



The Sea of Galilee is particularly susceptible to sudden and violent storms. Formed in a basin surrounded by mountains, cool air is sucked down through the narrow mountain passes where it meets the hot humid air of the sea. This natural phenomenon produces furious and turbulent squalls which are powerful enough to convince even an experienced fisherman like Peter that he and his friends are going to drown: 'Teacher, do you not care if we perish?' (v. 38). Mark informs us that Jesus is so unconcerned that he is sleeping – resting his head on a cushion! Consider the contrasts before us: a violent, life-threatening storm, terrified men – and Jesus fast asleep on a cushion! No wonder Peter thinks the Lord doesn't care!

Jesus' response to the drama reveals him as the Lord God, the Lord of Creation. He commands the storm to be still and rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. In the face of such an awesome display of God's power and authority the disciples ask the right question:

'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?' (v. 41).

Reflecting precisely on this question, Paul wrote: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together' (Col. 1:15-18). John also pondered on the question of Jesus' identity. He introduced him by saying: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made' (John 1:1-3). As we mature and grow in the Christian life we penetrate ever more deeply into the mystery of who Jesus is. Jesus is our Creator as well as our Redeemer, and the only true and right response is to bow down and worship him.

2 Samuel 12:1-7a, 10-17 • Psalm 50(51):12-17

Mark 4:35-41



The Lord will come with mighty power, and give light to the eyes of all who serve him, alleluia.'

Under Jewish Law a woman was required, after giving birth to a child, to offer to the Lord in sacrifice a lamb or, if she could not afford it, two turtledoves or two young pigeons (Lev. 12:6-8). Mary and Joseph, in bringing Jesus to the temple, fulfilled the prescribed legal requirement. At the same time they also consecrated Jesus to God: 'you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb' (Exod. 13:12). In presenting Jesus, Mary and Joseph were returning to the Lord, with thanksgiving, the very gift that he had given them. Their offering expressed the depth of their devotion and love of God.

Simeon and Anna also gave God the worship of their hearts. Simeon fulfilled perfectly the description of those in the Scriptures who are seeking and delighting in the Lord, longing for his coming (Mal. 3:1). The Spirit rested upon Simeon, preparing his heart for the Lord's coming and causing him to long to set his eyes on the Christ of the Lord (vv. 25-26). Delighting

in Jesus, he declared: 'mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel' (vv. 30-31). Similarly Anna was seeking the Lord. She had been in the temple for years, longing and praying for the Lord's coming. Now drawn by the Spirit, who had placed this longing in her heart, she blessed Jesus, the delight of her heart (vv. 36-38).

In Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna we see so much desire, longing and love for the Lord. They rejoiced as they recognized that Jesus was the longed-for Christ. It was the Holy Spirit who gave birth to this desire, longing, recognition and delight in their lives. The Spirit wants to give us a similar longing – no longer, of course, for the first coming of the Lord, but for his return. The Spirit wishes to purify our hearts from all dullness, indifference and apathy so that we may desire to see the light of Jesus' face and long to set our eyes on his glory when he comes again. By creating in our hearts this longing for and delight in Jesus, the Holy Spirit consoles and comforts us (v. 25).

Malachi 3:1-4 • Psalm 23(24):7-10

Hebrews 2:14-18 • Luke 2:22-40



God's power breaks forth in Jesus' ministry. Today's dramatic encounter reveals much about his mission and ministry. He came to liberate prisoners and set captives free. Free from what? From evil and all its consequences. The demoniac's aggression posed a real threat to himself and others. He was bent on violence and self-destruction. For everyone's protection he was excluded from society. Jesus, however, with a word healed him, restoring him to his right mind. The people were impressed, but begged Jesus to leave the region (perhaps his presence posed a threat to their livestock and livelihood!).

We like to believe we are more sophisticated than our ancestors. The idea of evil makes us uneasy. We fear it reveals a way of thinking that is out of place in our scientific, modern world. However, it requires little imagination to observe the presence of evil in our world. Acts of barbarism and wickedness are the daily fare of our new media. As we live our lives in the world today we can be exposed to a fair amount of darkness and evil.

Throughout the ages, the existence of evil has exercised the minds of writers and philosophers. St Augustine of Hippo reflected: 'I sought whence evil comes and there was no solution.' The same question has vexed modern thinkers too. The novelist Somerset Maugham wrote with remarkable candour: 'If I wrote down every thought I have ever thought and every deed I have ever done, men would call me a monster of depravity.' Perhaps GK Chesterton was nearest the mark in writing a letter to The Times on the topic of 'What's wrong with the human race?' He simply said, 'Dear Sir, I am. Yours sincerely, GK Chesterton.'

Jesus engaged with evil and drove it out throughout his ministry. He fought it and overcame it. On the cross he delivered us from Satan, sin and evil. Each day we are called to claim the power of his victory and pray that we shall be delivered from evil. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we can live lives that reveal the glory of Jesus' victory in the world today.

2 Samuel 15:13-14, 30; 16:5-13 • Psalm 3:2-8
Mark 5:1-20



Jairus is facing every parent's nightmare: the terminal illness of a child with death imminent. No matter who you are, what you believe, which country you live in, this tragedy moves the heart. Every human being can understand something of the trauma of this situation – but only a parent who has suffered in this way can truly know the indescribable anguish. Jairus is clearly at the end of his tether and literally throws himself at the feet and therefore the mercy of Jesus. His desperation gives birth to a profound faith: 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live' (v. 23). Jesus' response is immediate and unhesitating: he goes with Jairus to minister to his dying daughter.

En route the Lord is waylaid by another healing request but this time it is anonymous – his cloak is touched by a woman who has suffered from some kind of blood loss for twelve years. Her desire to get well again gives birth to another wonderful expression of faith: 'If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well' (v. 28). She is healed immediately. The Lord knows that power has left him and asks who

touched him. In one of the most moving scenes in Scripture Mark records for us: 'But the woman... came in fear and trembling, and fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace...' (vv. 33-34).

Meanwhile, Jesus receives the news that the young girl has died. But he urges Jairus: 'Do not fear, only believe' (v. 36). Jesus heals the twelve-year-old girl with the command 'Talitha cumi', which means 'Little girl, I say to you, arise' (v. 41). Jesus has not changed: he still brings healing and grace today.

'Heal the sick! The Church has received this charge from the Lord and strives to carry it out by taking care of the sick as well as by accompanying them with her prayer of intercession. She believes in the life-giving presence of Christ, the physician of souls and bodies. This presence is particularly active through the sacraments, and in an altogether special way through the Eucharist, the bread that gives eternal life and that St Paul suggested is connected with bodily health.' (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1509)

2 Samuel 18:9-10, 14, 24-25, 30-19:3 • Psalm 85(86):1-6
Mark 5:21-43



In some ways, it is rather disturbing to read in today's Gospel that Jesus could do 'no mighty work' in his home town of Nazareth (v. 5). The preceding passage had just described marvellous healings and Jesus' power to raise from the dead. Yet now we are told that this awe-inspiring power was not available – at least not then and there.

Those who had been familiar with Jesus in his childhood, who had seen his upbringing and knew his family, were clearly unable to reconcile this knowledge of his humble origins with the person who stood before them, teaching in the synagogue with authority. Their minds were simply closed. Their response was not merely apathetic but actually hostile – to call Jesus 'the son of Mary' (a title of love and veneration these days) may have been intended to be an insult, as the lack of reference to his father implied illegitimacy.

All Jesus' miracles were a testament to the power and love of God and his presence among his people. For this reason, faith was usually essential for a miracle – faith in the authority of Jesus and faith in the love of God. The people of Nazareth, in their hostility, had rendered themselves unreceptive to

the message of a miracle. Therefore, any miracle would have been pointless for them – a sign without meaning.

We are told, however, that a few sick people were open to Jesus and were healed. Sickness can focus our attention on our dependence on God in a way that nothing else can. And in Nazareth, in a prevailing atmosphere of hostility, it was those in need who were closest to Jesus and who were most able to experience his power. Those who had self-assurance, health and confidence were in fact blind to the presence of the Son of God in their midst.

Do we, like the people of Nazareth, sometimes refuse to accept the truth because we are caught up in our own private prejudices about others? We need to be vigilant to ensure that we are not robbed of the manifestation of God's power because of prejudice. The truth has power of itself and may be conveyed by the most unlikely of messengers. How important it is that we learn not to judge by appearances.

Lord, help me to be humble. Help me to know your presence in all circumstances. Help me to respect all who speak your truth.

2 Samuel 24:2, 9-17 • Psalm 31(32):1-2, 5-7

Mark 6:1-6



Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs. We do not know why he did this: it may have been to strengthen the credibility of his intrepid witnesses. According to the law a witness was supported by the testimony of another (Deut. 17:6). The trainee disciples certainly needed each other for mutual support and encouragement.

The disciples were commissioned by Jesus to spread the good news. Through their witness, preaching and ministry they ushered in the kingdom of God. Jesus' advice and guidance was blunt and brief. On their missionary trips they were to take nothing except a staff. Accessories like a bag, money, bread or an extra tunic were considered surplus to requirements. They were to depend totally and absolutely on the providence of their heavenly Father. If they encountered a hostile or resistant area they were commanded to shake the dust from their feet. This solemn and harsh gesture was one employed by the Pharisees whenever they passed through 'unclean' pagan or Gentile territory.

The notion of witnessing, evangelizing, being commissioned or sent out may be one that we shy away from or are not very comfortable with. If we identify

a lack of ease or an awkwardness towards this issue we should be aware that a nerve is being touched. Don't be afraid – many of us retreat from the fear of being ridiculed, mocked and even despised. This is human and understandable, but we are all exhorted to be witnesses and evangelizers. As Pope Paul VI recognized, we can only evangelize in and through the power of the Holy Spirit: 'If the Holy Spirit is of great importance in the life of the Church, it is certainly in the work of evangelization that his action is most significant. We must not think it was simply by chance that the first steps in evangelization were initiated on the day of Pentecost under the influence of the Holy Spirit' (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 75).

To be a witness requires many of the gifts of the Holy Spirit: love, patience, wisdom, courage, fortitude, creativity, tact, discretion and clarity.

Lord Jesus, you sent your Holy Spirit so that we would be inspired by his fire and empowered by his presence. Imbue me with the same enthusiasm as your first disciples. Replace fear with courage, indifference with zeal and cynicism with a living and vibrant faith.

1 Kings 2:1-4, 10-12 • 1 Chronicles 29:10-12

Mark 6:7-13

The gloom of Mark's account of the martyrdom of John the Baptist follows immediately after the triumph of Jesus sending out the apostles. So we are confronted with the stark contrast between God's kingdom, marked by repentance, forgiveness and healing, and Herod's worldly kingdom of tyranny, deception, lust and arbitrary violence. Although he styled himself 'king', Herod's official title, 'tetrarch', was less than kingly. Ultimately his immoderate ambition earned him banishment to Gaul when he demanded of the Emperor Caligula that he be given the title 'king'.

John the Baptist had preached before Herod, condemned his lifestyle and called him to repentance. But Herod had either failed to understand the significance of John's message or had rejected it and, after putting John in prison, nursed a grudge against him (Luke 3:19-20).

Herod lived by the standards of the world. Yet, despite his resentment and confusion, he recognized John as a holy man, and liked to listen to him. But that attraction did not mature into an active acceptance of his message. When faced with the choice of losing face in front of his guests or

having the innocent Baptist killed to fulfil his foolish promise, his worldly pride and fear won the day and John was martyred.

The same sort of confusion and attraction to God's message is common today. Many people listen to the proclamation of God's word and even get excited about it, particularly the message of salvation, but often they then retreat and succumb to the blandishments of the world.

Attraction is not enough. Throughout their ministries, John the Baptist and Jesus – and after them the apostles – preached that if we are to enter God's kingdom, we need to repent and change. When we acknowledge in prayer the greatness of God's power and his infinite mercy, the Holy Spirit will move us to repent of all our offences against him. As we receive the life-giving grace of forgiveness, our hearts are softened and we are enabled to embrace the healing changes in our lives that, out of love for us, he longs to bestow.

Lord Jesus, deepen your spirit of repentance in my heart today, that it may be softened and more receptive to the changes you wish to work in me.

Ecclesiasticus 47:2-11 • Psalm 17(18):31, 47, 50-51

Mark 6:14-29

When the apostles returned to Jesus from their mission, they 'told him all that they had done and taught' (v. 30). We can imagine the excitement and eagerness with which they crowded round Jesus, all trying to tell him what had happened to them and what they had achieved. Jesus' response was to take them away to a quiet place to rest for a while. He knew that after their efforts they would need to rest and relax: but, more importantly, he knew that those who are active in God's service need times of prayer and retreat. This is why Jesus himself frequently went off into the hills to pray.

In today's hectic world, we need more than ever to make time for prayer and reflection. The world values productivity above the interior life, and regards time spent in prayer as wasted. But in fact it is in our prayer that we gain the strength and wisdom we need to live godly lives in today's world. Prayer is not a retreat from reality: it is in praying that we come in touch with reality. By coming humbly before God, we acknowledge the truth that we are created by him and wholly dependent on him.

Though many of us may not be able to go on retreat, it is important to make some time every day for prayer. Bible Alive was launched during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II and we have always looked to his wise insights into living and putting into practice the Christian life. His life was rooted in prayer and he taught this simple message: 'Nourish your day with as much prayer as you can and allowing for moments of particular intimacy with the Lord, whether individually or in a group.' Only prolonged contact with him can transform each of us inwardly into a disciple of his. It is through prayer, meditation and silent listening to God that we are enabled to speak to other people about the divine mystery, to hand it on and to bear witness to it in the presence of others. We are called to pray continually and never to lose heart (Luke 18:1).

Heavenly Father, we know that you long to nourish and strengthen us as we come before you in prayer. Grant us the grace to persevere in our prayer and spend time with you, so that we may grow in love for you and communicate that love to those around us.

1 Kings 3:4-13 • Psalm 118(119):9-14

Mark 6:30-34



‘Oh, she is the salt of the earth,’ we often say when we are referring to a person who is straightforward, honest and without guile: in the words of another saying, in such an individual ‘what you see is what you get’. In today’s reading, Jesus’ description of his disciples as ‘the salt of the earth’ (v. 13) would have struck a chord and meant something very specific to his listeners. In Jesus’ day salt was a valuable commodity. In order to preserve food from decay in the heat salt was applied as a preservative. It also served to enhance the flavour of the food. The ancient tradition of salting the sacrificial offerings (Ezek. 43:24) denoted a purifying function; it was perhaps for this reason that newborn babies were rubbed with salt to denote purification of the addition to God’s people and as a reminder of the covenant.

Those who heard Jesus speak would have understood the meaning and tradition behind the idea of being ‘salt of the earth’. In the same way as salt prevents decay and corruption, so the witness of

Christians who live a life in the power of the Holy Spirit protects the world and society from decay and corruption. It also adds much-needed flavour to society.

Too much salt in our food can make us thirsty. St Augustine once wrote, ‘O Heavenly Father, you have put salt in our mouths that we may thirst for you.’ The work of the Holy Spirit is to create within us a thirst for the things of God: for union with God, for communion with him and for grace to live a life which is holy and pleasing to him.

Jesus also calls us to be ‘the light of the world’ (v. 14). In this way we are to be like our Master, for in John 8:12 Jesus describes himself as ‘the light of the world’. We are to be countercultural, signs of contradiction, heralds of the gospel of life in a world which, in so many respects, has lost its way.

‘What does light give me compared to what Christ’s light and love gives? The light is useful to me in my present life, but your light and love weaves for me a crown in the future.’ (St John Chrysostom)

Isaiah 58:7-10 • Psalm 111(112):4-9
1 Corinthians 2:1-5 • Matthew 5:13-16



The sick, the weak, and the suffering all pursued Jesus. Such was their faith that he could heal them that they simply wanted to touch his cloak, believing that in so doing they would be healed (v. 56). Jesus came to seek, save and heal the lost. His mission was to restore a fractured and fallen humanity. He himself said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners’ (Mark 2:17).

Nowadays, many people struggle with the concept of sin, but the Good News is not going to change to accommodate our modern sensibilities. We have lost a sense of sin and a corresponding sense that we need a Saviour. This is a sad and serious development because the very essence of the gospel is that Christ brings healing and redemption. We like sheep have gone astray, and Jesus, the great Shepherd and Physician, has come to rescue and heal us. St Athanasius understood this with a crisp clarity that speaks down through the centuries: ‘The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering humanity. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have

been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for him who came to heal and teach, the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put himself at the disposal of those who needed him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it, not vitiating the value of the Divine appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it.’

Through the grace of baptism we are brought from death to life and become a new creation, born of water and the Holy Spirit. However, we all remain wounded and need God’s constant grace to become what he intends us to be – his children. The Holy Spirit helps us grow in two important areas. The first is self-knowledge: we need God’s grace to understand ourselves and become aware of the aspects of our personalities which God wants to touch with his strength and healing. The second is confidence that God has the power to heal us and set us free from anything that hinders our growth as children of the Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, by your cross and resurrection you have set us free. You are the Saviour of the world.

1 Kings 8:1-7, 9-13 • Psalm 131(132):6-10
Mark 6:53-56



The Pharisees rebuke Jesus because his disciples are eating with unwashed hands, ignoring the rules of ritual purification. Jesus tells them that they are obsessed with external observance of religious rules, whereas what really matters is what is in the heart. It is possible to observe the outward rules while one's heart is far from God. This is summed up in the quotation from Isaiah: 'this people...honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me' (Isa. 29:13).

The Pharisees were not evil and developed their rules with good intentions. They thought that they were keeping the law more perfectly in these ways, but they lost sight of what was essential – love of God and neighbour. Their traditions became more important to them than God's commandments. Jesus was able to cut through all of this to the heart of the matter, and so his words are as relevant to us today as they were then.

We too can easily become legalistic in our religious lives; we can think that what is important is carrying out various duties. If we go to church and say our prayers, then

we feel happy with ourselves. Of course it is good to do these things, but they can easily become no more than habits. We can perform the actions while our hearts are distracted, just as the Pharisees did. We need to remind ourselves that God looks into the heart. He wants us to love and worship him in our hearts, and not just do things out of duty. If our hearts are hardened we can lose clarity about the truths of the gospel and the basic commandments of God.

Today in our prayer we could ponder ways in which we become like the Pharisees. Do we see our religion as a set of actions to be carried out or are we concerned about our interior life? Do we become more attached to liturgies and rituals than to loving God and our neighbour? Do we condemn others because they do not perform certain religious acts, forgetting that their hearts may be close to God?

Lord, we ask your forgiveness for times when we honour you with our lips while our hearts are far from you. May your Holy Spirit pour your love into our hearts so that we may stay close to you in all that we say and do.

1 Kings 8:22-23, 27-30 • Psalm 83(84):3-5, 10-11

Mark 7:1-13



In yesterday's Gospel Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for being more concerned with external actions and ritual cleanliness than with what is in the heart. In today's passage he elaborates on this point, teaching that what makes us unclean is not ritual impurity or eating the wrong foods, but the evils that come from our hearts. It is a common human tendency, for us as well as the people of Jesus' time, to judge by appearances, to look at people's outward actions rather than their hearts. Jesus sees more deeply and reminds us of the evils within each one of us.

When we read a list of vices like the one that Jesus gives here, we can become downhearted. If this is the state of our hearts, then what hope is there for us? But Jesus does not mean us to think that the human heart is wholly evil: the point is that we are all inclined to sin, and both good and evil impulses come out of our hearts. When we examine ourselves, we know that this is true.

What is our reaction when we know that we have these evil drives within us? Do we despair of

ourselves and become overwhelmed by shame and guilt? This is not what the Lord wants. He wants us to be aware of our sin but to know that there is a remedy. Because of his death on the cross and his resurrection we can come before him in repentance and be sure our sins are forgiven. More than this, we can receive a new heart and a new mind. This was promised by God in the Old Testament: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh' (Ezek. 36:26).

In Jesus this promise is fulfilled. Through faith in him we are renewed in our hearts. God gives us his Spirit to live in us, to guide us and to strengthen us. We are no longer slaves trying to keep a difficult set of rules, but children of a loving Father. God has acted to change our innermost selves, to deliver us from the power of sin and set us free to love him and one another.

Lord, we beg you to take away our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh.

1 Kings 10:1-10 • Psalm 36(37):5-6, 30-31, 39-40

Mark 7:14-23



Jesus encountered a Syrophoenician woman. He was in the region of Tyre, which was outside Palestine, just to the north of Galilee. He may have been hoping for a time of rest and reflection, but even there he was known and people came to him. As both a woman and a Gentile, it must have been hard for the Syrophoenician to approach Jesus: she might have expected to be rejected by a male Jewish preacher. Yet her desperate desire for her daughter to be healed gave her the courage to approach him.

Jesus' answer may seem rather harsh to us. We know that he did not come into the world to save only the Jews, but he was clear about Israel's special role in God's plan of salvation. As Paul says, the gospel 'is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (Rom. 1:16).

We can look at the qualities this woman showed as a model of faith for us. Though she was a Gentile, she had faith in this Jewish healer. She had the courage to risk rejection by approaching him. It required humility to fall at his feet in supplication and to continue

pleading with him even after his harsh-sounding answer. She did not reject Jesus' comparison of the Gentiles to dogs, and asked only for a scrap from the table. We can also admire her persistence in asking and her refusal to be discouraged. Because of her courage, humility, faith and persistence Jesus granted her request for her daughter to be healed.

These are all qualities we should try to have in our prayer. We need courage to believe that God hears our prayers. Without faith we would not approach him in prayer and ask him to grant our requests. It requires humility to accept that we are needy and kneel before the Lord in prayer. Jesus himself taught that we need to be persistent in prayer and not be discouraged by an apparent refusal (see Luke 18:1-8). However, we do not need to produce these qualities in ourselves by willpower: the Holy Spirit can give us hearts filled with true faith and humility.

Lord Jesus, grant us the grace to come before you as the Syrophoenician woman did, so that like her we may receive the healing which you long to give us.

1 Kings 11:4-13 • Psalm 105(106):3-4, 35-37, 40

Mark 7:24-30



Jesus sends his disciples out on a mission, to prepare the way for him. He sends them out two by two: this is not only for mutual support, but so that they might bear witness to the truth of each other's testimony, and that they might be a living embodiment of the gospel of peace. They are to bring the message of reconciliation, shown in the gift of the peace of God to those with whom they stay.

Jesus uses the powerful image of his disciples as being 'lambs in the midst of wolves' (v. 3). They are to be defenceless, completely dependent on the Lord, but will always remain under the protection of the Good Shepherd, who will care for his flock in all circumstances. They must allow nothing or no one to distract them from their mission. Their preaching and healing will make present the kingdom of God. This is the continuing role of all those who are called to spread the word of God.

Today the Church celebrates the feast of two brothers, St Cyril and St Methodius, who worked in the field of mission. They were first sent into Russia to preach the gospel, and to enable them to be effective witnesses they learned the

language of the people to whom they were sent. In 863 they were sent to Moravia, where the people desired to learn about the gospel in their own Slavonic language. The brothers had to start from small and unpromising beginnings: Cyril had to devise the first Slav alphabet, still used in Russia, to assist their work. The Bible was translated into the language for the first time, and so it became possible for the people to hear the word of God.

Despite the success of their work, SS Cyril and Methodius met strong opposition from other missionaries, but they never gave up their task. They were filled with the love of God and love of the people to whom they were sent. Their work found its basis in their knowledge of Scripture. They always tried to understand the people and their culture, rather than imposing their own ideas upon them. St Cyril died in 869; St Methodius continued his mission till his own death in 884.

Father, you brought the light of the gospel to the Slavonic nations through St Cyril and St Methodius. Open our hearts to understand your teaching and help us to become one in faith and praise.

Acts 13:46-49 • Psalm 116(117)

Luke 10:1-9



Whatever else they might have anticipated during the three days that the 4,000 people followed Jesus, it is unlikely that they expected a free meal! They were so overwhelmed by his powers of healing, so captivated by his teaching with such amazing authority that they had overlooked their own basic needs.

However, Jesus saw their need and was moved to feed them. There is a clear reminder here of God feeding his chosen people with manna in the wilderness after the Exodus (Exod. 16). On that occasion also he was moved by his infinite compassion because he loved them and wanted to demonstrate his love.

The miracle highlights an important dimension of our existence: that we are body and soul, and the Lord cares deeply for the whole person. So profound is his love that at the incarnation he took upon himself our flesh and blood with all its weaknesses and limitations. He knows us intimately at every level for he has shared, and continues to share, our being.

There is a danger with our faith that we can become too 'spiritual' and either disregard or deprecate

the body: indeed, there have been occasions in the past when the body has been seen as intrinsically evil. Certainly our appetites and instincts have been damaged by original sin, but we are still God's beloved creation. Jesus' cross and resurrection have shown that, in him, all humanity's weaknesses can now be overcome; his bodily ascension revealed his intention that humankind should be united with God for all eternity.

But still our senses demand tangible signs of faith. Jesus' action in breaking the loaves and giving them to the disciples to distribute is an anticipation of the Last Supper and the life-giving sacrament of the Eucharist in the Church. It is a breathtaking and glorious truth of our faith that in the Eucharist we receive the body and blood of Jesus as the bread of life, the promise of eternal life. 'I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh' (John 6:51).

I praise and thank you, Lord Jesus, for your compassion and for the life you have given me through your great sacrifice of love upon the cross. Continue to feed and sustain me in the glorious gift of your Eucharist.

1 Kings 12:26-32; 13:33-34 • Psalm 105(106):6-7, 19-22

Mark 8:1-10



Anger is a very common human experience. Situations make us angry; people make us angry; we get angry with ourselves. Sometimes we know we are wrong to be angry. Much more often, we think we are right. We think the fault lies with others – they have made us angry. Or else certain situations provoke us to anger – and because these are bad situations we feel that we have the right to express our anger.

Jesus teaches with extraordinary clarity that 'everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" shall be liable to the hell of fire' (v. 22). Must we take Jesus seriously?

Jesus sees anger as the root of murder. Angry feelings, if they are nursed and not dealt with, become hatred. The fruit of hatred can sometimes be actual murder. Jesus warns us to avoid the possibility of such appalling fruit of our anger by dealing ruthlessly with the initial feelings of anger.

We feel we have the right to be angry if we are exploited, let down, hurt, used or rejected. It is true that anger is a natural and even proper

reaction to such things. Jesus does not say that we cannot feel anger. What he says is that we do not have the right, in normal circumstances, to hang on to it and express it. Instead we need to let it go.

Jesus asks us to let go of our anger so that we can imitate him better. There were, of course, occasions when Jesus himself knew righteous anger and expressed it – but his anger never led him to sin. When he was betrayed, insulted, ridiculed, tortured and crucified, he had full right to feel angry. However, Jesus let go of all feelings of anger and forgave his oppressors: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). Jesus shows us a new way of living. As his disciples we must emulate him.

Whenever we are angry, we must acknowledge our anger – we are not asked to repress our angry feelings by neurotically denying them. Then we must let go of them by calling on the Lord's grace. Christ's Spirit will give us the power to fulfil his commandment to live as he did.

Father, help me with your grace to let my anger go and to live in peace.

Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20 • Psalm 118(119):1-5, 17-18, 33-34

1 Corinthians 2:6-10 • Matthew 5:17-37



Why did the Pharisees in today's Gospel ask Jesus for a sign from heaven? Jesus had only just fed 4,000 people using seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. Even if they had not yet heard of this miracle, the Pharisees must have been aware that Jesus had healed sick people, raised a dead young girl to life and fed 5,000 people on another occasion! Their motive was 'to test him' (v. 11): they did not expect Jesus to produce a sign and wanted to discredit him. These Pharisees did not believe in Jesus and did not want to do so: they had made up their minds about Jesus and maybe were among those who wanted 'to destroy him' (Mark 3:6).

Whenever we read about the Pharisees in the Gospels, we are challenged to examine our own hearts and see if we resemble them. Have we got fixed ideas about Jesus? We need to ensure that we are always ready for the Holy Spirit to teach us more about Jesus, and are seeking to experience him more in our daily lives. Do we put God to the test? When we are suffering or in difficulty or when we want something very much, it is easy to fall into the temptation of making

our faith dependent on God's answer to our prayers.

Jesus responded to the Pharisees' request by sighing 'deeply in his spirit'. We can ask the Holy Spirit today to show us what this sigh means. It reveals the love Jesus had for these people and the pain and frustration which their hardness of heart caused him. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to come to know him and to experience the fulfilment of all God had promised his people. He spent much time and effort speaking to them, answering their questions, and exposing their hypocrisy and self-righteousness. He knew that their rejection would ultimately lead to his death. Jesus wants to work powerfully in our lives but, as with the Pharisees, unbelief and arrogance can be obstacles blocking change. The sigh of Jesus is a call from his heart to us to believe in him and allow him to love us and transform us.

Lord Jesus, I believe that you are the Son of God, my Saviour, and the One through whom and for whom I was made. Lord, I want to know you better and be much more aware of your presence this day.

James 1:1-11 • Psalm 118(119):67-76

Mark 8:11-13



In first-century Palestine yeast, or leaven, was seen as a symbol of evil and corruption. Yeast is a preparation which permeates and pervades dough, causing it to rise. In the same way, evil is a force or power which can permeate and pervade our lives, leading us to sin. Jesus saw in the leadership of the Pharisees and the power of Herod corrupt teaching and evil influence. He used the metaphor of yeast to warn his disciples. The disciples (like ourselves often) were dull and sluggish in grasping the truth. They assumed Jesus was referring to the fact that they had forgotten to bring bread!

Jesus loved his disciples and sought to lead them into deeper waters of clarity and understanding. They were sleepy and plodding when it came to understanding spiritual reality – despite having witnessed the amazing miracle of the feeding of the 4,000 (8:1-13).

Jesus challenged the disciples with piercing questions directed at moving them forward in their understanding. These questions penetrated to the core of their lack of comprehension, provoking them to probe and examine themselves. The questions were directed at their spiritual faculties – the heart, eyes,

ears and the memory. The Greek for heart is *kardia*: it conveys the meaning of the centre or apex of our being, the seat of our emotions, thoughts and desires. Jesus challenged the disciples to examine their hearts.

It is good for us to ask ourselves the same questions. Through the grace of baptism we have received a new heart – not a heart of stone but one which is warm, receptive and open to the things of God. It is sin and unbelief that cause our hearts to calcify and harden. As we respond to the work of God's Spirit in our lives they become open and yielding again, so that the eyes of our hearts can perceive God's grace and the ears of our hearts can hear his clear voice. Often our eyes can be opened and our ears unplugged by repentance and the grace we receive through the sacrament of reconciliation. God has given us the gift of memory so that we can recall with precision the wonderful ways he has worked in our lives.

Lord, I thank you for the many blessings you have given me. Open my eyes that I may perceive your abundant grace at work in my life and open my ears to hear what you desire to say to me.

James 1:12-18 • Psalm 93(94):12-15, 18-19

Mark 8:14-21

The account of the healing of the blind man has great significance in Mark's Gospel. It comes just after a period when the disciples seem unable to understand who Jesus is, despite the miracles they have seen, and just before the revelation given to Peter and his proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus' healing of the blind man was primarily an act of merciful compassion, but it also symbolically showed the disciples that their eyes needed to be opened. Mark intends the account to teach his readers the same truth, that they need the eyes of their hearts enlightened (Eph. 1:18) before they can understand that Jesus is Lord.

Why is it so vital that our blindness be healed? We have probably experienced first-hand or witnessed around us the anguish of seeing no clear purpose in life or seeking happiness where it can't be found or falls short of our hopes. A commentator on St Thomas Aquinas writes: 'Until truth gives light to a man's mind, his heart is immobilized more effectively than the feet of a man in the pitch blackness of a strange place...if the light of knowledge be false we can only make missteps.'

Jesus has come as the light of the world, the light that enlightens everyone and will set our hearts aflame. Pope John Paul II encouraged us to come to Christ the Light in these words: 'The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly and not just in accordance with immediate, partial and even illusory standards and measures of his being must – with his unrest, sinfulness, with his life and death – draw near to Christ' (Redemptor hominis).

A unique aspect of this miracle is that Jesus heals the blind man in stages; his love and patience are shown in that he does not leave him until his vision is completely restored. If we have questions and doubts, we can trust that Jesus wants to give us the same clarity he gave the blind man. If we ask him in our prayer and seek him in Scripture reading, he will reveal himself and teach us just as he taught his disciples.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the light you have given me. I know there are many things that I do not see clearly yet; please touch my eyes every day, so I may see more of your glory and lead others to your light.

James 1:19-27 • Psalm 14(15):2-5

Mark 8:22-26

An elderly cockney was once asked how he was feeling. 'Like Tower Bridge,' he replied. 'You know – up and down!' Life can be like that – it has its ups and downs, its high points and its low points, its moments of glory and its moments of shame. In today's Gospel we observe Peter going through a high point followed swiftly by a low.

Jesus asks a most crucial and critical question. He wants to know who people say he is, and then he focuses the spotlight on the disciples. Peter – never one to be backward at coming forward – hits the nail on the head. In a moment of wonderful personal insight he declares simply and clearly that Jesus is the Christ. In a moment of pure grace and light he penetrates the sublime and glorious mystery of the incarnation. How he felt we do not know, but it is likely that he felt great joy and a sense of privilege in receiving this understanding. He was probably on cloud nine – elated, affirmed and clear.

Jesus then proceeds to teach plainly about the events which would begin to unfold and gather momentum as they moved nearer to Jerusalem. His disciples detect a clear shift in emphasis – no

miracles, no power, no glory, no public acclaim, but suffering, rejection, death. They are so overwhelmed that they fail to register the promise that on the third day he will rise from the dead! Peter, eager to correct this new slant in Jesus' teaching, strongly rebukes him. Jesus recognizes immediately the work of the evil one. His rebuke is razor-like in its sharp rejection of Peter's appeal: the disciple did not have in mind the things of God but those of men.

A time would come when this impulsive disciple would be the rock upon which the Church would be built – a chosen instrument of stability and clarity. Like many chosen instruments Peter was refined, tested and purified in the fire of humiliation and the crucible of weakness. Today, we are blessed to have Pope Francis, Peter's successor, bear eloquent and beautiful witness of one who has given his life entirely to Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Jesus Christ is the centre of the universe and of history. He alone is the Redeemer of every human being. In God's inscrutable providence he calls us all to proclaim, 'You are the Christ – the Son of the Living God.'

James 2:1-9 • Psalm 33(34):2-7

Mark 8:27-33



An advertising agency was invited by a church to make its message more popular, relevant and appealing. They concluded that the Church had a lot going for it. Its message of love, mercy and compassion was a winning one. Its emphasis on forgiveness and love was inspiring. Its message of social justice and concern for the common good was compelling. The marketing men were confident they could help the Church get its message over. Unfortunately there was a problem. They thought the message of the cross would rob their campaign of its cutting edge! It was too depressing, too negative and threatened to pour cold water on its upbeat advertising campaign. A message of self-sacrifice and self-denial was not one people would respond to – or so they protested as they lost the contract.

The values of the gospel stand against the values of this world. The message of the cross and self-denial stands brave and courageous against the seductive allure of self-indulgence. It addresses the very simple and straightforward question: What are we living for? It helps us grasp that this world is passing away – its lure, attraction, prestige and power are shallow,

fickle and transient. It also teaches that our true destiny is eternal. Our true worth is found not in the prestige of this world but in the glory of the next. God values our soul more than the external things we pay so much attention to – our possessions, our wealth, our social standing, even our reputation. This teaching is radical and presents us with the ultimate challenge in life – to die to self. It will never be popular; it will never be embraced by advertising agencies or media moguls. Nevertheless, its message is essential and fundamental to the gospel.

Freedom and life are gained not by following the pull-and-tug of our passions, our lusts or our drives but in resisting them. When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die. Jesus used very stark imagery to convey this teaching. We all have different crosses to bear, and the grace to take these up is available. This grace is born in us not through gritting our teeth or by muscular resolve but through humbly accepting that through our baptism we died with Christ so as to rise to new life. We can taste the freedom of this new life by counting ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

James 2:14-24, 26 • Psalm 111(112):1-6

Mark 8:34–9:1



Jesus asked his disciples who people said he was. Their reply shows that people had different opinions – some thought he was John the Baptist returned to life, others Elijah or one of the prophets. Today it is still true that there are many opinions about who Jesus is. Some see him as a prophet, some as a great moral teacher, a wise man or a spiritual guru. But as Christians we affirm with Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Jesus asks every man and woman the question ‘Who do you say I am?’ and each of us has to answer for ourselves. This is not merely an academic enquiry, but the most important question in our lives: our answer determines how we live and our eternal destiny. We need to ask this question not just once but many times, and reaffirm our faith in who Jesus is.

Jesus told Peter that it was not flesh and blood that had revealed the answer to him, but his Father in heaven. We can never come to understand who Jesus is by purely human reasoning. The Father has to reveal his Son to us, working in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who loves to reveal Jesus. And this

is not just a one-off revelation: if we open our hearts to him in prayer, the Father will bring us to an ever-deeper understanding of who Jesus is. The more we know who Jesus is, the more we shall love him and long to dedicate our lives to following him.

After Peter’s declaration Jesus made a remarkable statement, saying that Peter was the rock on which he would build his Church and that he would give him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. This promise applied not just to Peter, but to all his successors as pope, all those who occupy the Chair of Peter, which we celebrate today. The apostolic commission has been handed down through the centuries, and the Pope today has inherited Christ’s charge of guarding and leading his body. Like Peter, he is given the task of feeding Christ’s flock (John 21:15-17). Pope Francis needs our prayers as he seeks to carry out this awesome responsibility.

Father, bless and strengthen Pope Francis in his great task of guiding your Church, so that we, as your Body on earth, may reveal your Son to the world.

1 Peter 5:1-4 • Psalm 22(23)

Matthew 16:13-19



People often learn better if new teachings can be related or 'hooked' to what is already stored in their minds. The primary school child may be taught one way of understanding, for example, rainfall, but by secondary school a more sophisticated and scientifically accurate explanation will bring the child closer to the truth. In the light of further research in adult life, the student usually learns once more to discard some previously acquired 'knowledge' and to embrace a deeper understanding. Jesus teaches in the same 'organic' way. He loves the law and would do nothing to discredit it, but has come to complete it. Thus, he often begins by reinforcing the familiar with, 'You have heard that it was said...' and moves on to, 'But I say to you...' The new understanding usually expands, rather than reduces, the message of the law, making it more radical and at the same time more loving. 'Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect' (v. 48 NIV). That perfection includes loving not only your friends but also your enemies.

We are called to a radical commitment to the Good News, which involves being more

generous, more prayerful and more willing to set aside our own needs for the good of others. But loving our enemies? This sounds like an impossible target! Jesus is trying to help us to see the world a little more as God sees it. For God, there is goodness within each person. Our task is to make room for everyone, firstly because that is how God is, but secondly because we do not want to be in bondage to our resentments and thus fail to grow in our own relationship with the Lord of love. Our efforts will demand much of us spiritually and even emotionally, but will pay dividends in a new kind of interior freedom.

We have already seen this attitude lived out – in Jesus himself, who shows us what God is like. Jesus loved his enemies, forgave those who mocked, scourged and crucified him. In this sense, we can say that the Sermon on the Mount predisposes us to live a life of self-giving, in imitation of Christ.

Lord, help us to be attentive to your Word, to rediscover in Jesus the living God in our midst, and to radiate his love in our needy world.

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18 • Psalm 102(103):1-13
1 Corinthians 3:16-23 • Matthew 5:38-48



Imagination is a wonderful, God-given gift which we can use when we are reading Scripture. In today's passage Mark provides us with so many fascinating details about the healing that it is easy for us to imagine what was going on.

The key players are a distraught parent and a child writhing and foaming at the mouth, clearly suffering from some kind of demon possession. The scene is violent and frightening. We might want to attribute his distress to some kind of neuro-pathological disorder or to underlying mental illness, but Jesus doesn't allow us this option: he says very clearly, 'You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again' (v. 25). After the exorcism the Lord says to the disciples, 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer' (v. 29).

When we are dealing with the occult realm and demon possession, there are two equal and opposite errors into which we can easily fall. The first is an excessive interest which, when taken to the extreme, could lead to us becoming preoccupied with evil; the second is not to believe in it at all.

To help us to find a balance we need to look to the enduring witness of the Church and Scripture. Pope Paul VI said once: 'Evil is a terrible reality, mysterious and frightening. It is departing from the picture provided by biblical and church teaching to refuse to acknowledge the devil's existence, to regard him as a self-sustaining principle who, unlike other creatures, does not owe his origin to God, or to explain the devil as a pseudo reality, a conceptual and fanciful personification of the unknown causes of our misfortunes.'

Let us not be deaf to this warning: the devil is real; there is such a thing as evil; and it is possible to be demon-possessed. However, Jesus taught us to pray, 'Deliver us from evil'. We proclaim the victory of Christ and look to his cross by which he defeated evil and conquered the devil (v. 31).

'Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in the faith...[B]e strong in the Lord...Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.'
(1 Pet. 5:8-9; Eph. 6:10-11)

James 3:13-18 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15
Mark 9:14-29



An ambitious parent said to his son as he was about to go out and play for his school's First XV, 'Remember, son, it's not the taking part that's important, it's the winning!' Having just returned from the Olympic Games where she had won a medal, a sportswoman was invited to attend a school's sports day to watch a close friend's children participate. The Olympic champion was amazed by the overwhelming ambition of parents (both mums and dads) to come first in the parents' race – the parents, she noted, were more driven than their children!!

This may seem very excusable and very natural, but it does highlight something about human nature. The governing principle of our world is power: being first, being the greatest, being number one. The governing principle in the kingdom of God, however, is the very opposite: it is the principle of humility, being willing to be the least and to serve others.

Each of us, if we are honest, can recognize that the world's principle of power is not just out there, but is in us as well – in our hearts. Jesus saw it in his disciples, particularly on the occasion they argued about who was the greatest among them.

Jesus, who was always keen to demolish the world's principles, told them: 'If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all' (v. 35).

The story is told that when Karol Wojtyla was made a bishop at the age of thirty-eight, he immediately went on retreat. His appointment as bishop had not yet been made public and he was unknown to the other priests staying in the retreat house, who insisted that he serve them – which he did gladly. He cooked them their meals, served them drinks and tidied up after them. He did not protest, 'I've just been made a bishop: do you know who I am?' He humbly served his brother priests! In doing this he put into practice the teaching of Jesus – no wonder he went on to become Pope!

The Christian life is a life of service and a life of love. How true are the words of St Robert Bellarmine: 'The school of Christ is the school of charity. On the last day, when the general examination takes place, there will be no question at all on the text of Aristotle, the aphorisms of Hippocrates or the paragraphs of Justinian. Charity will be the whole syllabus.'

James 4:1-10 • Psalm 54(55):7-11, 23

Mark 9:30-37



Today's Gospel addresses an age-old problem within Christianity, namely exclusivity and cliquishness. John, the apostle of love, shows that he still has a long way to go as he indignantly protests that someone other than a disciple should have the effrontery to heal in Jesus' name. He arrogantly assumes he is correct by insisting that the exorcist should stop immediately. Jesus shatters this narrow and indeed dangerous attitude by challenging it with the statement: 'For he that is not against us is for us' (v. 40).

The gospel has a breadth and depth that transcends our narrow and petty prejudices. Such prejudices are often very subtle and to a large extent we may not be aware they exist within us. Nevertheless, they can have the effect of making us determine where and when we think God is working. This kind of attitude has been severely challenged by Vatican II in its Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) and by Pope Paul II in *That They May Be One* (*Ut unum sint*). These teachings challenge us to ask ourselves whether we recognize that God can work wherever and in whomever he wishes. Fortunately he is in no way influenced by our thinking, which

produces ideas and views that are coloured by our sin. We can be like the disciples and try to determine who is doing God's work and who isn't; we also tend to create our own hierarchy of gifts or ministries that draws all kinds of distinctions between individuals or bodies of Christians. The danger with this way of thinking is that it makes us harsh, intolerant and often ignorant of God's work in others both within our Church and in the wider Christian community.

The truth is that in the kingdom all are valued, all have a unique dignity, and God continues to work in ways far beyond our judgements of what is from him and what is not. Who would have thought fifty years ago that the present ecumenical spirit among Christians would be possible? Notwithstanding our sinful prejudices we are called to join this mighty ecumenical work. God's call to all Christians is to spread the gospel of love together.

Heavenly Father, you call us to love all people. You alone have the power to transcend division among us. Help me to recognize my complacency and my prejudices. Give me a repentant heart and a desire to work and pray that all your children may be one.

James 4:13-17 • Psalm 48(49):2-3, 6-11

Mark 9:38-40



St John Chrysostom said: 'There is only one thing to be feared, and that is sin. Everything else is beside the point.' The notion of sin sits less comfortably with us these days. Those who object to the use of the word maintain that it is archaic, old-fashioned and too depressing. In a way, of course, this is partly true. Sin certainly can be depressing. We only have to look at our own lives to see that!

Jesus is very clear that sin is a serious business. In fact, he gives a grave warning to those who lead others into sin. A millstone was a heavy stone slab pulled by a working donkey to grind the grain. One thing is certain: if you were thrown into the sea with one of those tied around your neck you'd sink! This graphic imagery may strike us as rather gruesome, but it serves to drive the point home.

What is sin? Sin is first of all an offence against God. It is a rebellion against God's love and involves us turning our hearts away from him. Sin is a kind of interior revolt or rebellion against our good Creator. Sin isn't a theory: it's a daily reality to which our experience testifies.

'What revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when people look into their own hearts they find they are drawn towards what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot have come from their good creator' (Gaudium et spes 13).

If we look into our own hearts we know this to be true. We experience life as an interior struggle between good and evil, light and darkness. We want to do good but find that the good we want to do we can't. The power of sin is a real force that works to undermine our life with God. The biggest mistake we can make regarding sin is to underestimate its power. Jesus' teaching helps us to understand sin in the right way. He came to set us free and strengthen us. Through his gift of the Spirit we are inwardly renewed and empowered to overcome sin. He gives us all the grace we need to say 'no' to sin and to live for God.

Lord Jesus, you came to conquer sin. Teach me to be vigilant and courageous so I may not be overcome by evil, but may experience victory over sin in my life.

James 5:1-6 • Psalm 48(49):14-20
Mark 9:41-50



Jesus fields a hostile question. Its purpose is to embroil him in controversy. The background to this particular interrogation had to do with John the Baptist's denunciation of the irregular marriage of Herod Antipas. John had condemned Herod for taking his brother's wife, Herodias. His stand on this issue lost him first his liberty and later his life. The question is designed to back Jesus into a corner.

Jesus refuses to be drawn into the discussion with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. His strategy, as always, is to raise things to a higher level. Divorce was a Mosaic concession to human weakness. This legislation was used to bring order into a society disintegrating through infidelity and rebellion. The Torah was not aiming to make divorce acceptable, just to minimize the suffering caused through marriage breakdown. Jesus points his detractors to consider God's original plan. God created man and woman in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). Through their union they become one flesh (Gen. 2:24). This communion is an image of the covenant of love between God and his people. This union is so sacred it cannot be broken – it is holy ground.

Tertullian, the early church theologian, had a profound sense of the dignity and beauty of Christian marriage. We can ponder his words:

How beautiful the marriage of two Christians, two who are one in hope, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, one in the religion they practise. They are as brother and sister, both servants of the same Master. Nothing divides them, either in the flesh or the spirit. They pray together, they worship together; instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another. Side by side they visit God's church and partake of God's banquet; side by side they face difficulties and persecution, share their consolations. They have no secrets from one another; they never shun each other's company; they never bring sorrow to each other's hearts. Unembarrassed they visit the sick and assist the needy. They give alms without anxiety; they attend the Sacrifice without hindrance. They need not be furtive about making the sign of the cross, nor timorous in greeting the brethren, nor silent in asking a blessing of God. Psalms and hymns they sing to one another...Hearing and seeing this, Christ rejoices. To such as these he gives his peace. Where there are two together, there he is present; and where he is, evil is not.

James 5:9-12 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 8-12
Mark 10:1-12