

Daily Reflections

Monday 1 December

Matthew 8:5-11 • (Solemnity in Scotland) St Andrew

Faith isn't just something that we exercise in our spiritual lives. Without faith we couldn't live in our society. We have faith that our money is safe in our banks; we have faith in electricity; we have faith in our doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professionals. Of course, all these institutions and individuals can let us down, but on the whole we maintain our faith in them.

The problem with spiritual faith is that we often misunderstand what it really is. Many think of faith as a kind of blind leap into the dark – you close your eyes and jump – but that isn't faith, that's stupidity. God calls us not to take a blind leap into the dark but rather to put our faith, hope and trust in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, for the existence of whom there is ample historical evidence.

The faith of the Roman centurion is one of the most moving and powerful examples of faith in the whole New Testament. Although his name is lost to history his faith is remembered every time we celebrate the Eucharist. His faith was rooted in his direct encounter with Jesus. The Holy Spirit was at work in this professional Gentile soldier, moving him to a faith so profound that he received the double blessing of a miraculous healing of his servant and his faith being recorded for all time. In response Jesus marvelled and exclaimed: 'Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith' (v. 10).

This movement of the Spirit is a mystery in all our lives. Nevertheless, it is important to understand and appreciate that the Spirit is always at work in people's lives – whoever they are, whatever they have done and no matter how far we judge them to be from God. God allows his sun to shine on the righteous and the unrighteous, on the good, the bad and the rebellious. Faith cannot be manufactured: it is the response of the human heart to God's infinite love and mercy. It is a supernatural gift from God. We believe first in order to understand and in this act of believing we receive the gift of revelation into the mysteries of God, which flesh and blood cannot reveal, but only the Father of mercy.

Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my life but, this Advent, I beg you to pour out your lavish blessings upon me.

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

Tuesday 2 December

Luke 10:21-24

What gives you joy? From today's Gospel we learn that what gave Jesus joy was the grace of revelation being poured out upon us so that we might learn of the height, the width, the depth and the length of God's love and wisdom. One thing we can know for sure is that if the Christian life is not a life of joy, then somewhere along the line we are missing the point.

Pope Francis is heading up a revolution of joy. He is the Commander-in-Chief of a ground-breaking rising up of joyful and Spirit-filled Christians. And his recent Apostolic Exhortation is, if you like, the battle plan. Like all prophets of joy Pope Francis has a great sense of humour. He has even pulled his own leg and ours by admitting that he is so realistic about the state of the hearts of clergy and laity alike that he is resigned to the fact that not many of us will even read or familiarize ourselves with his battle plan. Some have accused him of giving up before he has started but perhaps they don't understand his sense of humour.

In an ideal world, when the Pope publishes an encyclical or an apostolic exhortation there would be a stampede to download it and print it off, or to buy a hardbound copy. Our clergy would be hardly able to contain their joy that they had a papal document to get their teeth into and to fuel their preaching and their teaching and their interior life. They would be exhorting the lay faithful from the pulpit to read and study *Evangelii gaudium*, explaining that it is a wonderful document which will help them to live their Christian life with fresh enthusiasm and joy. And, in response, the lay faithful would storm Waterstones and WH Smith's to get their hands on a copy. Clergy and lay would then be united in an adventure to plumb the depths of the teaching of St Peter's successor, and together we would all be engaged in a common endeavour of study and prayer as we sought to learn more of the unfathomable mystery which is Christ.

Lord, give me joy in my heart keep me praising, give me joy in my heart I pray; give me joy in my heart keep me praising, keep me praising till the end of day.

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

Luke 10:21-24

Wednesday 3 December

Matthew 15:29-37 • (Memorial) St Francis Xavier

The signs and wonders performed by Jesus reveal the power of God. They reveal Jesus as the One who can reverse and overpower the laws of nature. But, in addition, each one points to a deeper meaning that is specific to that particular miracle. What, then, is the meaning of the two miracles of the multiplication of the loaves (see also Matt 14:15-21)?

Our scientific age is rather sceptical of the miraculous. Ever since the Enlightenment philosophers and even theologians have sought to undermine the idea that God can directly intervene in our lives, especially in supernatural ways. Nevertheless, it is impossible to read the New Testament without encountering signs and wonders. Furthermore, since the beginning the Church has taught that the Evangelists were eyewitnesses of historic events which were verified by Roman and Jewish historians. They were not writing propaganda for incredulous and superstitious peasants: they were witnesses of the Christ event.

St Augustine, that towering intellect of western civilization, said: 'Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature. I never have any difficulty believing in miracles, since I experienced the miracle of a change in my own heart.' There is no doubt that things happen that are beyond science and beyond explanation and reason. The Church is, however, so respectful of science and the competency of the medical professions that a healing at Lourdes, for example, is subject to over a decade of scrutiny before it is declared a miracle.

Thankfully the Catechism of the Catholic Church offers us commentary on miracles: 'The miracles of the multiplication of the loaves, when the Lord says the blessings, breaks and distributes the loaves through his disciples to feed the multitude, prefigure the superabundance of this unique bread of his Eucharist' (para. 1335). Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we are reminded of the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. In the same way that Jesus broke the bread and gave it to his disciples to distribute, so his body would be broken on the cross and his saving grace made available to all who partake in it. We are blessed to share in this miracle of miracles every time we are nourished in body, soul and spirit with the Bread of Eternal Life in the Eucharist.

'Sacrament most holy, sacrament divine, all grace, all thanksgiving, be every moment mine.'

Isaiah 25:6-10 • Psalm 22(23)

Matthew 15:29-37

Thursday 4 December

Matthew 7:21, 24-27

Most sermons, if we are honest, are pretty forgettable: they don't excite or encourage or stimulate. Indeed, in *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis encourages his clergy to focus on this part of their ministry because clearly, as it might say on a school report, they 'need to do better'!

That said, no sermon or homily could ever top the Sermon on the Mount. It is the sermon par excellence, revealing the mind of God and showing us how to live our lives. It pushes us far beyond the narrow and rigid attitude of simply obeying rules and regulations and crosses the threshold into the world of the life in the Spirit, showing us how to live not by the letter of the law but by the new way of the Spirit. The right reaction to reading the Sermon on the Mount is to throw our hands up in total exasperation and despair and say something like, 'It is impossible to live like this. Who can?' The answer will then come from God himself: 'What is impossible for men and women is possible with God.'

The Sermon on the Mount concludes with a profound parable about two men who built a house – one on sand, the other on solid rock. It is a simple parable and the message is clear: a house built on sand collapses; a house built on solid rock endures. Simple. But is it really that simple? Of course not, for how many of us truly invest in the wise strategy of building our lives on a rock-solid foundation?

Most of us have a shallow approach to life. We live for the immediate, the here and now. We don't take time out to think about how to root our lives in God and his teaching. However, if it were easy, everybody would be doing it! If we did the following most days of our lives, our foundation would go deeper and deeper: read the Bible; read the Catechism of the Catholic Church; pray; examine our conscience and repent; frequent the sacraments – especially the sacrament of reconciliation and supremely the Eucharist; throw ourselves on the mercy and forgiveness of God; and strive every day to love and forgive those we do not want to love or forgive.

Lord, teach me to lay down deep foundations in my life, rooted in the teaching of the Church and in the sacraments, which feed and nourish me on my journey to eternal life.

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

Matthew 7:21, 24-27

Friday 5 December

Matthew 9:27-31

It isn't hard to imagine that life without the gift of sight would be brutal – in this or any age. We often take our five senses for granted but losing any one of them must be terrible, reducing the quality of life significantly. The healing of the blind men in today's Gospel is a wonderful and encouraging miracle. Yet the majority of us are not physically blind, so how do we interpret this miracle story and apply it to our own lives?

First, it is important to say that many of those who have impaired vision or who are blind are incredible witnesses to courage and grace. For example, the American educator Helen Keller overcame the adversity of being blind and deaf to become one of the twentieth-century's leading humanitarians. She said that her blindness gave her 'a deep sense that "things seen are temporal and things unseen are eternal".' We live by faith and not by sight but the truth is that we can be blind to many things in our own lives and we, rather like the blind men in today's Gospel, need the gift of faith and the gift of sight. St Augustine of Hippo said: 'The very limit of human blindness is to glory in being blind.'

So how can we be blind in our own lives and what are the things to which we are blind? We are often blind to our own sin but remarkably very clear-sighted about the sin of others – this, unfortunately, is pretty much the human condition. We like to take the speck out of another person's eye when all along there is a plank in our own! The light of Christ needs to shine on us so that we have the grace to take the plank out of our own eye.

We can also be blind to the many blessings in our lives and fail to give thanks and praise to God. We can be blind to the beauty and grandeur of God's creation and not see the mark of the Creator in every good thing. This kind of blindness makes us cynical and resentful instead of joyful and generous.

Lord, I repent and turn away from those things in my life which make me blind to my own sin, blind to the blessings in my life and blind to the goodness of the Creator. Restore to me, Lord, the joy of my salvation.

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

Matthew 9:27-31

Saturday 6 December
Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5-8

The nineteenth-century American writer Henry Thoreau was largely unknown during his life, but was recognized in the twentieth century as being one of the greatest literary thinkers his country had produced. He was deeply troubled by the injustice of slavery, and his commitment to brave, but non-violent protest, inspired both Gandhi and Martin Luther King. He once wrote that 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation' It is a striking statement, precisely because we know it to be utterly true.

Most of us know that our friends and the people with whom we work and socialize all have their problems to cope with, but it can be very instructive to indulge in a little 'people-watching' on the train, in the street or in the bus queue, for instance when people are engrossed in their own thoughts. Furrowed brows and anxious or irritable looks are signs of the tip of the iceberg of burdens which many, many people carry from day to day.

Fractured relationships, financial worries, insecurity and the fear of rejection are no respecters of social boundaries. And many people do not even show the tell-tale signs giving absolutely no outward indication that behind their smile they carry a great sorrow.

The Gospels tell us clearly that Jesus could look into men and women's hearts and know what was within them. So, when Jesus was travelling around the towns and villages of Palestine he could look at the crowds and see the troubles, worries and insecurity behind the facades of every individual person. And, seeing these, he had compassion. His ministry to humankind is the same now as it was then; not counselling, or bland sympathy, but a solution that goes to the very centre of the burdened human heart. It is news that is truly life-changing to those who are really open to its full implications. The kingdom of God is at hand: sinners are forgiven, guilt is removed, the sick receive healing and those in captivity whatever its nature are set free.

Lord, I lay my burdens at your feet. Help me to begin to understand the full wonder of the gift of salvation which you have won for me. Set me free from the chains of fear, guilt and insecurity that bind me and restore me to the joy of your love.

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26 • Psalm 146(147):1-6
Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5-8

Sunday 7 December

Mark 1:1-8 (B) • Second Sunday of Advent

Why did people go out to the desert to hear John the Baptist? No doubt it was partly out of curiosity to see this unusual preacher who wore a garment of camel hair and ate locusts and wild honey. But they also went because John had a message that spoke to them. John was not the sort of speaker who minced his words: he told people plainly that they were sinners who needed to repent. Nowadays it is not fashionable to talk in such a way, even for many Christians.

Talking about sin is held to be negative and morbid. But accepting we are sinners is not unhealthy on the contrary, it is the way to spiritual health since it means we are acknowledging the truth. We all do wrong things, and there is no point running away from this fact.

John told people that they needed to acknowledge their sins openly, repent and make a fresh start. This is what the symbolism of baptism means. By accepting baptism people showed they were repenting of their sins, were being washed clean and emerging as new men and women. Pretending we are not sinners will not save us: the route to salvation is to confess our sins, repent and seek God's forgiveness.

Advent is a time when we examine our lives and repent of our sins as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' coming into this world. John the Baptist was preparing the way for the Lord, and he did this by leading people to repent and seek forgiveness. We must follow their example. It is in our hearts that we need to prepare a road for the Lord, to make the crooked ways straight and the rough places smooth. We are not only celebrating Jesus' birth in the past: we pray that he would come more fully into our lives at this time and we look forward to his coming in the future.

John's baptism symbolized repentance and rebirth, but could not actually save people. That is why he pointed them to Jesus Christ, the one who baptizes with the Spirit and gives us the new life which endures for eternity.

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 • Psalm 84(85):9-14

2 Peter 3:8-14 • Mark 1:1-8

Monday 8 December

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

The doctrine of Mary's sinlessness, from the moment of her conception, is the fruit of the Church's meditation on scripture and tradition. However, Luke, the evangelist, spends some two chapters telling us about the birth of Jesus and the episodes which preceded it. Contained in them (and in today's reading in particular) is much information about Our Lady - how she thought and how she behaved in the face of the bewildering events in which she found herself so unexpectedly playing a central role.

When we try to explain to children about the holiness of saints, or of Our Lady, they often seem to get the mistaken impression that because of their innate sanctity, the spiritual life must have been easy for them. Perhaps in our inadequate explanations we make saints appear like super-heroes, in the sense that they breeze through challenges effortlessly. Religious works of art tend to reinforce this idea. To a child's mind, the concept may be good enough for the time being, but in adult life we realize its inadequacy. True sanctity is nothing like that, and Luke paints a much more real, a much more complex picture of Mary's holiness.

It is quite clear that there was nothing easy or effortless in Mary's acceptance of God's will for her. Vulnerability, confusion, courage and faithful obedience are all seen quite clearly in Mary's responses. This was a young girl, who despite her tender years had a solid commitment to her destiny as a handmaiden of the Lord. Her courage enabled her to make the arduous and risky journey in the early stages of her pregnancy to visit Elizabeth in the Judean hills. On her arrival, her hymn of praise to God in the Magnificat remains one of the most powerful and most beautiful in all literature. Nowhere do we get the impression that any of this was easy for her. Quite the reverse.

Indeed, Mary's life - so far as we know it - was characterized by real challenges and by deepest suffering. Her sinlessness gave her no protection from the agony which she felt as she stood at the foot of the cross, having witnessed her son's journey to Calvary.

'My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour. He looks on his servant in her lowliness; henceforth all ages will call me blessed.' (The Magnificat)

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

Tuesday 9 December

Matthew 18:12-14

What is the Christian faith all about? There are many answers to this question, but at its very heart the Christian faith is about salvation – what we are saved from, why we need salvation and the purpose for which we are saved. We are saved from sin, death and eternal damnation; we are saved for a relationship with the living God.

Now sin, death and eternal damnation are subjects we don't hear too much about these days but they remain at the very core of the Christian message. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), and God, our heavenly Father, as we are told in today's Gospel, is not willing that even one of his little ones should be lost (v. 14). In other words, no one is beyond salvation or redemption, and salvation and redemption are vital in understanding the Christian faith. On the Day of Pentecost Peter proclaimed: 'And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

Salvation is a gift which we receive supremely when we are baptized but continue to work out throughout our lives, as Paul emphasized: 'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' (Phil. 2:12, emphasis added). We cannot earn our salvation; we don't deserve our salvation; we cannot buy our salvation or secure it in any other way than through the sheer kindness and mercy of God, which we graciously receive in the gift of baptism.

What we can do, though, is cultivate an interior attitude of gratitude for our salvation. It is our birthright as baptized believers to know the joy of salvation – joy and salvation go hand in hand. The season of Advent invites us to spend time reflecting on what a wonderful gift salvation is – 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...' (Isa. 9:6).

'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' (Eph. 2:8-10)

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

Matthew 18:12-14

Wednesday 10 December

Matthew 11:28-30

God knows we carry many burdens – but what is our greatest burden? God knows we have many troubles – but what is our greatest trouble? God knows we have many challenges – but what is our greatest challenge?

We can often think we are alone and isolated with our burdens, troubles or challenges but perhaps the truth is we all carry one burden, trouble and challenge in common. And that is that deep down we have lost a sense of God's love and forgiveness, and we feel that God is far from us. Our deepest need, then, is to rediscover God's love, forgiveness and plan for our lives.

How can we come to this knowledge and understanding? God created us without us but we are saved and work out our salvation by co-operating with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit urges us to find time to pray and be still for it is in this time of quiet and reflection that we can hear the Lord speak to us.

And what does God say to us in prayer? The Holy Spirit urges us to find time to read his Word and calm our minds and refresh our spirits. And what does God say to us through his Word? The Holy Spirit urges us to deepen our gratitude and our sense of awe every time we celebrate the great gift of the Body and Blood of Christ. And what does God say to us through the Eucharist? The Holy Spirit urges us to forgive those who have sinned against us or offended us in any way. And what does God say to us through this gift of forgiveness? The Holy Spirit urges us to reach out to the poor, to the cold, hungry and naked, and to the prisoners and those on the margins of our society. And what does God say to us when we reach out in charity and love to others? When we co-operate with the Spirit, find time to pray, read the Scriptures, receive the Eucharist, forgive our enemies and serve others in love and humility, God says to us:

‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’ (Matt. 11:28-30)

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

Matthew 11:28-30

Thursday 11 December

Matthew 11:11-15

Deeply rooted in the faith of Israel is the longing for the coming of the Messiah. In Advent we are encouraged to recover this holy desire for God's coming among his people. We pray, however, not for God's first coming as Messiah but for his second coming as Lord and King of human history, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church eloquently expresses, 'By sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming' (para. 524).

It is a gift of the Spirit and a great grace and blessing to read the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, through the prism of the unfolding of the mystery of Christ (CCC 1094). The Jews have always looked to the coming of the Messiah. Christians too look to the coming of the Messiah, God's Anointed, but as the One who will wrap up human history and lead us into the eternal joy of the kingdom of God.

The Jews belong to the age of the Old Covenant; we are children of the New Covenant. John the Baptist was the last prophet of the Old Covenant (v. 13). Jesus identified him as the one referred to by the prophet Malachi as God's special messenger: 'Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me' (Mal. 3:1). This John did by proclaiming the message of conversion and repentance in the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah (v. 13; see also Luke 1:17). Although truly one of the greatest men who ever lived, Jesus said that 'the least person in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he' (v. 11). This is because to be 'in Christ' is the highest privilege – one for which the holy men and women of the Old Covenant longed.

God has lavished his love upon us by making us his children. We are the recipients of the grace of the Old Covenant fully revealed in the New. The revelation kept hidden but now revealed is that God sent his One and Only Son to be our Saviour and Redeemer.

Lord, I have ears to hear, a mouth to sing your praises and feet to bring the good news to others. I give praise for the Old Covenant, given to the Jewish people, our elder brother in faith, and rejoice in the New Covenant, sealed in your precious blood.

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

Matthew 11:11-15

Friday 12 December

Matthew 11:16-19

John the Baptist came with a message of self-denial and abstinence, and he was accused of being possessed by a demon. Jesus dined with those whom polite society considered 'sinners' and he was accused of being a glutton and a drunk. If you are ever wrongly accused of being a drunk or a glutton, bear in mind that you are in very good company. The powerful punchline of today's reading is one we would do well to reflect and ponder on: 'But wisdom is proved right by her actions' (v. 19).

What can we learn from today's Gospel? What wisdom can we draw from the sacred text? Well, of course the Spirit will speak to each of us in an individual way, but we can identify two very clear strands of revelation and insight which can help us in living the Christian life. The first is that human nature needs the salt and light of God's grace to save it from a certain contrariness and extreme way of thinking which is the result of superficiality. John the Baptist was one of the greatest men who ever lived; he was not demon possessed, but it was easy and convenient for those who wanted to reject his message of conversion and repentance to draw that conclusion. Jesus was no glutton or drunkard, but it was easy and convenient for those who rejected him and his message to label him as such. If we simply rely on our own thinking we can only be informed by our own prejudices and narrow vision. If we simply rely on our own mind we fail to open ourselves up to God's light and wisdom.

Men and women who have served time in prison often say that one of the most important lessons they learned was not to be quick to judge. They have often been humbled by their prison sentence and they see that it is easy to judge but wiser to hold judgement because life is often more complex than it appears and things are not always as they seem. This enlightened way of thinking is the fruit of their experience, but we can be enlightened by the light and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit. Teach me to live a wise and good life; teach me to be slow to judge, quick to show mercy and eager to see the many ways God is working in everybody's life.

Isaiah 48:17-19 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6

Matthew 11:16-19

Saturday 13 December

Matthew 17:10-13 • (Memorial) St Lucy

How good are you at reading the ‘signs of the times’ (cf. Matt. 16:3)? The truth is most of us are so busy trying to get through our day that we don’t have time to give much attention to the signs of the times. However, as believers, our vocation encourages us to be sensitive and alert to God’s movement and action in history – past, present and future. From the past we learn how God has worked through his holy people Israel and through the Church; in the present we learn to be responsive to what God is doing in our own lives and in our midst; and although we cannot see into the future, God’s light and wisdom sheds light on our way.

Advent is a season in which we can reflect on how from the very beginning of time God was preparing to come as the Messiah. Isaiah proclaimed the coming of the Messiah (Isa. 9:6; 11:1-9) and also prophesied that the Messiah would be rejected (Isa. 53:1-9). The teachers of the law in Jesus’ day taught that the coming of the Messiah would usher in a time of final judgement, the end of the world and a day of triumph. Their belief that Elijah would come first to prepare the people was based on the prophet Malachi’s assertion: ‘Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes’ (Mal. 4:5). The disciples, as faithful Jews, would have been familiar with this teaching and influenced by it. Jesus opened their hearts and minds to understand that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come, the one sent to prepare the way. The teachers of the law rejected this interpretation and this brought them into sharp conflict with Jesus.

We must resist becoming fixed in our own thinking. Although there will be no new central revelations to the Christian faith, God is always at work among us. Fresh winds of the Spirit blow as the work of renewal, conversion and proclaiming the gospel continues. We must strive to ensure that we are those who welcome the work of God with joy and confidence and not those who resist the work of the Spirit in our midst. For this we need wisdom and the gift of discernment.

Lord, teach me to read the signs of your work in my own life, in the lives of others, in the Church and in the world.

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

Matthew 17:10-13

Sunday 14 December

John 1:6-8, 19-28 • Third Sunday of Advent (B)

It seems rather ironic that John the Baptist is often the focus of our readings during Advent since he himself was at pains to stress that he was not the focus of the message, but merely the messenger. He constantly directed attention away from himself, saying, 'I am not the Christ' (John 1:20). John the Evangelist gave beautiful and eloquent expression to the Baptist's ministry of testimony when he wrote: 'He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light' (John 1:7-8).

The humility of John the Baptist was born of a deep work of God in his life. From early childhood he would have been aware that God had set him aside for a very important, specific task. At the time of his birth, his father Zechariah had prophesied, 'And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins' (Luke 1:76-77).

In a sense, in Advent, the liturgy performs the same task as John the Baptist in pointing us to the Christ, the One whose birth is the true meaning of Christmas. Two thousand years ago God – the Creator of the Universe, through whom and for whom we were created – stepped into human history and revealed himself in the baby in the manger as God made man.

However, although the Christ stands among us, there is a way in which he remains yet unknown. Advent is a wonderful time to recover a lively interior sense of the burning love which motivated God to humble himself and be born as one of us. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us a living sense of the glory of the incarnation. It is all too easy to move through this season unmoved by the revelation unfolding before our very eyes, but the Holy Spirit leads us to humble ourselves, as the saints before us humbled themselves, before Jesus, the King of the Universe, humble and poor in the stable.

Lord, the great joy of our salvation fills our hearts and makes us sing in praise and adoration, 'O come, O come, Immanuel.' We bow before the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11 • Luke 1:46-50, 53-54

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 • John 1:6-8, 19-28

Monday 15 December

Matthew 21:23-27

When Jesus spoke the people recognized that he spoke with authority. Authority is an important idea and Jesus' final words on earth refer to it: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Matt. 28:18). No wonder the Lord was perceived and understood as such a threat to the nation. We encounter the fears and insecurities of the religious leaders in today's reading: 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' (v. 23).

Jesus' authority came from God, his Father, and Jesus passed this authority on to the apostles and the Church. It has been handed down through the ages and now resides in the Church and with the Pope and his cardinals and bishops. This is the sacred truth of revelation and we revere it, but it is also important for us to ask: What does this mean practically in our lives? In other words, what difference does it make?

Pope Francis has published a landmark exhortation called *Evangelii gaudium*, which is a magnificent, anointed and prophetic call to the whole Church to be joyful and confident evangelisers. However, in it he quips amusingly that not many people will read it!! Not because it isn't readable but because he knows perhaps instinctively that the teaching of the Pope can be ignored or not taken too seriously! In other words, the Church teaches in God's authority but we can choose to ignore that teaching or not take it seriously or allow it to touch our lives.

God's authority is different from other authority in our lives because his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matt. 11:29). God moves us by his tender mercy and calls us by his abundant love to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of Christmas. God's authority over our lives leads to joy, freedom and a growing experience of the power of the gospel. All men and women live under some kind of authority – even if it is simply their own – but when we live by God's authority, look to the teaching of the Church and the light of her wisdom, we walk as sons and daughter of God.

Lord, teach me to live my life by the light and wisdom of your loving authority. Show me the way of Christ and grant me the grace to learn of you who are gentle and humble of heart.

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

Matthew 21:23-27

Tuesday 16 December

Matthew 21:28-32

We may be surprised when we die to discover who's in heaven. It may come as a shock to discover that those who, while on earth, didn't seem remotely interested in God or faith or in leading a good life are in the Father's warm embrace, enjoying the delights of heaven and rejoicing in the beatific vision. We can never know what is inside a person's heart. We know that God is like the 'hound from heaven' in Francis Thompson's famous poem, always chasing, always urging, never giving up on those we may consider a lost cause or beyond the pale. To God no one is a lost cause; no one is beyond redemption or outside of his love, mercy and compassion.

As the parable of the Two Sons illustrates, there is something innately rebellious and resistant in our nature to doing God's will. We don't like to hear this because the image we have of ourselves is that we are better than this. However, if we look into our hearts we detect a certain dichotomy: we want to do good but find a power at work within urging us to do the very opposite.

The Holy Spirit is working in us to give us this kind of self-knowledge. The son who immediately said 'yes' to his father's request but actually did not do what his father asked, lacked self-knowledge. He did not reflect on his behaviour or examine his life. The other son said 'no' at first but then reconsidered his decision: he reflected on his response; he examined himself; he changed his mind; he got insight. We need this kind of self-knowledge because it leads to freedom. The way of freedom is found through examination of conscience, reflection and repentance.

Repentance is much more pleasing to God than we imagine. God knows that we sin: it is in our nature to sin; but it is not in our nature to turn away from sin. It is a work of grace. As Jesus pointed out at the end of his parable, it is often those most aware of their need for God, like tax collectors and prostitutes, who are quicker to confess, repent and turn to God for mercy than those who consider themselves to be righteous.

'He who commits sin does what is not pleasing to God: but he who repents of his sins, does what is most pleasing to God.' (St Robert Bellarmine)

Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13 • Psalm 33(34):2-7, 16-19, 23

Matthew 21:28-32

Wednesday 17 December

Matthew 1:1-17

‘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.’

In recent years there has been a great resurgence of interest in family trees and genealogies, with a number of television series and a flurry of new books on this fascinating subject. Of course, there is no surprise in this – it makes sense to want to know about our family history because in some way it sheds light on our past and informs our identity.

Ancient manuscripts often began with a genealogy, and so Matthew was simply following the literary style of his day. Not being familiar with it, we have to resist the temptation to skip over the opening paragraphs for the greatest story ever told. Matthew’s concern is to teach and enlighten his believing Jewish readers that Jesus’ Jewish credentials are second to none, and that his life and mission are tightly woven into the fabric of the nation of Israel.

Matthew’s genealogy traces Jesus’ lineage right back to Abraham, Jacob and Isaac and includes such important historic figures as Jehoshaphat, Jotham and Jeconiah. While his readers would have been reassured and comforted by their appearance in Jesus’ ancestry, the opposite would have been true of his inclusion of Tamar (a shrine prostitute), Rahab (another prostitute from Jericho) and Bathsheba (with whom King David committed adultery). To include women in a genealogy was unusual (they were after all considered second-class citizens) but to include women of ill repute and scandal would have been unheard of and probably offensive.

Knowing that Matthew was trying to win over his Jewish audience, why did he do this? The answer is because their inclusion revealed a profound truth of Jesus’ incarnation, namely that he came to identify not with the righteous but with sinners; he came to seek and save the lost.

Lord Jesus, during this holy season may I grow in a new understanding of the revelation that you came to set us free from sin, darkness and death and that no human being is excluded from your love and mercy.

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

Matthew 1:1-17

Thursday 18 December

Matthew 1:18-24

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

There are two equally profound truths which it is imperative for every Christian to understand about Jesus. If we miss these truths, then we miss the entire gospel message. You might think it impossible to miss these truths about Jesus, but many do, to their detriment.

There are a great many things we can rightfully say about Jesus: he was an outstanding oral teacher; he did amazing miracles; no one like him has ever walked the face of the earth; and so on. The two truths we are focusing on (revealed so beautifully in today’s Gospel) are, however, the cornerstone upon which the edifice of Christian faith is built. The first is that Jesus is Immanuel (God with us) and the second is that Jesus came to save sinners (Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua which means ‘the Lord saves’). There you have it in a nutshell – these two truths encapsulate the mystery of Christian revelation.

You may well find yourself protesting that you know that Jesus is God and that Jesus is Saviour, but we gently and respectfully suggest that each Advent the Spirit invites us to enter these mysteries in a new and exciting way. We need to appreciate that, as Aelred of Rievaulx taught, ‘Your teaching, Lord, does not fill the ear with fine-sounding words but is breathed into the mind by your gentle spirit.’ Joseph could not grasp the mystery unfolding before his very eyes without the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We need the same help and guidance.

The Holy Spirit can help us to grow in a sense of anticipation that during this season of Advent we will grasp these two truths of our faith in such a fresh and meaningful way that it will impact and even change our lives. Don’t be afraid, therefore, to ask the Spirit to illuminate your mind and heart in order that you may bow down and worship before the One who is Immanuel, God with us, and Jesus, our Saviour.

‘Illumine me with the true light, O compassionate One, so that I may see the glory which you had with your Father before the world began.’ (Symeon the New Theologian)

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

Matthew 1:18-24

Friday 19 December

Luke 1:5-25

‘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’s account of the events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist do not fail, time and time again, to grab our attention. This is not surprising as Luke was a master storyteller who captures so beautifully the drama of the events which led to the birth of the Baptist.

The raw material Luke has to work with provides a rich mix for a compelling narrative: a barren couple, the appearance of an angel, the silence of unbelief (in the form of dumbness) and a heavenly name for a baby boy; but, of course, John was no ordinary baby boy. There is so much to reflect on and draw from this rich vein of Scripture that it can be hard to know where to start. We would like to concentrate on the lessons it has to teach us on prayer.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were a couple who prayed. Their relationship with God was expressed through their prayer life. Their plight of barrenness, a heavy burden to bear in a society which viewed childlessness as a curse and a sign of God’s displeasure, was, for sure, the basis for much of their supplication and intercession. Did they cry out to God in their suffering and anguish? Almost certainly they did, probably also yearning, groaning and beseeching God to help them. The fruit of their prayer was rich blessing and the result a baby boy.

God wants us to have confidence when praying to him because he wants to answer our prayers. This is not to be facile or simplistic. God delights to answer our prayers if we but turn to him. We all have different issues, concerns, problems, challenges which we have to face and deal with. God knows this, but sometimes what is needed is, as St Ignatius of Loyola said once, in *The Art of Prayer*: ‘the essential, indispensable element in prayer is attention. Without attention there is no prayer. True attention given by grace comes when we make our heart dead to the world.’

Lord, as Elizabeth and Zechariah were focused in prayer, may I too focus all my attention upon you, confident that you are holy and good and hear our prayer. Amen.

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

Luke 1:5-25

Saturday 20 December

Luke 1:26-38

‘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 captives free from prison; free those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.’

‘But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons’, writes the apostle Paul in Galatians 4:4-5, referring to the momentous encounter of the angel Gabriel and the young virgin Mary in the Annunciation.

Our salvation involved the three persons of the Holy Trinity working, moving and acting together, each playing their own unique role. The Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Giver of Life, was sent to sanctify the womb of the Virgin Mary causing her to conceive the eternal Son of the Father.

Consider this truth of our faith: God willed to send his Son, but, in order to put his salvation plan into action, he desired the free co-operation of one of the creatures he had created, and to this end from all eternity he chose a young Jewish woman from Nazareth in Galilee. Mary’s ‘yes’ to God was a crucial moment in human history. In one very real sense all our future and all our hopes, and indeed God’s plan of salvation, hung on this one moment. If we truly grasped its significance we would shudder in awe and amazement. We would also bow down in worship and adoration at God’s humility and condescension.

As St Irenaeus reflected, Mary’s ‘yes’ to God reversed the ‘no’ of Eve: ‘Being obedient she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race. The knot of Eve’s disobedience was united by Mary’s obedience; what the virgin Eve bound by her disbelief, Mary loosed by her faith.’ In the midst of the busyness of our Christmas preparations, let us take time to reflect on Mary’s obedience and trust in God, and so mature in our sense of awe and amazement of Mary, the Mother of God.

‘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 has a share in the coming of death, so also should a woman contribute to the coming of life.’ (Lumen gentium 56)

Isaiah 7:10-14 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Luke 1:26-38

Sunday 21 December

Luke 1:26-38 • (B) Fourth Sunday of Advent

‘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.’

St Ignatius of Antioch wrote, ‘Mary’s virginity and giving birth, and even the Lord’s death escaped the notice of the prince of this world; these three mysteries worthy of proclamation were accomplished in God’s silence.’ Today, with the great feast of Christmas Day just around the corner, we urge you to find some peace and quiet to reflect in prayer and silence on one of these mysteries: the mystery of Jesus’ birth.

The virgin birth is beyond human understanding. That a human being could be conceived without human seed and by the Holy Spirit defies nature and stands before us as one of the most amazing and incredible miraculous interventions of God in human affairs. Faith in the virginal conception of Jesus has always met with opposition, mockery and incomprehension from many quarters. The Church has from the beginning confessed and proclaimed that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

When he came to earth, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity became a human being just like us. Turning once again to St Ignatius of Antioch, we affirm with a hearty Amen that we too ‘are firmly convinced about our Lord, who is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, Son of God according to the will and power of God, truly born of a virgin,...he was truly nailed to a tree for us in his flesh under Pontius Pilate...he truly suffered, as he is also truly risen.’

As we root and ground ourselves in our faith, we will become more and more certain of the truth that Jesus was born of the virgin. We will also grow in our understanding that while Jesus is Mary’s only son, her spiritual motherhood extends to all humankind. God is our Father. Mary is the spiritual mother of all believers and we strive with all our heart, soul and strength during Advent and Christmastide to imitate her.

‘The imitation of Mary includes the imitation of Christ because Mary is the first Christian to follow Christ, and she is the first and most perfect model of Christ. Imitation of Mary is not only relevant to women but to all Christians.’ (Edith Stein)

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

Romans 16:25-27 • Luke 1:26-38

Monday 22 December

Luke 1:46-56

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

Mary’s prayer, known in Latin as the Magnificat and in Greek as the Megalynei, expresses a surge of praise and thanks to God for choosing her to fulfil the amazing task of bringing his son into the world. It is a beautiful poem revealing her complete and utter love for God.

In the faith of this humble handmaid from Nazareth, God found the surrender he had been waiting for since the beginning of time. The desire of her heart was revealed when, having heard the message delivered to her by the angel Gabriel, she humbly accepted God’s plan with the words: ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word’ (Luke 1:38). Full of grace, Mary, the one chosen to be the Mother of God, responded to God’s outpouring of grace upon her by offering her whole being to God.

Mary’s prayer reveals her to be a true daughter of Israel, with a keen sense of the importance of God’s people in his divine plan. Not only does it echo previous prayers in the Scriptures (cf. 1 Sam. 2:1-10; Pss. 34:1-3; 98:1-3), but it also reveals her awareness that salvation and redemption are collective and not simply personal and, in this sense, it is the prayer of Israel. Mary sees God’s plan for Israel unfolding in the events of her life. In sending Jesus, God was not departing from his plan for his chosen people – Jesus is the plan of salvation both for Israel and for all humankind.

In Mary God found a woman who was a living embodiment of all that he had hoped Israel would be – humble, receptive and obedient to the Lord God, the God of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Mary fulfils perfectly Israel’s role as the place of welcome for the coming of God’s Son and her prayer expresses magnificently her sense of her own destiny being right at the heart of God’s plan for his people.

Lord Jesus, may my soul too magnify the Lord and may my spirit too rejoice in God my Saviour. For like your Mother, we too have received grace and blessing and are called to give birth to Christ, by word, by life and by witness.

1 Samuel 1:24-28 • 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-8

Luke 1:46-56

Tuesday 23 December

Luke 1:57-66

‘O Immanuel, you are our King and Judge, the One whom the peoples await and their Saviour. O come and save us, Lord, our God.’

Those present at the circumcision of John the Baptist asked themselves: ‘What then will this child be?’ (v. 66). Looking back over two thousand years of Christian history, we know exactly what the future of this child held and we know, too, that his message holds as true today as it did then.

God designed that John the Baptist would be the forerunner of the Lord, the one who prepared the way, and if we are open and receptive, he continues even today to prepare the way for the Lord. One thing that is very clear about the message of Christ, the ‘Good News’, is that there can be no enjoyment of the blessings of the gospel without the gift of repentance.

You see, repentance has the effect of breaking up the hard ground of our lives; it turns us away from that which is dark and destructive and opens us up to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Deep down we all know that sin is rebellion and opposition to God, an abuse of the freedom that he has given us. Deep down we all know that we are sinners in need of mercy. Since the resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit has proved the world wrong about sin. But the same Spirit who brings sin to light is also the Comforter who gives our hearts grace for repentance and conversion. The message of John the Baptist resounds today in every human heart receptive and open to conversion: ‘repent and turn back to God.’

Our hearts are hardened and burdened through sin, and God must give us a new heart. Advent is a wonderful opportunity for us to experience the greatness of God’s love with such power that our hearts are shaken by the horror and weight of sin and we begin to understand what it means to fear offending God and being separated from him. Our hearts will be converted as we look upon him in the crib who gave his life for us on the cross.

‘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)

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

Luke 1:57-66

Wednesday 24 December

Luke 1:67-79

For many today is a full and busy day: last-minute shopping, cooking and a whole host of tasks which need to be attended to. The challenge we each face is to carve out time so that we can meditate upon the true meaning of Christmas. It doesn't have to be long, but if we find some time to be still, gather our thoughts and reflect, we will be richly blessed and will discover one of the secrets of Christmas – a secret which is unveiled and revealed for us today through the life of Zechariah. This secret is that God wants to fill us with his Holy Spirit so that our hearts overflow in praise, adoration and worship of him.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is Spirit-filled. Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit (v. 35); full of the Holy Spirit Elizabeth called a blessing down upon Mary and her womb (vv. 41-42); John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit even in his mother's womb (v. 15); and, in today's passage, we witness Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, no longer doubting but believing (vv. 18, 67ff.), no longer dumb but praising God with every fibre of his being.

The same Holy Spirit who was at work then is at work in our lives today. The Holy Spirit is the one who fills us with the very life of God. He is the one who fills us with a joy and peace the world cannot give. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you joy today, for joy is his gift and he gives generously to all without finding fault. Joy comes as we do as Zechariah did: as we ponder, reflect and meditate on God's action in history and in our lives. The joy of Christmas is not a shallow or fleeting joy but rather a wellspring from deep within the being of those who have learnt to delight in God's saving plan unveiled in the birth of the Saviour of Bethlehem.

'Since he is joy, he does not accept entry into a house of sorrow and grief, just like the busy bee will not go into a house full of smoke. If, however, you have prepared yourself with joy he will come and dwell with you in joy. Allow the Master to take his rest untroubled upon the couch of your soul.' (Symeon the New Theologian)

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

Luke 1:67-79

Thursday 25 December

John 1:1-18 • (Solemnity) The Nativity of the Lord

Today we bow down. Today we humble ourselves. Today the Eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, was born into our world. But not born in pomp, or ceremony, or power, or majesty, but in poverty, simplicity and humility. What other response can there be but to bow humbly before the One who from the beginning was the Word and, in the fullness of time, dwelt among us, full of grace and truth (v. 14)? With faith and love we gaze on him in the Bethlehem crib, and with the same faith and love we recognize that he is present sacramentally among us when we celebrate Mass today.

In the mystery which is the liturgy, the climax of Christmas, the birth of the Saviour, is made present to us as effectively and as powerfully as it was two thousand years ago. The mystery of Christmas proclaims to us that our future and destiny is secure in Christ. We have a new beginning because, through grace, we have received power to become children of God, born not by man but by God (v. 12).

Today, we do indeed bow down before the mystery of God becoming man and rejoice from the depths of our being in our future and destiny in Christ. The insight of St Athanasius into the incarnation has served the Church for centuries, because he captures so succinctly and clearly the utter awesomeness and majesty of God becoming man in Jesus of Nazareth: 'There were two things which the Saviour did for us by becoming man. He banished death from us and made us anew; and, invisible and imperceptible as in himself he is, he became visible through his words and revealed himself as the Word of the Father, the Ruler and King of the whole of creation.'

Bowing low has been a theme of this reflection because what other response can there be to such mercy than to bow low in humble praise and adoration of the Father who sent his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit?

'He once had meant to come on earth in heavenly glory, but we sinned, and then he could not safely visit us, except with a shrouded radiance and a bedimmed majesty, for he was God. So he came himself in weakness, not in power.' (Blessed John Henry Newman)

Isaiah 52:7-10 • Psalm 97(98):1-6

Hebrews 1:1-6 • John 1:1-18

Friday 26 December

Matthew 10:17-22 • St Stephen (Feast)

It is one of the more sobering features of the Christmas liturgy that as soon as we have rejoiced in the birth of the Saviour we are plunged right back into the harsh reality of life – namely death. The Church wastes no time in reminding us that when Christ calls us, he bids us come and die with him in order that we may rise with him. The martyrdom of Stephen reminds us that each of us is called to be a witness for Christ. Stephen's witness – for this is what a martyr is, a witness for the faith – entailed paying the ultimate price of laying down his life for his Saviour.

However, it is not on Stephen's brutal death that we should dwell, but on the courage and faith with which he faced it. The world was not worthy of him and in the manner of his death he imitated his Master, praying that the sins of his tormentors be not held against them and that the Father receive his spirit.

As the proto-martyr, the Church's first martyr, Stephen holds a special place of esteem and affection. However, from the time of Stephen until now thousands upon thousands have followed in his footsteps. They show us by their witness that this world, with its false promises and empty rewards, is passing and fleeting, and point us towards another world where Christ reigns in eternal glory.

We are related, through faith, to Stephen and all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, baptized in the blood of sacrifice and clothed in the garment of the new life of the Spirit. We can never know what the Lord has in store for those who love him. We can never know what the Lord will demand of us or what challenge we may face. We can only pray that, as faithful and obedient servants, we will be open and receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. What is sure and clear is that we are called to have courage and stand up for our faith in Christ.

'The martyrs get a birth at the time of their death. They get a new beginning through their end, and a new life through their execution. They who were thought to be extinguished on earth shine brilliantly in heaven.' (St Peter Chrysologus)

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

Matthew 10:17-22

Saturday 27 December

John 20:2-8 • (Feast) St John, Apostle and Evangelist

Today we celebrate the feast-day of St John the Evangelist. For good reason St John is the patron saint of theologians. Perhaps as the youngest apostle and the only one to die a natural death, he had more time and relative peace to reflect, ponder and pray on the deeper meaning of the gospel and the life of Jesus. There is no doubt that St John's insight into the mystery of Christ is unique and profoundly penetrating, leading us into a treasure chest of riches and revelation into the mystery of the Word made flesh.

Unlike the synoptic authors, for whom Jesus' identity unfolded and was unveiled, from the beginning John portrays the disciples as seeing Jesus' glory and recognizing his true identity (see 2:11). For John the miracles are signs pointing to a deeper underlying reality about Jesus' nature, mission or person. Jesus' first sign, the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, points to the new wine of the messianic era which has begun in his person. To Nicodemus the Lord speaks of re-birth by water and the Holy Spirit; to the Samaritan woman at the well he offers living water welling up to eternal life.

In raising Lazarus from the dead, Jesus shows himself to be the resurrection and the life, the Lord who will conquer death and its sting through his death and resurrection. A key to understanding John's theology is the way he approaches Jesus' suffering and death. Jesus is serene and courageous; the cross is his 'hour' and his 'glory' and the moment towards which his entire life has been focused. He is the master of his destiny: he has the authority to lay down his life and the authority to take it up again. John's account of Jesus' suffering and death is an eye-witness testimony of the highest order because he was there at the foot of the cross (19:25-27).

Through his Gospel John invites us to enter the mystery of Christ in ever-deeper measure and in new and exciting ways by encountering the God whom he has seen, heard and touched.

Lord Jesus, your invitation to all men and women of every time and place is the same, 'Follow me.' As we prepare to enter into a new year, may we truly follow you and lay down our lives in loving, obedient and faithful service.

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

John 20:2-8

Sunday 28 December

Luke 2:22-40

We know for a fact that God's greatest work is carried out within the family. We know this because Jesus was born into a family, and that means that there can be no better school for us to grow in holiness and mature. During his long pontificate Pope John Paul II reflected much on the sheer dignity and grandeur of the family and he wrote: 'Our salvation was wrought in the context of the family; and it is thanks to this that all of us are saved. Today's feast is of universal significance and the light of the Holy Family shines out to anywhere where there is a human family – which in fact means everywhere.'

Of course, what is self-evident and striking about every family is that simple fact of its ordinariness. The life of every family is built around the day-to-day realities of existence, the rough and tumble of daily life, and the tensions, hardships and suffering as well as the joy, tenderness, delight and fun of being part of a family. Jesus lived in obscurity for thirty-three years before his public ministry began. We can be certain that during those years his life consisted of the mundane, the routine and the ordinary. However, it was in the ordinary, mundane and routine that Jesus learnt to listen to his Father and to delight in doing his will. The same is true of us: it is within the family that we too learn the art of prayer, the skill of listening to the Lord and the discipline of putting to death our sinful nature, and where we learn day by day to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today, thank God for your family, because it is truly the gift of God. If we cannot love those within our immediate family, we will struggle to love those outside of this circle. It is within the family that we learn to love. It is within the family that we learn to serve. It is within the family that we learn to pray. The family then is a school of the gospel, the 'domestic church' where our Christian vocation is realized and fulfilled.

Lord Jesus, today I praise and thank you for the Holy Family of Nazareth. Fill my heart with gratitude and thanks for the family you have given me, and help me love and serve them as you would have me love and serve them.

Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3 • Psalm 104(105):1-9

Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19 • Luke 2:22-40

Monday 29 December

Luke 2:22-35 • St Thomas Becket

(Feast in England only) (Patron Saint of English Clergy)

St Thomas Becket is the patron saint of the English clergy. On this his feast day we pray for the bishops, priests and deacons of England that they would continue to be faithful and committed to their promises to serve God and lay down their lives for Christ and his Church, as their patron so courageously did.

Thomas Becket was an outstandingly talented man. He attracted the attention of both the religious and secular authorities and was made both Lord Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury. However, over time, his relationship with King Henry II deteriorated to such an extent that the King famously exclaimed from his sick-bed: ‘Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?’ Reginald Fitzurse, Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy and Richard Brito went immediately to Canterbury to challenge the Archbishop. According to the eye-witness accounts of Gervase of Canterbury and Edward Grim they entered the cathedral and confronted him, but he refused to do their bidding. He was slain as he made his way to vespers.

Edward Grim’s eye-witness account makes for harrowing reading indeed: ‘the wicked knight leapt suddenly upon him, cutting off the top of the crown which the unction of sacred chrism had dedicated to God. Next he received a second blow on the head, but still he stood firm and immovable. At the third blow he fell on his knees and elbows, offering himself a living sacrifice, and saying in a low voice, “For the name of Jesus and the protection of the Church, I am ready to embrace death.” But the third knight inflicted a terrible wound as he lay prostrate...“Let us away, knights; this fellow will arise no more.”’

Only three years after his death, so great was the popular clamour for Thomas Becket to be made a saint that he was canonized by Pope Alexander III on 12 July 1174.

‘O God, for the sake of whose Church the glorious Bishop Thomas fell by the sword of ungodly men: grant, we beseech Thee, that all who implore his aid, may obtain the good fruit of his petition.’

1 John 2:3-11 • Psalm 95(96):1-6 • Luke 2:22-35

(In England Only: Col 1:24-29 • Ps 22(23) • Wk 22-24-30 or Mt 10:28-33)

Tuesday 30 December

Luke 2:36-40

Anna stands in a long line of women with the ministry of prophetess, including Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Kgs. 22:14) and the daughters of the apostle Philip (Acts 21:9).

On being widowed after seven years of marriage, Anna dedicated her life to God, never leaving the temple but fasting, praying and worshipping God day and night. So sensitive was she to the Holy Spirit's leading and guiding that the moment she set eyes on the Holy Family, she knew that their child was the promised Messiah bringing redemption to Israel, although she did not understand that he would also bring redemption to all humankind. Today thank and praise God for the faithfulness of Anna and for women like her who throughout history have dedicated their entire lives to loving and serving God.

By virtue of our baptism each of us is called to be a prophet because we share, by God's grace, in the prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ (who was priest, prophet and king). What does it mean for us to share in the prophetic ministry of Jesus? In order to understand this we must first reject the notion that to be a prophet is to know the future or have an insight into events that have not yet happened. A prophet is primarily someone who proclaims God's message to the world, and God's message was and is revealed in the person of Jesus. Jesus is God's message. The prophets of old longed to see our day because all their labour and sacrifice pointed to the ultimate and final revelation of Jesus. Many did not live to see that day, but those who saw it, like John the Baptist, Anna and Simeon, were glad and gave praise to God.

The key to living as prophets and being a prophetic witness is prayer. St Robert Bellarmine said of prayer: 'Prayer enlightens the mind: we cannot directly fix the eye of our soul upon God who is light, without being enlightened by him.' It is through prayer that we learn to be sensitive, responsive, obedient, faithful and docile to the Holy Spirit.

'Prayer is the best weapon we have; it is the key to God's heart.' (Padre Pio)

1 John 2:12-17 • Psalm 95(96):7-10

Luke 2:36-40

Wednesday 31 December

John 1:1-18

On this last day of the year, it may seem incongruous for the Church to present us with a Scripture passage which commences 'In the beginning...'. Yet as we look back over the year and think, perhaps with mixed feelings, of all its joys and sorrows, all the promises kept and the opportunities wasted, it is important for us to be reminded that our Father is the Lord of all time, and in him all things are constantly, truly, made new. It may be that we find ourselves looking back on the resolutions which we made at the beginning of the year, on all our good intentions to improve our commitment to prayer and our spiritual life, and feeling a certain sense of disappointment at our inability to live up to our ideals. Perhaps we find ourselves struggling with the same patterns of sinfulness which we did a year ago, and more.

Well, the Church tells us that today is not a day for disappointment over how little we have achieved, but a day for joy and anticipation over what God has achieved! For today's Scripture invites us to turn our eyes away from the relentless, slow passage of days, months and years, and to look instead towards the free, unending horizon of eternity. The very words 'In the beginning...' are themselves attempting to express the inexpressible. Our minds recoil as we try to grasp the concept of a retrospective eternity. God had no beginning. He always existed. And God always existed as Trinity, with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a perfect harmony of love and unity.

The earth-shattering truth, expressed in today's profound Scripture, is that God – this same God who always existed, and who is the Lord of time – actually became man and lived among us. And he did so for no other reason than that he loved us, and wants each one of us to live in an intimate relationship of love with him, here on earth while we live constrained by the laws of time, and then to join him in an eternity of utter fulfilment.

Father, help me not to be depressed by my weakness, but to be elated by your greatness. Forgive me for my failings during this year, but most of all help me to look towards you during the year to come, to glimpse the wonder of your love for me.

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

John 1:1-18