harsh reality of trial, suffering and martyrdom.

Jesus warns his disciples soberly of this truth, clearly foreseeing that his disciples would be required to undergo fearful persecution in which they would be 'handed over', 'flogged' and 'brought before various authorities' (kings, governors) to witness to their faith (vv. 17-18). Jesus could not promise protection from this time of trial but he could and does assure us that those courageous enough to bear witness would do so through the power of the Spirit of the Father. It is as if, the very Blessed Trinity draws close to those in the midst of such trials, to give them strength, courage and especially eloquence: 'At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you' (Mt 10:19-20 NIV).

Stephen witnesses to this incredible clarity and beauty. As a

deacon his primary call was, as it were, to 'wait on tables' (Acts 6:2-3). His calling was one of *diakonia*, loving service and charity, rather than the ministry of the Word, to which the apostles had been called (Acts 6:4). How wonderful then that, only a chapter later, we see the deacon Stephen raised up by God to proclaim his Word. Brought before the authorities, as Jesus had foreseen, he speaks with clarity and eloquence, and displays a penetrating understanding of the vast panorama of God's plan of salvation as it unfolded through his Chosen People and culminated in the revelation of Jesus as God's Righteous One (Acts 7:52). His martyrdom mirrors the Lord's own death: this mighty warrior of Christ, slain by stones but asking God to forgive his killers, is a striking witness of Christ's love.

Not many of us will be called to martyrdom as St Stephen was, but our vocation invites us always to be prepared to give the reason for our hope, our joy and our confidence in Christ.

Lord Jesus, grant me the courage to bear witness to my faith, not in my own strength or power but through the Spirit of the Father speaking through me.

Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59 • Psalm 30(31):3-8, 16-17
Matthew 10:17-22

Today we celebrate the feast day of St John the Evangelist. This herald of the gospel was one of the four holy Evangelists who wrote the four Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke share many features where as John's testimony about Christ is unique.

What is unique about John's Gospel? Quite simply, this Gospel has a depth of insight into the person of Christ as the Word made flesh, as the Eternal Word of the Father, that the others, wonderful as they are, do not have. It is as if John's Gospel is less concerned with historic detail (although, of course, his Gospel is rooted in history) and more concerned about helping us understand who Jesus is.

Why is this? Written towards the end of the first century (circa 90 AD) John was the last Gospel to be written. It is the fruit of the mind of a theologian, one who had studied, reflected and pondered on who Jesus was. The Gospel is also distinctive in the way that John uses the device of 'signs' which point us to the deeper meaning of Jesus' identity. These signs or miracles reveal aspects of the Christ mystery, but do not spell it out – there is always a subtext which

invites us to seek out the deeper, many-layered meaning behind the event or incident or words of Christ.

The greatest of these signs is the sign of the empty tomb. John presents the facts surrounding this key event of Christian faith and invites us to walk the road of faith, as he walked the road of faith. He saw and believed (v. 8), and blessed are those who do not see yet believe. John had a great sense of how the Spirit leads us to know Jesus through the gift of revelation, through the light of faith. Pope Francis' new encyclical on the Light of Faith breaks open this mystery also. We can only come to faith through the light of faith. In this sense John was a true mystic and we are invited also to be mystics, theologians, men and women of prayer, for whom the Scriptures are our source and the Spirit our teacher.

Lord Jesus, through the gift of your Spirit may I touch, hear, see and taste the mystery of God made man, Christ among us, the Word made flesh.

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

It is interesting to note that the structure of the story we know as the Flight into Egypt is similar to that of the birth of Jesus in many ways (Matt. 1:18-25). It consists of the angel's appearance to Joseph in a dream, a command, the reason for the command and a quote from the Old Testament (Jer. 31:15). Egypt was a common place of refuge for Jews of this time. Only after Herod's death around 4 AD was it safe for Jesus to return to Palestine. The quotation from Hosea 11:1, 'out of Egypt I called my son', reveals that in God's mind Jesus was not only the Messiah, but in himself the representation of the Chosen People, Israel. In the same way that God called Israel out of Egypt in order to create a special, holy people, so he calls Jesus out of Egypt into the land of Israel in order to create a new people – the People of God, the Church (Matt. 21:41, 43).

Herod was a ruthless despot with murder in his heart. Scholars point out that, although Herod's slaughter of the innocent children is consistent with his style of oppression and rule, Matthew's account is the only historic record of this mass killing. Herod's evil

slaughter of these poor children is similar to Pharaoh's slaughter of the Israelite children in Egypt (Exod. 1:15-22).

The liturgy introduces us to a lot of blood, murder and killing in the days following the birth of the Saviour. It is almost as if you have to hold on to your seat as you are thrown into the sharp daylight of intense and dreadful suffering. On 26 December we have the martyrdom of St Stephen and then today these holy innocents are brought low. From crib to cross, from birth to blood is the story of the early Church. We are reminded today to pray for the holy innocents throughout history who have been lost through war, genocide and mass killings. But we also pray for and bring to mind the millions of babies deprived of life through abortion – they truly are also the holy innocents of our age, our time, who plead for the gift of life and the right to live.

'We are fighting abortion by adoption. We have sent word to the clinics, to the hospitals, to the police stations: "Please do not destroy the child. We will take the child."' (Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

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

Today we celebrate the feast day of the Holy Family of Nazareth: Joseph, Mary and Jesus who lived together as a family unit in Nazareth. Jesus was born in the royal city of Bethlehem but raised in the obscure village of Nazareth. God deemed it necessary, vital even, that the holy Son of God humble himself and experience the domestic reality of family life that most human beings are raised in.

The Holy Family of Nazareth was the ultimate holy household. We can idealize this state, if we like, but the reality was probably like every family since time immemorial. Jesus would have been familiar with household chores, would have seen his father Joseph strive to make a living and would have witnessed first hand Mary's management of domestic tasks. These are the nuts and bolts, if you like, which keep a family together. He would also, of course, have learnt to be a devout Jew, adhering to the Torah and loving the Lord his God with all his heart, strength, soul and mind.

How was this household different from others? We know very little about Jesus' home life and can really only assume and conjecture. We do know that when aged only twelve he went missing for a few days and caused his parents untold

grief and suffering. His response to their anxiety on finding him was that he had to be about his Father's business (Luke 2:49). Jesus was no ordinary child, that is for sure.

Politicians and governments since the beginning of time have recognized and understood the family as the basic cell, the fundamental building block, if you like, of a stable human society. The Church, too, has always taught this. The Catechism firmly states, for example, 'A man and woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family' (para. 2202). Never before has the family, as defined by the Church, been under such attack as it is today. What constitutes a twenty-first-century family has wide and varied definitions. The clamour for same-sex marriage is growing. However, this should not prevent us from upholding the truth that God's plan for marriage and family life is holy and sacred and that we must cherish and honour it.

'Through God's mysterious design, it was in that family [the Holy Family] that the Son of God spent years of a hidden life. It is therefore the prototype and example for all Christian families.'
(Pope John Paul II)

*Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6, 12-14 • Psalm 127(128):1-5
Colossians 3:12-21 • Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23*

Anna was a prophetess. She enjoyed seven years of marriage before being tragically widowed and then devoted her life to serving God in the temple. Luke informs us that she never left the temple but gave herself up to fasting, praying and worshipping God. She basically immersed herself in doing God's will, hearing his voice and giving him glory. This made her an instrument in the Lord's hand and she became very responsive and sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit in her life. She was, it would be fair to say, a finely tuned spiritual instrument: Spirit-sensitive, Spirit-responsive.

When she drew near to Joseph and Mary, who had come to the temple to present the baby Jesus to the Lord, she understood instinctively that the child was the Messiah, the One whose coming had been eagerly awaited for many centuries. Anna, the prophetess, was given the gift of revelation from the Father and, remarkably, she recognized the Christ, the Lord's Anointed, the promised Messiah.

We are all called to be prophets of the Most High by virtue of our baptism. To be a prophet can mean that we have some kind of insight

into the future but this is not its primary meaning. To be a prophet is first and foremost to be sensitive and responsive to the work of the Spirit in our lives.

We need to pray especially for bishops, priests, deacons, and those with a religious calling (religious sister/brother or monk), for they are called to seek out the Lord and become prophetic beacons of light, proclaiming and confessing Jesus as the Light of the World, the Messiah, God's Anointed. Of course, this is not to diminish or reduce the role of lay people: we too are called to be prophets and seek out the Lord, but often our domestic and family obligations prevent us from giving as much time as we would like. God understands this, which is why throughout history he has raised up prophets among us – people like Anna and Simeon, and those who through dedication and devotion are sensitive and responsive instruments in his hand.

Lord, through prayer and carving out time to read sacred Scripture, raise me up to be a prophet, one who proclaims, confesses and bears witness to the truth that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

*1 John 2:12-17 • Psalm 95(96):7-10
Luke 2:36-40*



How time flies! No sooner, it seems, have we celebrated the beginning of one year than we find ourselves perched on the end of another. When we are young time goes slowly; when we are older it moves quickly. The truth is, of course, that time is time and is always the same. Time is a very important concept for the Christian. The great glory and wonder of the Christian revelation is that God, who is beyond time, entered into it, sanctified it, changed it and made it holy. We can cultivate a kind of spirituality or theology of time which can change the way we live.

This spirituality or theology is first and foremost grounded in John's insight that Jesus is the Eternal Word of the Father. We are given, if you like, a glimpse of what it is like outside of time. John writes, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God' (vv. 1-2). The goal and purpose of human time, the time allocated to us on earth, is to return to this beginning, to be with the Word, because the Word is God.

The Church has always understood that through the incarnation, God becoming man, all time is sacred. The liturgical rhythm of the Church reflects this and, in a very real way, part of the vision of *Bible Alive* has always been to encourage its readers to immerse themselves in the holy movement of the liturgical cycle. Day after day the Church prays the Scriptures; day after day the daily reflections invite us to enter into the mystery of Christ through the Scriptures.

Today we look back but we also look forward. We repent and turn to the Lord for his mercy and forgiveness, and give thanks and praise for the many blessings and graces which he has poured out upon us. Perhaps one of our new resolutions this year could be that 2014 will be a year in which we learn more and more to cherish and treasure the gift of time and learn to sing a new song of praise and thanksgiving to God for pouring his Holy Spirit into our hearts.

Lord God, I give you thanks and praise for the gift of time. Teach me to practise your presence daily that I may walk with you, talk with you and have my very being in you.