



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)



February • Wednesday

Mark 6:1-6 • St Agatha (Memorial)

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



February • Sunday

Matthew 5:13-16 • Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

‘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



February • Tuesday

Mark 7:1-13 • Our Lady of Lourdes (Optional Memorial)

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.

I 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.



Jesus encountered a Syrophenician 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 Syrophenician 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 Syrophenician 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

February 19, 2015

Thursday after Ash Wednesday • Luke 9:22-25

Most of us think we are reasonable and logical: we like to think that we are sensibly cautious, we don't take undue risks, we weigh things up, and are diligent and circumspect. The problem with this attitude is that it rather flies in the face of what Pope Francis calls 'radical discipleship', which doesn't leave a lot of room for caution or diligence. Radical discipleship employs a different kind of logic – what we like to call 'kingdom logic'. According to this rather topsy-turvy logic, as Jesus clearly explains in our Gospel today, we who are his followers must be prepared to lose our lives in order to save our lives, and we must weigh the possibility of gaining the world against the danger of losing our soul. Other examples of kingdom logic are: loving our enemy, praying for those who persecute us, turning the other cheek, laying down our life for others.

Faith in Christ has always flown in the face of the prevailing culture – it certainly flies in the face of our rather consumer-driven, secular and hedonistic culture today. However, faith in Jesus is not only counter our culture, it is counter our very fallen human nature. By nature we don't want to deny ourselves – in fact, we would rather save ourselves and gaining the world can appear rather appealing at times. If we are ever to rise up above our selfishness and egocentricity, we need the help of the Spirit to embrace the logic of the kingdom. Lent is a great time to do this because the clarion call of this season is to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Christ.

Jesus concludes his treatise on kingdom logic by saying that if we are ashamed of him and his teaching while we're here on earth, he will be ashamed of us when he comes in glory (v. 26). These are tough words to which we need to give considerable thought. In order to truly embrace the logic of the kingdom we need a profound, life-changing revelation of Jesus' Lordship. In the light of such revelation we will be the very opposite of ashamed: rather we will be proud and willing to deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow Christ.

Lord, today I embrace the logic of the kingdom that in order to gain life I must, like the grain of wheat, fall to the ground and die through a life of self-denial and serving others.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 • Psalm 1:1-6

Luke 9:22-25

Friday 20th February

Matthew 9:14-15 • Friday after Ash Wednesday

Fasting today is a bit of a dying art, which is ironic given the obesity crisis and our obsession with dieting. It is a scandal, of course, that half the world are starving while the other half are on diets. What on earth is that all about?

The Pharisees and John the Baptist's disciples seem to have had a thing about fasting. They observed the discipline rigorously themselves and, like many religious people throughout history, they wanted to know why others weren't as rigorous as they were. Jesus famously refers to this ridiculous mindset in the parable of the Publican and the Tax Collector, in which he has the Pharisee flag up to God his rigour and commitment to fasting: 'I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get' (Luke 18:13). Up to that point the Pharisee had been doing a good job, but then he had to go and spoil it by revealing the attitude of his heart. Fasting is good. But being proud of fasting and judging others are not good and have the effect of cancelling the good out.

Jesus obviously got the inspiration for his parable from real-life Pharisees, whose rather arrogant and aloof approach clearly wasn't confined solely to fasting – in fact, they seemed rather at home looking down on others. But the same, it appears, was also true of John the Baptist's disciples, since they approached Jesus and demanded to know why, if they and the Pharisees were fasting, his disciples weren't as well?

As always, Jesus' answer cuts to the chase: his disciples would fast when the bridegroom had been taken from them. The time to which he was referring is the time in which we are now living, which is sometimes called the 'age of the Church'. Since the beginning the Church has urged us to fast. We do not fast, however, as an end in and of itself. We fast because by denying ourselves we learn to rely on God – we learn that we don't live on bread alone but on the Word of God and prayer. The season of Lent is a great time for us to rediscover the lost art of fasting and through this discipline to draw closer to God.

Lord, teach me not just to abstain from food and water but also from gossip, malice and resentment. Cleanse me and I shall be clean; purify me and I shall be purified.

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

Matthew 9:14-15

Saturday 21st February

Saturday after Ash Wednesday • Luke 5:27-32

Are we judged by the company we keep? Apparently so – Jesus certainly was. Imagine the following scenario: a notorious drug baron or pornographer or criminal invites the Pope to dinner and he accepts. Photographs are published of the Pope enjoying the said company, evoking a frenzy of condemnation from the conventional media and from social media. Then imagine the drug baron, pornographer or criminal deciding to convert and follow Christ and giving his money to the poor. In such a scenario we're getting close to the sense of moral indignation the Pharisees experienced when they knew that Jesus was dining with Levi, a tax collector, a traitor and a despised member of their society.

Levi may have been the lowest of the low in their eyes but he clearly knew how to put on a party and extended the invitation far and wide. Luke informs us: 'Levi made him a great feast in his house; and there was a large company of tax collectors and others sitting at table with them' (v. 29). What was really going on here? Why were the Pharisees and teachers of the law so upset? The key of course is in their question to the Lord: 'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?' (v. 30).

Jesus' response turns the idea of righteousness and what it means to follow God on its head. For Jesus was not ashamed to be in the company of these outcasts; he didn't feel embarrassed or out of place. His response sheds light on who he is and who we are: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (vv. 31-32 NIV). Jesus is the doctor and we are his patients.

We tend to think that religion or faith makes good people even better. But this is a wrong way of thinking. There are no good people, just wounded ones – we are all deeply wounded, hurt and bruised by original sin. In fact, there is a way that original sin didn't only hurt, wound or bruise us – but it brought about our spiritual death. It is baptism which brings us back to life again. But, rather like a patient recovering from major life-saving surgery, we remain wounded, hurt and bruised and need Jesus' ongoing healing.

Lord, through the sacrament of reconciliation may I know the healing mercy of Christ.

Isaiah 58:9-14 • Psalm 85(86):1-6

Luke 5:27-32

Sunday 22nd February

Mark 1:12-15 • First Sunday of Lent

In our Gospel reading today we have the temptations of Jesus and the imprisonment of John the Baptist. That's a lot of action crammed into three short verses! Because it's Lent, today we are going to focus on Jesus' temptations in the desert. St Mark's Gospel was, some scholars believe, a shortened version of St Matthew's Gospel – the abridged version if you like! Matthew affords us more detail about what happened in the desert or, to be more precise, deep in the recesses of Jesus' heart (see 4:1-11).

Mark doesn't beat around the bush on this subject – for him there was an urgency dictated by the Spirit of God: 'At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert...' (v. 12). This was a defining moment in Jesus' life and in the salvation of the whole world. Clearly, if Jesus had given into temptation, then we would be lost. If Satan had managed to break him and overpower him, then we would have no hope of salvation. So for just under six weeks Jesus and Satan fought it out – a preliminary round to the big fight, so to speak.

We can easily think that because Jesus is God, resisting evil, sin and temptation was easy, but this is a mistake. Jesus is human in every way that we are and was tempted in every way that we are (cf. Heb. 4:15). But there was no disordered desire in Christ. There is often also some confusion about temptation: we often confuse it with actual sin, but in fact sin results in our consenting to temptation (CCC 2846). The problem is we cannot be human without being tempted. Even if we cut ourselves off from those things which tempt us – say TV or food or the Internet, etc. – we can still experience and undergo temptation. Temptation has to do with the human heart and knowing ourselves – our weaknesses, compulsions and inner drives. We resist as Jesus did: by relying on the Spirit and countering the attack by the power of God's Word, which is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17).

'He said not: "Thou shall not be tempted." Thou shall not be travailed; thou shall not be afflicted.' But he said: "Thou shalt not be overcome.'" (St Julian of Norwich)

Genesis 9:8-15 • Psalm 24(25):4-9

Peter 3:18-22 • Mark 1:12-15

Monday 23rd February

(Memorial) St Polycarp • Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus offers us a window into the last or final judgement. It is a graphic and awesome scenario of punishment and reward, of election and rejection, of life and death. What is clear is that reward, election and life are intimately connected with caring for the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the prisoner in our midst, while punishment, rejection and death are to do with ignoring the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the prisoner in our midst.

It's sobering, isn't it, that, as St John of the Cross, famously said, 'At the eve of our lives we will be judged on our love'? St Thomas Aquinas, the esteemed saint and theologian, offers great wisdom into how we should think both about our judgement and the final judgement which will consummate human history.

First, he makes it clear that 'Judgement cannot be pronounced on us until our lives have run their course.' He goes on to say: 'Everyone – past, present and future – will be judged. Now then, is the time for mercy, while the time to come will be the time for justice only. For that reason, the present time is ours, but the future will be God's only.'

If you died today, how would you stand in the judgement? Each of us will surely have to throw ourselves on God's mercy. It is fitting that in this season of Lent, a time of repentance, contrition and conversion of heart, that we are attentive to the teaching of the saints: 'There are four remedies against the fear of divine judgement. The first is good deeds... the second is confession and repentance of the evil done – and this should include three conditions – sorrow of heart, shame in confession and rigour of satisfaction (penance). These atone for eternal punishment. The third is almsgiving, which cleanses us from all stains. The fourth is charity, namely the love of God and our neighbour.'

None of us knows what the future holds, but what we do know is that we all must be ready to stand before God and give account of our lives on earth.

'The day that is past must not judge the day that is present, nor the present judge that which is past; it is only the Last Day that judges all.' (St Francis de Sales)

Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15
Matthew 25:31-46

Tuesday 24th February

Matthew 6:7-15 • Lenten Weekday

If you made a list of your needs right now, how long would it be? Quite long, probably! We can sometimes think that God does not care about these needs, particularly the less important ones; but if we think this, we are wrong! God cares about our every need and, in fact, he knows what they are before we even ask him or make our list! This means, of course, that God knows us better than we know ourselves. If this is the case, then why pray? It's a good question. We pray because God wants to have an intimate relationship with us and we pray because Jesus taught us how to.

As believers we have to resist the tendency to take the wonderful truths of the gospel for granted. Take the Our Father, for example. Because we know the words, pray it at Mass and say in in our private prayers, we can grow over-familiar with it and lose our appreciation of what a beautiful and wonderful prayer it is. St Augustine reflected: 'Run through all the words of the holy prayers in Scripture, and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's prayer.'

Jesus has left us the perfect prayer, as St Thomas Aquinas was also keen for us to grasp: 'The Lord's prayer is the most perfect of prayers... in it we ask not only for all the things that we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. This prayer teaches us not only to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them.' The Our Father is not a formula but rather a surge of the heart, a cry to our heavenly Father. Today, renew your resolve to pray with fresh energy, vitality and desire – today, ask the Father to help you pray the Our Father, meditating on each word and offering it up to him as a fragrant offering of praise and worship. What a privilege, what a grace, it is to be able to call God 'Our Father'.

'Our Father: at this name love is aroused in us... and the confidence of obtaining what we are about to ask: what would he not give to his children who ask, since he has already granted them the gift of being his children.' (St Augustine)

Isaiah 55:10-11 • Psalm 33(34):4-7, 16-19

Matthew 6:7-15

Wednesday 25th February

Lenten Weekday • Luke 11:29-32

The story of the prophet Jonah is a story of the power of repentance. Although the Lenten season begins with the priest daubing our forehead with ashes and pronouncing the words, 'Repent and believe the gospel', how convinced are we of our own need to repent?

Perhaps the problem is that we misunderstand what true repentance is: we fail to grasp that Jesus' call to conversion, like that of the prophets of old, is not aimed primarily at an outward display – putting on sackcloth and ashes, as it were – but on the interior conversion of the heart. Without a profound interior conversion our acts of penance remain cold, sterile and false.

What then is interior conversion? It is a radical reorientation of our whole life: a turning away from evil and a turning back to God with all our heart. It is a wholehearted resolve to throw ourselves upon the loving mercy of God and undergo a 180-degree about-turn in life.

Our problem is often that while we clearly see that those whose lives have unravelled or are caught in a negative spiral of sin need to do this, we struggle to see how it applies to those of us who live respectable lives: the churchgoers, the mass attenders, the clergy, those perceived as righteous. But such an attitude reveals our own lack of self-knowledge and self-awareness – truly gifts of the Holy Spirit. We are all sinners; all our hearts are heavy and burdened by sin. It is actually a principle of holiness that the holier we grow, the more acutely aware we become of our own sinfulness. In this saint and sinner stand alongside each other. We all need a new heart, but God will only give it to us if we really want it.

Pope Francis is calling for a new wave of mercy, kindness and compassion in the Church. He is calling us to recognize that we are a Church of beggars who have received God's mercy. True repentance would usher in a revolution of love – love for God and love for others. God is the One who gives us the strength to begin anew, and it is as our hearts are shaken by the horror and weight of our sin that we run to him to receive his mercy, forgiveness and healing.

Lord, during this holy season of Lent teach me the great joy which comes from repentance and conversion of heart.

Jonah 3:1-10 • Psalm 50(51):3-4, 12-13, 18-19

Luke 11:29-32

Thursday 26th February

Matthew 7:7-12 • Lenten Weekday

In today's Gospel Jesus holds out the self-evident principle that if asked by their child for a fish or bread, no parent would give them something inedible or potentially dangerous such as a stone or a snake. To do such a thing would be madness; it would be immoral. Indeed, in our modern world such an action would result in social services getting involved. With only a few exceptions, parents do good to their children. So the logical step, then, is to understand that God is exactly the same. God has revealed himself to us as our Father; we are his children. Just as earthly fathers give their children 'good gifts' (v. 11), so, too, does our heavenly Father. That's all pretty clear, isn't it?

But where we might come unstuck is in considering what it is that we want our heavenly Father to give us. What good gifts are we talking about? The problem is that we often ask God for the wrong things. Well, perhaps not so much the wrong things – there is nothing wrong with asking God to help us secure a promotion at work or a rise in our salary or any number of the practical things we often ask for. But the truth is we cry out to God all the time – there is a way in which this is the human condition – but we don't always ask him for things that have eternal value. We are pretty short term in our thinking.

Perhaps God doesn't just want us to ask him to supply our everyday needs: perhaps he longs for us also to ask him for the gift of revelation, for fresh insight into the mysteries of life in him. How often do we ask him to give us, for example, a deeper understanding of the power of the resurrection, or to renew our prayer life, or to enable us to grasp the meaning of a particular scripture, or to let go of hurt or resentment? The Holy Spirit is the One who gives us confidence in God as our Father. The Holy Spirit is the One who makes us bold and adventurous. The Holy Spirit is the One who makes us eager to receive every spiritual blessing and gift from the Father, who gives generously to all without finding fault.

Lord, help us to believe that as our generous Father in heaven you give good gifts to those who ask you.

Esther 4:17 • Psalm 137(138):1-3, 7-8

Matthew 7:7-12

Friday 27th February

Lenten Weekday • Matthew 5:20-26

Jesus' disciples once exclaimed, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?' (John 6:60). The disciples may have been slow and dull at times but they could not be faulted for their honesty. In today's Gospel Matthew presents us with a classic example of a hard teaching of Jesus: his teaching on anger.

Jesus introduced a new kind of morality: one that is not simply external, but internal. The Ten Commandments stipulate 'You shall not murder' (Exod. 20:13), but Jesus takes it a step further in teaching that to be angry and nurse resentment towards another person is tantamount to murder. This teaching is totally revolutionary. Jesus is saying that in his kingdom it is the heart that counts, and since anger precedes murder, we must deal with our anger.

Our criminal justice system mercifully doesn't prosecute people just for thinking angry thoughts, but if it did, many of us might find ourselves hauled up before a judge. How angry a person are you? Do you suffer from any of the modern forms of rage, such as road rage or air rage? Are you the kind of person who nurses resentment if something is said and done against you (or as you perceive against you)? The truth is most of us do: some suffer more than others, but most of us rage not just against the night but the day and everything else in-between!

Why is this? What is at the heart of anger? Unhappiness is at the heart of anger – an angry person is not happy, and an unhappy person is often angry. We become angry when we lose sight of the love of God and drift away from him. When God pours his love into our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit, our anger, hurt and resentment melt away. We know that fatty foods cause a build-up of cholesterol in our blood vessels. Well, in the same way anger and resentment cause a build-up of negativity and resistance to God. The Holy Spirit is a fire which melts our cold and hard hearts.

Here is a practical remedy to help you deal with your anger: pray for the person you are angry with. Do it today. Perhaps you might like to use this prayer:

Lord, I pray for the person who makes me angry. I pray that you would bless them and pour out your love upon them.

Saturday 28th February

Matthew 5:43-48 • Lenten Weekday

Victor Frankl, the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, was treated in the most inhumane way conceivable by his thuggish and ill-educated Nazi captors. Imprisoned for being a Jew in the dreaded concentration camp Auschwitz he was stripped of every last vestige of personal dignity. The guards would often beat him and strip him naked; they would delight in forcing him to serve them their meals naked and on his knees whilst all the time taunting and goading him. Such treatment would have destroyed the strongest of men, but he survived the Holocaust.

Frankl knew that if he succumbed to the anger and hatred boiling up inside him, it would destroy him. So he refused to hate by an act of his will. He simply chose to excuse his captors' behaviour, to try to understand it and to replace anger with pity and compassion. He had determined that 'The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance.'

Well, let's get real: if a man subjected to such terrible treatment at the hand of his enemies was able to forgive them, shouldn't we also be able to? The amazing thing about Victor Frankl is that he didn't have the gift of faith. He wanted to believe in God but his experience in the concentration camp had destroyed his faith. Nevertheless, he reached down deep into his humanity and discovered within the law of love, and – though he would not have recognized it as such – through God's power, for surely it was, he was able to do the impossible and love his enemy.

G K Chesterton famously said, 'It isn't that Christianity has been tried and been found wanting; it just hasn't been tried.' In this area of loving our enemies, most of us are found wanting. If we truly loved our enemies we would transform the world, starting with ourselves.

Lord, by your grace teach me to follow your example and pray for my enemies, those who torment me or oppress me or make my life difficult. Enlarge my heart so that through a decision of my will I can say with heartfelt conviction, 'I will love my enemy, I will pray for enemy and I will forgive my enemy.'

Deuteronomy 26:16-19 • Psalm 118(119):1-8

Matthew 5:43-48