



We look back at our forefathers with awe and reverence. They were courageous and gave their lives for Christ, the Church and each other. They were of a calibre and stature which grounded the Church as a force to be reckoned with. These early believers witnessed eloquently to Tertullian's saying that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. The seed they planted was a deep, sound and sure foundation. Hebrews reminds us of these qualities displayed in the crucible of persecution unleashed so violently on these first believers (v. 32). They stood their ground against their opponents, they were joyful despite their intense suffering, they were confident that God had his hand on their lives despite their ordeal, and they persevered in the midst of their trials and tribulation. They were exhorted to hold on to these qualities because their faith would be richly rewarded.

Faith is and has always been counter-cultural. We are called to emulate the very qualities we discover living and active in these early believers. We too have to stand our ground, be joyful in affliction, confident in God's providence and persevere – swimming courageously against

the tide. To be a Christian today demands that we be witnesses – that we stand up for our faith, that we be prepared to endure ridicule, calumny and misunderstanding. How is it possible to live like this? What's the key to living life as a true witness to Christ and the gospel? We need to live as the Hebrew Christians lived. They looked towards a life beyond the confines of this one – they were heavenly-minded. Their vision was vertical and heavenly; they looked to a better and lasting world – the kingdom of heaven where Christ will reign forever.

We are involved in a spiritual conflict – a battle for our soul. Every day we are called to resist the enemy, stand firm for Christ, overcome temptation and live the life in the Holy Spirit.

On his own, man has not the power to oppose Satan, but the devil is not second to God, and united with Jesus we can be certain of vanquishing him. Christ is 'God Who is near to us', willing and able to liberate us: that is why the gospel really is 'Good News'. And that is why we must go on proclaiming Christ in those realms of fear and unfreedom. (Pope Benedict XVI)

Hebrews 10:32-39 • Psalm 36(37):3-6, 23-24, 39-40
Mark 4:26-34

With great joy Mary and Joseph went up to the temple in Jerusalem to present Jesus to the Lord. Humbly and gratefully acknowledging the gift of a son, they now wished to give him back to the Lord, as their ancestor Hannah had done many years before: 'Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord' (1 Sam. 1:28). They desired to consecrate Jesus to God, setting him aside to love God and serve God's purposes all his life. Unlike Mary and Joseph, parents so often do not want their children to pursue God's plan for their lives. If you are a parent, do you earnestly desire to consecrate your children so that they may serve the Lord's own purposes for their lives? Have you joyfully given your children to the Lord?

The Presentation of the Lord in the temple also symbolizes Jesus' own consecration to his Father. The Son left heaven to do his Father's will: 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God' (Heb. 10:7). His Father's will was to gather his scattered children back to himself. Through our first parents' disobedience we had turned away from the Father and his plan for our lives. The

tragic result of our choice had been separation from God, the loss of blessedness and of communion with God. The Father chose to accomplish our restoration through his Son. The Son, by becoming man and taking on our human flesh, completely shared our humanity and joined himself to us inseparably. Then, in offering his life to the Father on the cross in atonement for our sins, Jesus took us back to the Father, now purified and cleansed, forgiven and reconciled (Heb. 7:14-17). Jesus, returning to his Father, restored us to blessedness and communion with God: 'Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory...' (John 17:24).

Like Jesus, we are called by the Father to do his will and serve his purposes in this world. Is your greatest desire to serve God's purposes for your life? Will you consecrate your life to the Lord?

Father, all that I am and all that I have comes from you. I give you back my life and consecrate myself to you. I wish to serve your purposes for my life.

Malachi 3:1-4 • Psalm 23(24):7-10

Luke 2:22-40

The people of Jesus' day could not be indifferent to him. They either loved him or hated him. His message was both sweet and bitter. Many hearts and minds were won over to the Good News; but many turned away and were lost.

At the point when today's Gospel begins, Jesus has just read from the Hebrew Scriptures in the synagogue. His reading, from Isaiah, has been received with reverence. On sitting down (the traditional teaching position), Jesus makes a shocking declaration. The promise of Isaiah is fulfilled here, today. The response of the people is fascinating. They embrace and accept him. Amazed by his gracious words and conscious of his background, 'all spoke well of him' (v. 22). All seems well with the world – the prophet is honoured and the people are happy.

Jesus shatters this illusion. He cuts through the veneer of platitude. He realizes that the implications of what he has said have escaped them. He exposes how capricious and fleeting is human praise. He challenges the members of the synagogue to see that God works outside their predetermined ideas. Jesus points to the example of the widow in Zarephath and Naaman

the Syrian, both Gentiles who received the help of God's prophets (1 Kgs. 17; 2 Kgs. 5). Israel, in contrast, had a history of turning its back on God's chosen messengers. Now, in their presence, stood the One to whom the law and the prophets testified. Jesus declares that to reject him is far more serious than to reject the prophets of old. God's plan of salvation is made present in Jesus. Listening to his teaching, the people's apparent approval of Jesus quickly wanes. They turn from praise to thoughts of murder in a matter of moments.

This incident highlights a fundamental question from which no one can escape. The question is: who do you think Jesus is? A prophet? A holy man? An impressive religious leader? We can't go through life and not address this question. There is a bottom line with Jesus: we either accept him or reject him. The synagogue congregation could not ignore him – he challenged their world and he challenges ours too.

Lord Jesus, you endured the humiliation of being a prophet without honour. But you are much more than a prophet, you are true God and true man. You are the light of the world and you call us to be prophetic witnesses to your life.

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19 • Psalm 70(71):1-6, 15, 17

I Corinthians 12:31-13:13 • Luke 4:21-30

After listing various faith-filled men and women of the Old Testament, the author summarizes the lives of many others. There is an interesting division in this summary between those who won victories with God's help, and those who were mistreated, tortured and killed. We might see the first group as a good advert for a life of faith, but do we really want to be like those who were tortured or cruelly executed? In fact, these two aspects are both present in a life of true faith and obedience to God. We will experience victories in Christ, but we should be aware that the Christian life also brings suffering with it. We are not magically protected from suffering by becoming Christians. On the contrary, many great Christians have undergone profound suffering for their faith.

Our fight against sin is often painful, just like an operation to remove something diseased from our bodies. And we encounter resistance because we are living in a way contrary to the beliefs and habits of the world. We may not be actively persecuted, but if we proclaim our faith we will meet with hostility and ridicule.

But none of this need depress us or lead us to despair. In the Christian life there is suffering, but there is also deep joy. We take up our cross and follow Christ, but we also share in the power of his resurrection. He does not shield us from suffering, but he is always sharing it with us, and gives us the strength to endure it. Often it is only through suffering that we will grow and become strong in faith. We believe that Jesus has already won the ultimate victory over sin and evil, and eventually we will come to share in the fullness of that glorious victory.

Let us rejoice with Paul that 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:38-39).

Lord Jesus, we know that you suffered for us, and you are always present to help us in our sufferings. May we have the strength to remain firm in faith through all our trials, till we share in your triumph over sin and death.

Hebrews 11:32-40 • Psalm 30(31):20-24

Mark 5:1-20

The support of a large crowd can often spur on sportsmen and women to achieve what they could not do on their own. The author of Hebrews similarly uses the image of spectators at a race to encourage us in our daily struggle to serve God. In this case, the cloud of witnesses are all those who have gone before us in faith, whether heroes of the Old Testament or our Christian predecessors. Their example can inspire us, and their prayers obtain grace for us from the Lord.

An athlete needs discipline and perseverance to succeed, and the same is true of the spiritual life. We need to train ourselves regularly by prayer, reading Scripture and receiving the sacraments. There are many temptations and obstacles in our path, and if we are not spiritually trained we will not be able to resist them. All this may sound rather austere, but we can take courage from knowing that we do not have to run the race alone. We have the saints on our side, but above all we have our Saviour Jesus Christ. We always need to keep our eyes on him, seeking his help and remembering his example. We

can know, that whatever trials and temptations we are enduring, he has endured them too, and worse afflictions than anything we have to undergo. But he knew that his sufferings were necessary if he was to achieve our salvation, and win through to the joy of his glorious resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand. For this he was willing to endure the shame and pain of death on a cross, and bear the weight of all our sins.

We too can be inspired by knowing that our sufferings are not in vain. If we share in Christ's pain, we will also share in his victory. Our Lord's example, and the vision of future joy, can help us to persevere through whatever troubles we have to face. Let us always remember that 'the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (Rom. 8:18).

Lord Jesus, you endured the agony and humiliation of the cross for us, and now you are raised up in glory. Help us to keep our eyes always on you as we try to imitate your example, and come through our troubles to the joy of eternal life.

Hebrews 12:1-4 • Psalm 21(22):26-32

Mark 5:21-43



We do not regard as good parents those who let their children do whatever they want, and make no attempt to discipline them. Such behaviour is a sign of not caring enough, rather than truly loving, and usually leads to spoiled and badly behaved children. Children are too young to know what is best for them, and it is right and proper for their parents to tell them off when they do wrong, and teach them how to behave.

Our heavenly Father loves us more than any earthly parent, and he too shows his love by teaching and disciplining us. We are like children in not having the wisdom to know what is best, and often pursuing things that will harm us. God's commandments are not meant to stop us having a good time but to protect us from danger. The demands of a Christian life may seem hard at times, but it is not an easy process for sinful human beings to be made holy. The treatment can be painful, but eventually 'it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it' (v. 11).

God loves us too deeply to be satisfied with a few superficial

changes in our lives. We tend to think that we are basically good people who just have a few faults, but God calls us to a radical transformation of our nature. He is not satisfied with anything less than perfect holiness in his children.

We can respond to training and discipline in various ways. We can show resentment and anger, or self-pity and sulkiness, or we can accept it gratefully as the work of our loving Father. If we are open to correction from the Lord, and eager to grow in holiness, we will co-operate with his work in us and experience victories over sin. Let us take up this challenge, knowing that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be with us to help us every step of the way. As we are healed of our wounds and increase in holiness, we will also be able to help others who are going through the same struggle as ourselves.

Heavenly Father, you show your love for us by wanting to correct us and lead us into full righteousness. May we be humble enough to accept your guidance and obey your commands, so that we may one day be perfectly holy.

Hebrews 12:4-7, 11-15 • Psalm 102(103):1-2, 13-14, 17-18
Mark 6:1-6



Have you ever lost a loved one? If so, you will be familiar with the rather baffling range of emotions which accompany natural grief. Anger, frustration, sorrow: all can creep up on us unawares as we try to adjust to the cataclysmic changes in our lives. Perhaps hardest to deal with is the sense of loss and loneliness, accentuated by the little, silly mistakes we make at first, such as making mental notes of important things we will tell our loved ones later, only to remember with leaden desolation that they are no longer around. They say that time is a great healer. We never forget our loved ones. We undergo a process of insight in which God guides us through some of the truths we knew in principle but never had to face or apply in practice. It just takes a bit of time to do this, because we have to assimilate a new way of thinking in which we really encounter spiritual reality.

Today's Scripture gives us a glimpse of this kind of reality – something which we have known from childhood, but maybe never

embraced as life-changing truth. For the author of Hebrews invites us to remember that we are part of a vast spiritual universe, a great family of those who have been redeemed in Jesus and who have entered their destiny in eternity as children of our loving Father. Our God's glory is not remote and forbidding, as portrayed in the terrifying manifestation on Sinai, but the accessible, all-encompassing invitation to eternal love. And our loved ones are there – this is the vital point – they have not ceased to be. Our God, still, is not the God of the dead, but of the living. Those we love, who have gone from us, wait to welcome us too into the destiny that is ours through Jesus.

Lord, lead me through the pain of loss and bereavement, to the realization that in your love all things are made new. Comfort those who grieve, bless those who mourn and give us hope in the resurrection and the life to come. Teach us to trust in the Father, turn to the Son and rely on the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 12:18-19, 21-24 • Psalm 47(48):2-4, 9-11
Mark 6:7-13

Francis Bacon, the sixteenth-century philosopher, once wrote, rather earthily, that 'Money is like muck, not good except it be spread.' Money itself, of course, is neutral since it is inanimate. The problem arises in our attitude to it. We are familiar with the proverb 'Money is the root of all evil', but the Bible quotation from which it originates is probably closer to the mark – 'the love of money is the root of all evils' (1 Tim. 6:10). The strange thing is that our desire for money is, quietly, insatiable.

For most of us, it isn't that we have a burning daily desire for it, but the truth is that we would perhaps like just that little bit more... And even if we get it, it still isn't quite enough. We expand our lifestyles to absorb the money available. We may promise ourselves that we will be more generous, but somehow that never materializes. Isn't it odd, too, that those who clearly have plenty of money, with opulent lifestyles – the very people whom we would expect to be content and secure – are often deeply vulnerable and are bemired by the complexities and snags which worldly wealth brings. If you don't believe it, thumb through

a copy of a magazine like Hello, which lays the private lives of the wealthy before us.

Obviously, we don't have to be wealthy to be greedy and insecure. It is quite possible to be mean and poor at the same time, so our own relative lack of wealth is no guarantee of virtue! What matters is whether or not we really rely on God's love for us. This is what the author of Hebrews is telling us. If we order our lives in the certain knowledge that God loves all of us, then we don't need to be grasping and self-interested. God's love is not subject to budgeting constraints or limitation of resources! There is more than enough for everyone. In the final analysis, nothing else matters. Grubbing around for cash to hoard for our own desires seems so petty in the context of God's pure, fervent, life-transforming love.

Lord, you know all things, and you know the future, so help me to be content with the situation in which you have put me. Help me not to be ensnared by a quest for material things, but to find my fulfilment in enjoying your love right now.

Hebrews 13:1-8 • Psalm 26(27):1, 3, 5, 8-9

Mark 6:14-29

Even nowadays, whenever I injure or hurt myself, I often remember the rather strange thing that used to be said to me as a child, after I had fallen over and scraped my knees: 'Offer it up as a sacrifice!' I can still experience my sense of bafflement at the concept. Children are able to apply logic in a blindingly simple and straightforward way, but unfortunately it is coupled with a lack of insight and experience, which may lead to entirely the wrong conclusions. Hence I used to wonder, as tearfully I nursed my bruised limbs, why God could possibly be pleased if my knees hurt. Even worse, I probably formed the notion deep down in my understanding that God, in some mysterious way, liked a bit of suffering. My intellect knew it had to be wrong, but how else was a child to make sense of how things were explained to him or her? Perhaps if we don't revise these misconceptions, we carry them into adult life with us.

Much later in life, when I was lying in hospital whilst seriously ill, a well-intentioned but misguided visitor said, 'God must love you very much if he allows you to suffer

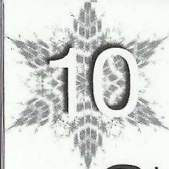
this way.' It brought back all the topsy-turvy logic of childhood, with the unappealing image of a remote, impassive God who stands back as a spectator when we suffer. I would have been quite angry if I had had the energy.

It has taken me some years to make even partial sense of it all. The key – as the writer of today's Scripture tells us – is love. Without love, sacrifice is meaningless. When we give to others, literally loving until it hurts, only then are we offering the kind of sacrifice that God desires. Of course, the times when we suffer involuntarily, as in illness, are harder to explain. I only know that I cannot look at a crucifix and say, 'You don't know what it is like to suffer' – because he does. Perhaps that's a concept which a child would understand, though I'm not sure that I could explain it effectively.

Lord, help me to hold on to the truths I know, and to identify and reject all the mistaken notions of childhood which prevent me from seeing you as you really are, for only in the presence of your love does our life begin to make sense.

Hebrews 13:15-17, 20-21 • Psalm 22(23)

Mark 6:30-34



Simon and his companions were fishermen who came from a fishing community. It was something they had done all their lives, and they never anticipated any change in their lifestyle. They probably loved their work, but no doubt they had had many days like this one, with nothing to show for their efforts. At times like this, maybe it didn't seem such an attractive occupation. After such a night, perhaps they were particularly receptive to hearing Jesus talk about new life.

When Jesus singles out Simon and his companions, they are at first reluctant – understandably so after their fruitless labours of the previous night. But when they do respond to his words, their nets bulge and Jesus displays the fullness and abundance he brings. This is what might be called a parable in action. It is not simply an exhibition of power by Jesus, but something that speaks a clear message: it is impossible to achieve by any human skill what can be done by responding to God's word.

For Simon, it is almost too much. Experienced fisherman that he is, he has never seen anything like it. He is awestruck and humbled. He falls down in penitence, conscious of his

own weakness and sin in the face of God's holiness at work in Jesus. Overwhelmed by what they have seen, Simon and his friends are open to hearing Jesus' call to come and share in his mission. Jesus reassures them that they have nothing to fear – yet they are now to embark on a challenging and dangerous course as they leave everything to follow him.

This encounter by the lake illustrates an eternal truth. The initiative to service always comes from God. So often the call comes to us as individuals in the places where we live and work. It is there that we must respond, and it is there that we must be open to the power of the gospel to transform us. Like the fishermen at the Galilee lakeside, it is often in the midst of our everyday lives and activities that we find God or, perhaps more usually, that he finds us. When we sense the presence of God, we may become more keenly aware of our own inadequacy, but we can be reassured that we have a place in his eternal plan.

Here I am, Lord. Open my heart to hear you speak to me today. Open my mind that I may respond to your call.

Isaiah 6:1-2a, 3-8 • Psalm 138(139):1-8
1 Corinthians 15:1-11 • Luke 5:1-11



God was and is before the dawn of time: 'Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me', says God in Isaiah (43:10). This, then, is the God who decided to create every kind of life form. The mystery of this creator God is more fully revealed to us in John 1, which clarifies that nothing was made without God's help, and in Ephesians 1, where it is made clear that God even chose each one of us 'before the foundation of the world'. Taken as a whole, these texts give a strong sense of the primacy of God and of his initiative in the entire process of creation. God spoke the first word, which was uttered long before Genesis was written, for the book postdates both the Kings and the Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Genesis is a poem containing some basic teachings presented in mythic form. This means the stories are not supposed to be read in a literal way, but in a literary one, calling into play all our senses and feelings in response to a God who is all love and whose sole motive is love. The very pulse and throb of the poetry,

the regularity of the description, with God at each stage of creation speaking, forming, naming that creation and seeing that it is good, gives a sense of the dependability and predictability of a heartbeat. The God we worship aches with love for all creation. God made each being, not out of need, but out of a profound desire to love it into life.

God said, 'Let there be light'. All creation is essentially light and there is no darkness in God, 'the Father of lights with whom there is no variation' (Jas. 1:17). Insofar as we see darkness, in ourselves, in others or in the world generally (and heaven knows there is ample evidence in our daily newspapers at least to give pause), it is because someone other than God – under the influence of evil – has intervened to jeopardize the divine plan. A sobering thought!

God our Father, you are love itself. Teach me the lesson that I too can do more for the building of your kingdom if I try to love you and others with my whole being.

Genesis 1:1-19 • Psalm 103(104):1-2, 5-6, 10, 12, 24, 35
Mark 6:53-56



Yesterday we heard the mythical account of the first four 'days' of creation; today we have the last three days, culminating in God's Sabbath rest. According to this interpretation, the more sophisticated creatures are brought forth towards the end of the 'week', and humankind, the most precious to God and the most capable of loving relationship with him, comes last of all, bringing God's labours to a fitting climax. The human creature is the one to whom God has given an awesome responsibility: stewardship of the earth, and the challenge to acquit himself with wisdom and discernment. Human beings are unique, for they alone among living creatures can study, and reason, and know, and deeply love. They are also the only beings who are conscious of the greatness of God and God's works. 'Their eyes saw his glorious majesty,' says the sage, Sirach, 'and their ears heard the glory of his voice' (Sir. 17:13).

'Male and female, he created them' (v. 27). When Genesis speaks of the creation of humankind, it is not just the discrete, singular man to whom it refers, nor just the discrete, singular woman. It

is the couple. The image of God in which humankind is made is not an individual affair, for the non-relational human being is lonely and full of pride and self-absorption. No, human creation is about the meeting of two people who are united in communion and who between them are the bearers of life.

The Trinity is a mystery we are invited to immerse our minds and hearts in. God is three persons in one being. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist in one nature. We are made in the image and likeness of the Blessed Trinity. We were created to know and love God and partake in the divine nature. We can have a living, dynamic and intimate relationship with each member of the Blessed Trinity. Our destiny is to enjoy this relationship and look forward to an eternity worshipping the majesty of the Father, the beauty of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Father, we desire to learn more and more about the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. We praise the Father for the gift of creation, the Son for the work of redemption and the Holy Spirit for making us holy.

Genesis 1:20-2:4 • Psalm 8:4-9

Mark 7:1-13

The holy season of Lent begins. It is a time for us to be 'reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5:20). It is a time for us to 'repent, and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:15). It is a time for us to grasp in a new, fresh and meaningful way the summons we have received to convert and turn back to God.

There is a way in which we cannot recover a knowledge of God's love for us without first recovering a sense of sin. Sin is not a popular subject these days. We have developed a kind of cultural sophistication which refuses to acknowledge this most basic of human realities. We twist and turn and wrestle with it but alas we can find no other real name or word for it – sin is sin. It is a falling short; a rebellion and refusal to do God's will; an insistence on doing our own will resulting in interior conflict.

Thankfully, Lent is a season when God pours out upon us his abundant grace and blessing. However, we have a part to play. God created us without us but he cannot save us without us. We have to co-operate; we have to choose and partake as the Spirit moves in us, convincing, convicting and leading us onto the highway of holiness, the road of conversion and repentance.

The spiritual practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving open us up to this grace. Jesus promised that if we practise these disciplines, in the right way, we will receive a reward from the Father in heaven (v. 4). What is this reward? It is the rich and deep blessing of coming to know God's love, mercy and forgiveness. Jesus stressed that these acts must not be merely external, designed to attract or (worse) seek the approval and affirmation of others. We must be wholehearted in our desire to receive the new heart that God wants to give us (see Joel 2:12).

As we embrace our call to pray with new fervour, fast with renewed focus and draw close to God through prayer, let us consider the following prayer of St Catherine of Siena:

'Cancel out our sins today, then O true God, and wash our soul's face with your only begotten Son's blood, poured out for us, so that, dead to ourselves and living for him, we may offer him a return for his suffering with bright face and undivided soul.'

Joel 2:12-18 • Psalm 50(51):3-6, 12-14, 17
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2 • Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Does today's Gospel excite you or depress you? Do you think in terms of how wonderful it is to be chosen by the Lord to spread, preach and proclaim the gospel? Or does your heart sink and, secretly and silently, you think, 'I am so glad others have this gift and especially priests, nuns and religious, because I don't feel comfortable doing this at all'?

We probably experience a mixture of reactions. The truth is that most of us find witnessing to our faith difficult and challenging. We don't want to be associated with the 'God squad' or accused of being 'Bible bashers' but also we have a healthy respect for people's right not to have religion or faith forced upon them. The truth, however, is that we are the least likely people to force anything upon anyone. Forcing our faith upon people isn't really our problem – our problem is we just don't know how to go about talking to people about it. And for this reason we have conflated a whole set of excuses about why we don't hand it on more directly. In this Year of Faith, and especially as Lent is now underway, we can know within us a desire to preach and proclaim the gospel.

The world has a great need to hear the gospel message. Not only does it have a need but it has the right. In *Evangelii nuntiandi* Pope Paul VI wrote:

Can it be regarded as a crime against the liberty of another to proclaim in the spirit of joy the gospel we have received from the all-merciful God? Why should it be only errors and falsehood, the unworthy and obscene, which may be proposed? Can it be right that these should be included, as, alas, they frequently are, through the persuasive and pernicious propaganda of the mass media or as a result of the undue tolerance of legislation, or of the cowardice of good men and the audacity of evil? To proclaim Christ and his kingdom with all due respect for others is not merely the right of the evangelizer; it is his duty. (para. 80)

Lord Jesus, here I am, send me. Create within me a burning and confident assurance in the power of the gospel to save. Help me to be as gentle as a dove but as shrewd as a serpent. Grant me also a loving heart which shares, teaches and proclaims the gospel with gentleness and sincerity.

Acts 13:46-49 • Psalm 116(117)
Luke 10:1-9

Our culture is more into dieting than it is into fasting. Of course, fasting can also lead to weight loss but this is not its goal or purpose. We fast to draw near to God. We practise this ancient discipline so as to learn that we do not live on bread alone but on the word of God. Fasting, like lots of things in the Christian life – we can think of forgiveness and evangelization as examples – is a great idea until you actually have to do it!

Ascetic practices were very important to religious groups in Jesus' day. They were an important sign of one's devotion to God and of one's radical commitment as a disciple, whether one was a disciple of St John the Baptist or a leading Pharisee of the day. And a failure to fast – as is clear from today's Gospel – attracted attention and criticism. Jesus clearly indicated that a time would come when his disciples would fast, but while the Bridegroom was among them, it was not fitting.

Fasting has a long and distinguished tradition in the Christian Church. In the *Didache*, a Christian writing from the second century, it is reported that while Jews kept private fasts on Mondays and Tuesdays, Christians did so

on Wednesdays and Fridays in memory of the Passion of Christ. For them the practice of fasting was understood as a way of humbling themselves before God (Isa. 58:3-9) and strengthening their prayer (Tobit 12:8; 2 Chronicles 20:3). Rabbinic literature also linked fasting with almsgiving. An early Jewish writing from the same period stated: 'The merit of a fast is in proportion to the charity dispensed.'

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are signs of our desire to convert to God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, that deep well of instruction from which we can freely draw, helps us to understand these spiritual disciplines, teaching that through their practice we are able to express conversion in relation to ourselves, to God and to others. Alongside these, the writers cite: efforts at reconciliation with one's neighbour, tears of repentance, concern for the salvation of one's neighbour, the intercession of the saints and the practice of charity 'which covers over a multitude of sins' (para. 1434).

Lord, help me to draw near to you, and in doing so know you more personally and deeply and walk with you more faithfully during my day.

Isaiah 58:1-9 • Psalm 50(51):3-6, 18-19

Matthew 9:14-15

The vast majority of the readers of Bible Alive are involved in their parishes all over the world. Many are Mass Readers and Eucharistic Ministers; others are involved in all manner of ministries within their parish communities. The vast majority have known the blessing of God in their lives and have practised their faith for a long time. They are upstanding and wonderful people making a contribution not only to their parish communities but to society at large.

Because of the incredible generosity of these readers, we are also able to send our magazine into prisons all over the world, where many have experienced radical and life-changing conversions from destructive lifestyles. Some of our readers in prison are incarcerated for committing pretty heinous crimes. We send the magazine to convicted murderers, paedophiles, bank robbers, thieves and so on. You name the crime, we have readers who are doing the time. That's the point, though, isn't it? There but for the grace of God go you and I.

Jesus did not come to call the righteous but the unrighteous. We are all beggars before the throne of God. We are all in need of God's

mercy and forgiveness. One thing is for sure, tax collectors have never been liked, but in first-century Palestine they were really no more than traitors and were especially despised, reviled and hated by the people. If a man is judged by the company he keeps, then Jesus was judged harshly for his embrace of Levi (Matthew). Jesus would, however, have none of it and in effect said, 'I came to call precisely those whom you may think are not only beyond the pale but beyond redemption, for no one is beyond my healing and mercy.'

This is what makes the gospel so scandalous. The truth is that we are all sick and in need of healing. In fact we are all in desperate need. How do we know this? Well, just look into your own heart. The Holy Spirit is quick to shed his light into the dark recesses of our desires, motivations and sins. We all enter the kingdom of God on our knees, asking God for mercy and forgiveness. We are united in solidarity to each other not because of our righteousness but our unrighteousness.

Lord, help me to respond like Levi, immediately and generously, and restore to me the joy of salvation, which is the joy of knowing your mercy and forgiveness in my life.

Isaiah 58:9-14 • Psalm 85(86):1-6

Luke 5:27-32

What are you doing for Lent? Are you giving something up? Or are you taking something up?

One thing which you might consider taking up is a prayerful study of the Gospel readings from each Sunday of Lent. The six Gospel readings for the Lenten season draw us into the mystery of Christ in a very deep and rich way. It is as if the Church wants to 'fast-track' us into the Paschal Mystery so that it can have a radical impact on our lives. Our problem is that we don't think in terms of change or transformation or growing in holiness. We tend to think that such enthusiasm is for the young or new converts – but this is a mistaken and, frankly, rather darkened way of thinking. The Holy Spirit wants to work in each one of us so that we all taste anew and afresh the new humanity we received in baptism.

So what do you make of today's Gospel with its account of Jesus' temptations in the desert? Nowadays talk of the devil can make us feel uncomfortable and even fearful. Uncomfortable because we sophisticates of the twenty-first century struggle with this notion of personified evil – the devil, Satan, demons – and so we relegate it to the dark ages. Well, the Church is

having none of it. Many look to the Second Vatican Council as a time when the Church broke free from some shackles of the past, opened up the windows and ushered in a new beginning. And this is true of course – the Italians have a word for it, *aggiornamento* meaning 'new life, new beginning'. However, even through these times of renewal, the Church never deviates from the truth of revelation and of the Scriptures.

To maintain today, therefore, that Jesus' words about Satan express only a teaching borrowed from his culture and are unimportant for the faith of other believers is evidently to show little understanding of the Master's character or of his age. If Jesus used this kind of language and, above all, if he translated it into practice during his ministry, it was because it expressed a doctrine that was to some extent essential to the idea and reality of the salvation he was bringing. ('Christian Faith and Demonology', Congregation of Divine Worship, 26 June 1975)

Lord, give me the strength and the grace to resist the evil one, first in my own mind and heart and, second, in the world around me.

Deuteronomy 26:4-10 • Psalm 90(91):1-2, 10-15

Romans 10:8-13 • Luke 4:1-13

The word 'holy' occurs more times in Leviticus than in any other book of the whole Bible. Leviticus is a holy book. Since the beginning God has wanted his people to be holy, as he is holy (vv. 1-2).

The Israelites were unique among their neighbours in the ancient Near East: they enjoyed a close and intimate relationship with God their Creator. Other nations pledged allegiance to gods and idols, some in human form, but the Israelites gave themselves wholeheartedly to the one, true and living God. In order to guide them in his way, the Lord gave them laws, instructions and commandments. The book of Leviticus contains guidance on how to live.

There is no doubt that Leviticus is not an easy book to read. It gives detailed instruction on almost every aspect and facet of life as a faithful and obedient Jew. In obeying these laws the people of Israel would be a living and shining witness to other nations of God's gracious and loving nature.

The liturgy helps us to 'cut to the chase' and get to the very heart of the teaching contained in this holy book. It draws our attention to Leviticus 19 where we find a

summary of all that God intended for his people in their relationship with others: 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (v. 18). This follows an earlier call to 'be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy' (v. 2). Love and holiness are deeply and closely entwined. God created us out of love and has called each of us to love him and love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

The fourth-century rabbi Tanhuman bar Abba was once asked why the psalmist likened the righteous to a palm and a cedar tree (Ps. 92:12). He replied that from far away the cedar and the palm tree stand out because they are taller than other trees. Furthermore, people can stand beneath them and enjoy their shade. Like the palm and cedar trees we are called to stand out because of our love for others.

'Faith in action is love, and love in action is service. By transforming that faith into living acts of love, we put ourselves in contact with God himself, with Jesus our Lord. To be a Christian is nothing other than to give of oneself for the sake of Christ. We have been created to love and to be loved.' (Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15

Matthew 25:31-46

Christian tradition tells of many masters of the spiritual life, men and women who dedicated their lives to prayer and have left us a rich legacy of how to pray and how to live – St Augustine of Hippo, St Benedict, St Ignatius of Loyola, St Catherine of Genoa and St Teresa of Avila, to mention only a few. However, the true master of prayer is Jesus himself. The Our Father is the prayer of the Master and each word comes directly from God the Father (John 17:7). In the rich tradition of Christian prayer the Our Father has pride of place and is our first prayer, the foundation stone of all our prayer.

Jesus taught that it is possible to pray in an empty, meaningless and even chaotic way. He called it 'babbling like pagans' (v. 7 NIV). He had in mind, perhaps, the kind of praying that Elijah mocked in the prophets who prayed to the pagan god Baal (1 Kgs. 18:26-29). Our prayer to God is rooted in the Word of God (Sacred Scripture). We are taught by the Holy Spirit to pray to 'Our Father'. Jesus gave us the words to pray to the Father and sent the Spirit so that these words would become 'spirit and life' (John 6:63). The Our Father, then, is a gift from Jesus to the Church.

According to the *Didache* (an early Christian writing) Christian communities would pray the Our Father three times a day, substituting this prayer for the 'Eighteen Benedictions' which formed part of a faithful Jew's prayer. Today the Our Father is an essential and integral part of our liturgical prayer. St John Chrysostom taught: 'The Lord teaches us to make prayer in common for all our brethren. For he did not say "My Father" who art in heaven, but "Our Father", offering petitions for the common Body.' Paul taught that 'the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father"' (Rom. 8:15 NIV).

During Lent we pray the Our Father with a desire to plumb its depths and mystery. For we are children of the Father and, through the death and resurrection of Jesus our Lord, we approach the Father with freedom, confidence and renewed boldness.

Lord Jesus, I give you thanks and praise for the gift of the Our Father. For with its blessed and holy words I proclaim the Good News of salvation.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrian empire was Israel's nemesis, its archenemy. In 721 BC the Assyrians conquered Israel (the northern kingdom) and summarily uprooted and deported its entire population. There was no love lost between these two nations. The patron deity of Nineveh was Ishtar, the pagan goddess of love and war. On the face of the earth it would have been hard to find a people more diametrically opposed to the Israelites. How striking it is, then, that the prophet Jonah was sent precisely to this people and they received his message of repentance and conversion warmly and immediately.

This story in the book of Jonah was not written with the Ninevites in mind. Their city fell to the marauding and conquering Medes and Babylonians in 612 BC. No, this moving story of their acceptance of the message of repentance was written for God's chosen people and for us. It was written to highlight the truth that repentance is the way to life and the key to receiving the tender mercy and forgiveness of God. The sign of Jonah is the Paschal Mystery, and we receive it on our knees in humble repentance and adoration.

Repentance, like many things in the Christian life, does not come naturally. In fact, it could be said that we cannot truly repent without the grace of the Holy Spirit. It is equally true that no grace or blessing or mercy can be poured out upon us without our having a repentant and humble heart. How true are the words of C.S. Lewis: 'It is after you have realized that there is a real moral law, and a power behind that law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that power – it is after all this and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk to us. When you are sick, you will listen to the doctor.'

Lent, then, is a season for discovering the gift and the joy of repentance. We cannot fabricate it or feign it. We need the grace of revelation, helping us to focus on our wrongdoing, our sinfulness and our hardness of heart. In this moment of grace, we cry out: 'Lord, have mercy upon me a sinner.'

Lord, help me to respond generously and humbly to your call and to know in my heart the joy and freedom of sincere and life-changing repentance.

If praise of God is the highest form of prayer, then intercession is the most common – common in the sense of most frequent, most human and most heartfelt. We pray for what we want and need, and for the things that are closest to our heart. While the language of praise of God is adoration and worship, the language of intercession is asking, seeking, knocking, receiving, finding and opening.

In Jesus' teaching on intercession there is very real encouragement for us to be bold, confident and brazenly presumptuous. This kicks against our nature. We don't like to be overly bold, confident or presumptuous as it can lead to disappointment. Who hasn't prayed for something only to find it hasn't happened or been granted? Nevertheless, there is no escaping Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel.

Bible scholars tell us that Jesus' words could be more accurately translated: 'Keep asking and it will be given; keep seeking and you will find; keep knocking and the door will be opened to you.' The things that we ask for in this kind of persistent way are those that are closest and dearest to our hearts. We beg for God's help when someone close to us is sick or dying. Parents know only too

well how quickly they turn to God in times of trouble, upset and distress. Young people pray for exam success, and old people for peace and quiet. God encourages us to pray for these things and to be assured that he knows our deepest desires and needs.

Jesus devoted his entire life to prayer. We learn from him. When the time of his Passion came, he asked the Father if his divine plan could be changed. He didn't just simply ask: he begged, pleaded and beseeched the Father, offering up loud cries and tears. When he realized this was not possible, he fully embraced God's plan.

The Spirit leads us to ask God for good things. What are these good things? They are the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, understanding, counsel and fear of the Lord. We can receive these gifts in abundance because the Son has given us access to the Father. Jesus can instruct us to seek and knock because he is the door and the way.

Lord, teach me to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, believing that all the things I need and want will be given to me as well.

Esther 4:17 • Psalm 137(138):1-3, 7-8

Matthew 7:7-12

Since the fourth century the Catholic Church has commemorated on this day the selection of St Peter as chief apostle and his role as the first bishop of Rome. According to tradition the 'Chair of St Peter' refers both to the actual chair that St Peter sat in as he presided over the Church in Rome and to the gift of the papacy itself. Today we are encouraged to pray and reflect on his special role as 'servant of servants' and 'first among equals', and as the rock upon which the Church was built.

St Peter was given a special and unique role in history to establish the Church. This Galilean fisherman, a Jew and a married man, was chosen by Jesus to be the first pope, the first leader of the largest Church on earth. Today, in direct apostolic succession, Joseph Ratzinger stands in the shoes of the fisherman. In fact, every bishop is directly linked through an unbroken apostolic succession back to the first apostles and to St Peter himself. The Pope is a sign of this unity and this rock of stability. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council taught:

The Roman Pontiff, as successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the

whole company of the faithful. The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular churches, which are constituted after the model of the universal church; it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists. And for that reason precisely each bishop represents his own Church, whereas all, together with the pope, represent the whole Church in a bond of peace, love and unity. (Lumen gentium 23)

Today we pray especially for Pope Benedict, thanking God for the gift of his ministry. We pray that he would walk in the shoes of the humble fisherman and not in the palace of Constantine. Like St Peter, the Pope is only a man. He needs our support, our best wishes and most of all our prayers. We pray also that, like St Peter, the grace of revelation would lead him as he holds out the life-giving teaching of the gospel.

Lord God and Father, you built your Church on the rock of St Peter's confession of faith. May nothing divide or weaken our unity in faith and love.

1 Peter 5:1-4 • Psalm 22(23)

Matthew 16:13-19

The Bible contains many demanding and challenging sayings, but perhaps none more so than Matthew 5:48: 'You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Often this verse is taken in isolation and explored in and of itself, which is fine, as it invites us to study and pray on what 'perfect' means. However, if we link it, as it should be, to the whole, we see that the call to perfection is related to the call to love our enemies. Jesus was once asked, 'And who is my neighbour?' (Luke 10:29). But we should ask the Lord: 'And who is my enemy?'

How would you answer? Who is your enemy? G.K. Chesterton amusingly said that the reason we are called to love our neighbour and our enemy is that all too often they are the same person! How good are you at loving your enemy and praying for them? The truth is that we find this nigh on impossible but, with God's grace, all things are possible, including loving our neighbour who may well be our enemy.

So how is this possible? By what power can we find it in ourselves to love and care for those who have hurt or wounded us or who positively wish us ill? Paul explains:

'Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come' (2 Cor. 5:17). Our old nature died with Christ on the cross; our new nature is given to us through the power of the resurrection. What we need to do is step out in faith and put the new creation into practice. Living by faith means that in the cut and thrust of daily living we can live in a new way.

The way to love our enemy is to pray for them. Think of anybody whom you would consider an enemy and make a conscious decision to pray for them. This will be difficult at first – but push through the difficulty and the resistance you feel in your heart. Ask the Father to bless them, to pour out his love and mercy upon them. As we do this, something wonderful and marvellous occurs within us as the Spirit pours out his love into our hearts.

Father, just as St Polycarp laid down his life, may I too lay down my life and commit myself to living a life of love, mercy and forgiveness.

Deuteronomy 26:16-19 • Psalm 118(119):1-8
Matthew 5:43-48

How do you read Scripture? Are you curious, questioning and inquisitive? Or are you passive, incurious and unquestioning? Maybe there is a more middle-of-the-road position, in which we are neither one nor the other. But you know what they say about those in the middle of the road: they get run over! Without a doubt the best way to read the Scriptures is with a curious, questioning and inquisitive mind. The Spirit encourages us to be like this. We are to be, if you like, scriptural, faith or spiritual detectives – taking nothing at face value, seeking the deeper meaning, looking for the connections, the undercurrents, the signs that point to the deeper mystery.

Today's account of the Transfiguration is a perfect Scripture with which to begin this process. Why was Jesus transfigured? What purpose did it serve? Why did he take only three disciples with him? Why Peter, James and John? Why did Peter betray the Lord after having witnessed first hand such an amazing miracle? All interesting questions and ones about which the Spirit will surely enlighten us.

The Transfiguration was a foretaste, a glimpse into the life to come. The disciples were allowed

to see what happens when a human being is completely suffused by the knowledge of God's love. As the second person of the Blessed Trinity, from eternity Christ's glory has been that he is the beloved Son of the Father. But now, as man, Jesus reveals how our sinful humanity will also be glorified.

As we in faith embrace Jesus as the manifestation of God's loving plan of salvation, a wonderful transformation takes place in us. We also become a gloriously new creation, destined to share in the same glory as Jesus himself. Through baptism, by grace, and not by our own merits, God will raise us up on the last day. Our bodies are destined to be transformed by the love and glory of God. Christ in us, the hope of glory, is the promise of being a new creation. We can know and experience something of this transfiguration in our own lives. In prayer, when we read God's Word and supremely when we receive the Eucharist, we come in touch with God's divine life and say, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here.'

Lord, we are not changed by our own efforts but by accepting and receiving your life and grace.

Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18 • Psalm 26(27):1, 7-9, 13-14
Philippians 3:17-4:1 • Luke 9:28-36

If you listen carefully, many sermons or teachings on the faith are basically a moral message. What does this mean? Well, a priest, deacon or catechist will remind us of our obligation to be kind, merciful, compassionate, generous and so on. Whenever this message is preached or proclaimed we mostly switch off because a moral message in and of itself is, let's be honest, boring, predictable and not very compelling at all. Which of us doesn't understand that we should be more merciful, kind, generous, etc. We get this, and being told we should be so by someone who probably isn't much more kind, generous or merciful than ourselves does not really make our hearts burn with the gospel.

Many today think of Jesus as a great moral teacher and in today's Gospel we encounter some of his moral teaching. Or do we? Well, yes, we do, but we need to understand this teaching in a deeper way. Jesus was not teaching us to be moral *per se*, but to imitate the Father. We are called to be merciful in the same way that God the Father is merciful, and to do this we need to find out what God's mercy looks like. God the Father is 'slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love' (Ps. 103:8). God's

mercy is different from human mercy because it sees a person for whom Jesus was willing to lay down his life. God's mercy is rooted in the truth that every human being is dearly loved by God. Jesus is calling us to think with the Father and love with the Father. This is so much more compelling and exciting than simply being moral. Even the very best of us, the most moral and most noble, know that in our hearts we are fallen and need God's grace. Morality, as good as it is, is in this sense external whereas the Father transforms us from within and this enables us to live righteous lives. God wants us to know his mercy and kindness and generosity in our lives and then give witness to it. Through humble repentance and confession of sins we become recipients of God's love, kindness and mercy, and in receiving this blessing we are able to give to others.

Father, have mercy upon me. Teach me to love as you love. Teach me to show compassion and kindness to others. Teach me to reveal your goodness to the world.

Daniel 9:4-10 • Psalm 78(79):8-9, 11, 13

Luke 6:36-38

What kind of behaviour or way of life can make you, to quote Jesus, 'a child of hell' (v. 15)? Nowadays we tend to think in terms of those who have fallen into drug addiction or sexual sin in its many forms or criminal activity of one kind or another. Back in the sixteenth century fornication, adultery, prostitution and homosexuality were capital offences in England. Those tried (yes, such things went to court) and found guilty were punished, at the very least, with a whipping and then exiled from their community – at the very worst they were hung or beheaded. Indeed, even today, in some countries where Islamic religious fundamentalism holds sway, people are treated in a similar fashion. Thank God, in our own land those days are long gone! It is striking, therefore, that Jesus reserves his harshest criticism for the religious elite of his day – the Pharisees, the professional religious who had dedicated their lives to God.

Who are the Pharisees of today? How are we to understand this Gospel reading? Well, clearly, those who are full-time religious today face the same temptation as the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Our clergy wear long, flowing robes, they are

greeted in the market-place, they can place burdens on people, and so on. However, the truth is that we are all guilty of hypocrisy and we all have something of the Pharisee in us – that sense of self-righteousness which comes from the delusion that we are in some way superior to others. Jesus shattered this illusion. In fact, one can reasonably deduce from Jesus' teaching that it is those who have an acute sense of their own sin, their own unworthiness and frailty, who are truly his disciples.

At Bible Alive we frequently receive letters from our readers in prison and are constantly struck by the compelling, beautiful and powerful witness of God's grace in their lives. They write and witness from a position of humility and not arrogance. Lent is a wonderful time to learn the virtue of humility. We are all fallen, we are all beggars, none of us is righteous. We all need God's grace and salvation. When we lose sight of this we are in danger. God give us the gift of self-knowledge.

Father in heaven, set me free from seeking the approval of others in my Lenten observations. Purify my heart and my motives as I seek to serve you and give my life to you.

Isaiah 1:10, 16-20 • Psalm 49(50):8-9, 16-17, 21, 23

Matthew 23:1-12

Today's reading has two parts: the first part focuses on Jesus predicting his death (vv. 17-19); the second on the request of James and John's mother (vv. 20-28). Both are linked and both reveal the most profound truth of the Christian revelation. Jesus turned our understanding of how to live upside down. He revealed a new humanity and a new way of thinking and behaving in relation to each other. Perhaps it was this that G.K. Chesterton had in mind when he reflected that the Christian faith had not so much been tried and found wanting but, in fact, it had never been tried. You see, at the very core of the Christian message is humility: God's humility and our call to live humble lives. This message and way of life is rooted in the example of Jesus.

Jesus came to serve and to humble himself, and we are called to do the same. Jesus transformed our understanding of what it means to be great, and through love, service and humility we can all be great. This attitude is the very opposite of what we see acted out in today's reading where, in a naked case of nepotism, James and John's mother asks the Lord to grant her sons privilege and status.

Living humbly is one of the key themes running through the apostle Paul's writings. He urges us as Christians to 'count others better than yourselves' (Phil. 2:3) and teaches that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Quoting from an early Christian hymn, Paul explains why we should live humble lives: '[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name' (Phil. 2:5-9).

'Everybody can serve. You don't need a college degree to serve. You don't need to know about Plato or Aristotle to serve. You don't need to know about Einstein's theory of relativity or the second theory of thermodynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love, and you can be that servant, that exalted position in the kingdom of God.'
(Martin Luther King Jr)

Jeremiah 18:18-20 • Psalm 30(31):5-6, 14-16

Matthew 20:17-28

Cardinal John Henry Newman had a way with words. As one example, take the following quotation on the subject of wealth: 'All bow down before wealth. Wealth is that to which the multitude of men make instinctive homage. They measure happiness by wealth; and by wealth they measure respectability...[I]t is a homage resulting from a profound faith...that with wealth they may do all things.' As he captures so eloquently, the problem with wealth is that it easily becomes an idol to which we bow down in worship.

Today's parable, unique to St Luke's Gospel, also explores the eternal danger of wealth and God's preferential love for the poor. What is particularly striking and, yes, sobering about the parable is the presumption that the rich man goes to hell after death (vv. 22-23). It is as if wealth blinded him to the reality of eternal salvation. He indulged his body, living in luxury, but, we can safely assume, neglected his soul. On the other hand, Lazarus does nothing to deserve heaven. The fact that he has lived in dire poverty appears to be enough to merit him heaven and the gift of eternal life. We can also see how salvation includes the body and the soul for in his torment the

rich man longs to have even a drop of water on his parched tongue to slate his thirst. The parable also highlights the finality of heaven and hell, and how after death repentance is not possible.

To understand the mystery touched upon in the parable invites prayer and study but the message is clear. It is, however, perhaps too simple to deduce that the rich man went to hell because he was wealthy and the poor man to heaven because he was poor. The sin of the rich man was his cold indifference to Lazarus. You have to be pretty callous to ignore the pleas of a man who simply longs to eat the crumbs from your table.

God loves the poor and we, who have plenty, are called to give to those in want. We are living through an especially austere time and people are suffering from want of food, and not just in the developing world. In this Year of Faith we need to renew our efforts to reach out to the poor, to be united to them in love and solidarity and to give generously.

Lord, teach me to give and not count the cost.

Jeremiah 17:5-10 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6

Luke 16:19-31