

Today we celebrate and mark three very important occasions. The first is New Year's Day, the first day of 2013. Happy New Year! This passing of time, from one year into the next, is celebrated all over the world by believer and non-believer alike. We share a common humanity, a shared sense of anticipation and wonder at what this new year will bring. Blessed Pope John Paul II had a great sense of reverence for the movement of time. He captures what our attitude should be: 'remember the past with gratitude, live the present with enthusiasm and look forward to the future with confidence: 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (Heb. 13:8).'

The second important occasion we celebrate today is World Day of Peace, a day on which we pray with heartfelt conviction for peace in the world. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council declared that 'peace is not just the absence of war', meaning that we must strive for peace first in ourselves, then peace with our neighbour and finally peace between nations. God knows many parts of the world are engaged in war and in conflict. We can think particularly of the Middle East where the prolonged conflict in

Syria and growing tensions between Iran and Israel threaten the peace and stability of the whole world. We commit ourselves to work and pray for peace.

Last but by no means least, we celebrate the feast-day of Mary, Mother of God. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council put it so beautifully when they wrote in *Lumen gentium*: 'The Virgin Mary is acknowledged and honoured as being truly the Mother of God and of the Redeemer. She is clearly the mother of the members of the Christ since she has by her charity joined in bringing about the birth of believers in the Church, who are members of its head' (para. 53).

As this year gets underway, we turn to Mary, our Mother, and ask for her intercession and prayers to bless us and protect us and lead us closer to Jesus. We learn so much from Mary. From her we learn to surrender to God's will in all things. We learn to trust even when all hope seems gone. We learn to love Christ her Son and the Son of God!

Whoever does not wish to have Mary Immaculate as his Mother will not have Christ as his Brother.
(Saint Maximilian Kolbe)

Numbers 6:22-27 • Psalm 66(67):2-8
Galatians 4:4-7 • Luke 2:16-21

Since the very beginning the doctrine of the incarnation, God becoming man in Jesus of Nazareth, has been attacked and undermined. The Gnostics found the teaching that Jesus was true God and true man repulsive and resisted it, persuading many new believers to give up on their new-found faith. It was to address crisis that John wrote his letter. The 'Word become flesh' is the distinctive sign of our faith.

We live in a culture which has a certain hostility and resistance to faith. Those who doubt Jesus' historical existence are, to use a cricketing analogy, on 'a sticky wicket', as Jewish and Roman historians record his existence (Josephus, Pliny the Younger). Those who believe Jesus was simply a great moral teacher are misguided. A man who was simply a great moral teacher would not have claimed to be God made man, as Jesus did. The mystery of the incarnation is one we are invited to enter into and understand in a way which impacts on how we live our lives.

The incarnation in a special way reveals God's love for us. Jesus knows and loves each one of us. As Paul proclaimed, 'The Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). Jesus loved us with a human heart. In the body of Jesus we see our God made visible and we are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see.

In this Year of Faith we can learn to love and adore the person of Jesus. One aid to doing this is contemplating his face in holy images and icons. Pope Pius XII said, 'the one who venerates the icon is venerating in it the person of the one depicted'. Meditating on the Gospels we encounter Jesus, the God-Man, our Lord and Saviour. Receiving the Eucharist, the source and summit of our faith, we learn most of all to bow low in worship and adoration of our God and King.

The Son of God worked with human hands; he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.
(Gaudium et spes 22)

1 John 2:22-28 • Psalm 97(98):1-4
John 1:19-28

How good are you at committing things to memory? Our education system changed some years ago from training our children to memorize key dates, facts or formulae. Interestingly, with all manner of educational reforms on the horizon, the skill of memorizing facts and data is looking to make a return. The ancients who had no printing press or emails or worldwide web relied heavily on the oral tradition — remembering what wise or sage teachers or prophets had said. In the not too distant past, priests, catechists and parents used to engage children in rote learning of the catechism. A severe rap across the knuckles from an over-zealous priest, nun or parent, who was frustrated with their inability to remember a phrase or an important point, was the lot of many back then. Well, thank God being rapped across the knuckles in this fashion has long gone and good riddance, but the need to bring to mind the truths of our faith remains as vital as ever.

One of the most important truths to take to heart, memorize and be intimately familiar with is the one

proclaimed by John in today's first reading: 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!' (3:1 NIV). The emphasis 'And that is what we are!' is almost a liturgical refrain. This could become our 'faith prayer' for the Year of Faith.

Prayer: How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God.

Refrain: And that is what we are!

We are children of God. God is our Father. What could be better than knowing this truth, deep down, so that whatever the trials or challenges we face, we are rooted in this rock-solid truth? St Augustine said: 'God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.' God's love for us is therefore unique and special. If God is for us — in other words, if God loves us as the Scriptures proclaim — then nothing can separate us from this love.

We know and believe the love God has for us. (1 John 4:16)

1 John 2:29–3:6 • Psalm 97(98):1-6
John 1:29-34

Why did Jesus appear? John tells us the answer: 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work' (1 John 3:8). Do you believe in the devil or Satan? Scripture (as we see today) and the Tradition of the Church since the beginning have always identified a 'seductive voice opposed to God' (CCC 391), a fallen angel, called Satan or the devil, at work in the world and in our own lives. Jesus referred to this fallen angel as 'a murderer from the beginning' (John 8:44) and he was tempted by him in the desert. His sole purpose was to divert the Lord from fulfilling the Father's mission (Matt. 4:1-11).

Although only a creature, Satan is a pure diabolical spirit and he is powerful. The good news is, however, that he cannot prevent the building up of the kingdom of God on earth. It is, of course, a profound mystery as to why God permits the devil to work but 'We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him' (Rom. 8:28).

The way the devil works in our lives is to lead us into sin. John makes this very clear: 'He who

commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning' (1 John 3:7). Now the problem with sin — and this is a very real problem for us — is that it can be very attractive and at times overwhelming and hard to resist. The truth is we will be sinners until the day we die, but God's forgiveness and mercy will always continue to be available to us. We are children of God, born of him, and we have living within us the seed of grace, sown at baptism, which gives us the power to resist and overcome sin. We died to sin when we were baptized in Christ Jesus. Does this mean, though, that we don't struggle or fight or even at times get defeated? We do, of course. Life is a constant battle, and we are called to be self-controlled and alert. We hold on to the truth that by God's grace we were buried with Christ in baptism, and just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may live a new life in him.

Lord, teach me today to count myself dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

1 John 3:7-10 • Psalm 97(98):1, 7-9
John 1:35-42

John's first letter offers us an amazing testament and witness to Christ. John heard, saw, looked at and touched Jesus, the Word made flesh. The apostle lived a long life, reflecting and pondering on Jesus, the Word of Life. After years of reflecting, this was his message: we should love one another (v. 11).

Could it be that simple? Love is, as we know, a many-splendoured thing, and not quite as simple and straightforward as we might think. There are different kinds of love. There is friendship, there is romantic love, there is love for one's elderly parents and there is the love of a parent for a child. How do we know what love is? John answers this question: 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren' (v. 16). The love of the New Testament (*agape*) always has this idea of sacrifice, of laying down one's life, of going the extra mile, of humble service. So, in a nutshell, our faith boils down to love. And we are called to live a life of love.

All of this talk of love is marvellous and sounds wonderful and indeed is wonderful and marvellous. The problem is that love is a lot harder than we realize and often, truth be told, we find it relatively easy to love those we like and get on with, and who don't make too many demands on us. The key to loving others is knowing that we are loved by God. Victor Hugo wrote: 'The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved — loved for ourselves, or rather loved in spite of ourselves.' This awareness of being loved is the gift of God. It is in this conviction that God loves us, died on the cross for us and sent the Holy Spirit to be with us, that we live and move and have our being. Victor Hugo also wrote: 'To love another person is to see the face of God.' In this Year of Faith let us bear witness to our faith by a renewed commitment to love and serve, but rooted in the experience, knowledge and understanding of God's love for us.

When evening comes, you will be examined in love. Learn to love as God desires to be loved and abandon your ways of acting.
(St John of the Cross)

1 John 3:11-21 • Psalm 99(100)
John 1:43-51

For many, each New Year is a time of new beginnings and fresh resolve. A sense of excitement and opportunity prevails. For others there can be a kind of 'New Year blues', a sense of deflation or loss and a certain feeling of sadness because Christmas is over and ahead is the prospect of dark and bleak winter nights. On this first Sunday of January, we are invited to celebrate a most wonderful feast-day in the liturgical rhythm of the Church's Year. The word 'epiphany' has its roots in the Greek word *epiphania* meaning 'manifestation'. The Magi recognized Jesus as the Son of God, the King of Kings, and they came to bow low and worship. This evocative event unveils the truth that Christ came to redeem all of humanity: Jew and Gentile.

The Magi were men of good will; they were seekers of the truth and were attracted by the light of Christ. Many today are just like the Magi. They are men and women of good will, seekers of truth, attracted by the light of Christ. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that moves hearts and minds to seek God's truth, beauty, justice and peace. John Paul II, in his

encyclical on faith and reason, *Fides et ratio*, said: 'men and women are on a journey of discovery which is humanly unstoppable — a search for the truth and a search for a person to whom they might entrust themselves' (para. 33). Jesus of Nazareth is that person and the Church is the star, the light which guides and leads us to Christ.

However, as members of the Church, we are stars that light up the lives of those who are searching for Christ. We are called to illuminate the path of those who seek the Lord by the word and example of our life. How important it is that we Christians are faithful to our vocation! We carry a burden to be authentic and sincere witnesses. We must not be lazy or indifferent Christians. In this Year of Faith especially we strive to be salt of the earth and lights to the world.

Lord, by your grace, help me to radiate the life and light of Christ. By the power of your Spirit make me a witness of love, truth and grace.

Isaiah 60:1-6 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 7-13
Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6 • Matthew 2:1-12

St John the Evangelist could equally be called the Theologian of Love. The Gospel named after him is known for its depth of insight and wisdom into the mystery of Christ. It holds a unique and special place in the treasures of Scriptures, written as it was by 'that disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 21:7).

John, a pillar of the early Church, reduced God's commands to two: the first, to believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ; the second, to love one another. Faith and love were for St John the Evangelist what the gospel was all about. Love is the litmus test of faith. Show me your faith — show me your love. Without love we are, as Paul says, rather like 'a clanging cymbal' or a 'resounding gong'. We must 'walk the walk, and talk the talk' of love. Love is an ingredient as essential to our faith as salt is to food. Without salt food loses its flavour. So we may stand up for the poor, raise our voice on behalf of others and be passionate about justice, but without love it is simply legalism. In the same way, faith without love is merely ideology, hope without love is self-centred, forgiveness without love is meaningless,

courage without love is recklessness, and generosity without love is extravagance.

So we are called to spread love wherever we go. First of all in our own house. Perhaps we can resolve that no one come into our home without leaving feeling better and happier. We are called to be the living expression of God's kindness. Of course, words are cheap, as is intention or desire; what matters is action: love in action. St John of the Cross said: 'An instant of pure love is more precious to God and the soul, and more profitable to the Church, than all other good works together, though it may seem as if nothing is done.' Perhaps then the life of faith involves us striving daily, with all our heart, soul and strength, to bear witness to love. Love, in this sense, is a gritty, day-to-day, mundane part of the fabric of our daily existence. Today step out in faith, determined to put into practice Jesus' commands of faith and love.

Our Lord does not care so much for the importance of our works as for the love with which they are done. (St Teresa of Avila)

1 John 3:22-4:6 • Psalm 2:7-11
Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

A fool learns from his own mistakes; the wise from other people's. This, of course, is not the logic or the wisdom of the gospel. The way of repentance and conversion is the folly of the gospel; 'fools for Christ' follow in this way. Bitter tears of repentance teach us their own unique lesson.

The apostle John did not at first witness to love. The Gospel writers spare him no blushes. They are brutally frank about his capacity for violence, revenge, hatred. He and his family were ambitious and made no bones about it. They were certainly not shy at coming forward — they were, at least to this extent, honest and forthright. They wanted position, status and power. Ideally, according to their mother, they wanted to sit at Christ's right or left hand in his kingdom (Matt. 20:20-23). Nicknamed the 'sons of thunder' John and his equally violent brother James wanted God to bring down fire and brimstone on those who resisted their message (Luke 9:51-55).

Unlike Paul's encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus or Peter's denial and transformation after Pentecost, we are given no

insight into the details of John's transformation. We do know that he was the youngest of the apostles and that he lived into old age. Some scholars suggest that he lived into his nineties, which was unusual, as life expectancy was very low in the ancient world. What we are witnessing in John is the fruit of a life spent reflecting on Jesus.

It would, however, be a misunderstanding to assume that John is teaching that 'all you need is love'. He is teaching that love was revealed in the person of Jesus and Jesus showed us what love is by dying on the cross. He also teaches us that God loved us first; we did not love God first. In fact, there is a way in which we understand what it means to love our own, our nearest and dearest, but love and service beyond this is hard for us since it kicks against the grain of our nature. To love in the way that Christ calls us to love is to die to self and live for God.

When evening comes you will be examined in love. Learn to love as God desires to be loved and abandon your own ideas of love. (St John of the Cross)

1 John 4:7-10 • Psalm 71(72):1-4, 7-8
Mark 6:34-44

In the period building up to the new millennium Pope John Paul II led the Church through a time of repentance for the sins of her sons and daughters throughout history. The Church could not cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children, clergy and lay, to purify themselves through repentance of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency and slowness to act. He looked back on two thousand years of history and identified many shameful moments where we, the sons and daughters of the Church, did not cover ourselves with glory and fell short of love.

Repentance is integral to living the Christian life. The reason repentance is so crucial is because of our failure to love as God intends us to love. As John teaches today, 'God is love', and when we live and act and move in love, we live in God. In essence, what sin is at its very core is a failure to love. Repentance, then, is a vital ingredient of love. The sorrowful and repentant are able to love, forgive and show mercy because they are the recipients of God's forgiveness and mercy. The world is crying out for witnesses of this love.

Perhaps, though, the key to being a witness of love is understanding how we fail to love. This is what St Augustine meant when he wrote: 'To my God a heart of flame; to my fellow man a heart of love; to myself a heart of steel.' In loving God we learn to see our sin, our shortcomings and our inability to love as God would have us love. In this moment of understanding, of recognition of our helplessness and hopelessness, we receive God's abundant grace to love. In this moment we experience what John meant when he taught that perfect love casts out fear. We learn not to fear God but to immerse ourselves in his mercy and kindness. It is by our love that the world knows that we are disciples of Jesus. St Catherine of Siena heard God say these words to her: 'For I created you with a capacity for loving — so much so that you cannot live without love. Indeed, love is your food.'

Lord, through the path of repentance which leads to joy and humility, make me perfect in love.

1 John 4:11-18 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 10-13
Mark 6:45-52

If you had to sit an exam on how good and loving you are, how would you fare? Would you pass the exam? What grade would you get? Pope Benedict has encouraged us to intensify our witness to love during this Year of Faith. Paul taught that love is the greatest virtue. We should be in no doubt about this. We cannot love God and not love our fellow human beings. If we say we love God but do not love others we are liars. 'So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor. 13:13). We are under an obligation or duty to love. We have no choice but to devote ourselves to loving, as Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, 'until it hurts'. We are called to this. This is what it means to be a Christian. Don't let anyone tell you differently.

However, love is a demanding business and puts us under pressure to behave in a way which stretches and pushes us way beyond our comfort zone. James had a profound sense of the challenge of love. He wrote: 'What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works?

Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled", without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith' (Jas. 2:14-18). For him and for us too, faith without charity (love) bears no fruit and charity without faith is mere sentiment, constantly at the mercy of doubt. Faith and love need each other. Christian history is replete with examples of many who have dedicated their lives with love to those who are lonely, marginalized or excluded.

Lord God, through faith help me to recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for my love. As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Matt. 25:40).

1 John 4:19-5:4 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 14-17
Luke 4:14-22

What happens after we die? Do you have the gift of eternal life? Are you going to heaven? We don't like to be presumptuous and we probably have inherited ways of thinking about life after death from our childhood. The good go to heaven, the bad to hell, and so on. If we have been good, then – fingers crossed – we will go to heaven; if we have been bad, well, it's the other place.

We are called to have a simple faith but we are not called to be simple. John wrote his Gospel and his Letters toward the end of the first century. When we read his words, we draw directly from a remarkable and authentic source, for he touched, walked and talked with the Lord. For John eternal life is not a future project but rather is realized in time and space. What happens after death is a continuation of the grace we have received. For John the key issue is knowing the Son or as he puts it: 'He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life' (v. 12). Through baptism we have received life – God's life, eternal life, a seed which death cannot destroy. C.S. Lewis said,

'A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do.' God wants us to focus our thoughts on heaven and the life to come. In doing this we cultivate the virtue of hope and make it real in our lives.

When did you last hear a sermon on the last things – heaven, hell, the judgement, the second coming? Probably a long time ago, as sadly even our clergy can be slow to point us toward the heavenly life which awaits us. Thankfully, the Scriptures, the teaching of the Church and the saints of the Church show no such reticence. Contemplate the teaching of Paul, for example: 'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God' (Col. 3:1-3).

Lord, teach me to walk as a child of God, certain of the joy of eternal life.

1 John 5:5-13 • Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20
Luke 5:12-16

In this Year of Faith we are invited to ask, 'What is faith?'

Faith could be described as a living, daring confidence in God's grace. This confidence is so sure and certain that we can stake our lives on it. This confidence in God's grace makes us bold, courageous and at ease with ourselves and others as we move through our day. Faith enables us to live in another dimension – rooted in this life, for sure, but drawing life and strength from another, from Christ.

We don't tend to think of faith in these terms. There is a tendency to diminish faith to living in a more timid, frightened and cowering way. There is a perception that the weak live by faith; the strong do not need faith, they do not need a crutch. Many non-believers are impressive human beings: confident, loving and persevering. They have confidence in themselves and their own abilities. The tragedy for believers is that although we have the wisdom not to put our trust in ourselves, we don't always have the faith to put our trust and confidence in God. There can be among believers a kind of crisis of confidence which threatens our witness. In this Year of Faith the Holy Spirit is calling us to recover a

new, confident faith. The gospel is 'Good News' – it is a life-changing and joyful message.

So why are so many Christians – and indeed many clergy today – miserable, seeming to have lost a sense of joy? Many can be rather bitter, bad-tempered, frustrated and complaining. The recovery of joy is the fruit of self-examination, repentance and contrition. Through this bitter process of renewal we taste the sweetness of the Lord's mercy and forgiveness. John teaches us that one of the blessings of faith is that we have confidence in approaching God. This approaching God in freedom and confidence is the fruit of a repentant and humble heart.

How confident are you in approaching God? 'This is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him' (vv. 14-15).

Lord, grant me an optimistic faith which believes that with you all things are possible. Nothing can be done or achieved without hope and confidence in you.

1 John 5:14-21 • Psalm 149:1-6, 9
John 3:22-30

Today, the season of Christmastide draws to a close. It reaches a wonderful climax in a definitive event in the Lord's life: his baptism in the Jordan. Jesus' baptism was a remarkable event because the baptism offered by John the Baptist was for repentance. The immersion in the waters of the Jordan was a sign of conversion, of a person changing direction in life. John's message was addressed to tax collectors, soldiers and ordinary men and women. It was a message of moral reform, of preparing for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus' baptism began his public life and in this moment God is revealed as Blessed Trinity.

The Trinity is unique to Christian faith. We are united to Muslims and Jews because we share a common belief in One God, but at this point our faith departs sharply from these two other faiths because we believe that God is Three Persons in One God – the Holy and Blessed Trinity. God is Father, God is Son and God is Holy Spirit. Jesus' baptism was the manifestation, the epiphany, of Jesus as Messiah of Israel and the Son of God.

This unveiling of Jesus' nature and mission brought forth from the Father a tender and heart-warming

affirmation: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased' (v. 22 NIV). Jesus' baptism was the acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God's Suffering Servant. He allowed himself to be numbered among us sinners – he is truly 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29).

In today's Gospel we are seeing unfolding before our very eyes the 'fulfilling of all righteousness' (Matt. 3:15). We are witnesses of Jesus consenting to submit himself entirely to his Father's will, which was his death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. The coming down of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism looked forward to the coming down of the Holy Spirit on us – a prelude, if you like, to the new creation. We commit ourselves to entering more deeply into the mystery of our baptism, praying about it, seeking to understand it and growing in our appreciation of this wonderful grace.

Let us be buried with Christ by baptism to rise with him; let us go down with him to be raised with him; and let us rise with him to be glorified with him. (St Gregory of Nazianzus)

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 • Psalm 103(104):1-4, 24-30
Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7 • Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Today we begin a journey through the letter to the Hebrews. For centuries this letter was called 'the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews' but Paul's direct authorship seems unlikely since its style and approach appear different from his other writings and in their case the apostle clearly identifies himself as the author. In Hebrews 2:3 we also read: 'This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him' (NIV). These words suggest that the author, unlike Paul, had neither been with Jesus during his earthly ministry nor received special revelation directly from him (cf. Gal. 1:11-12). We don't want to get carried away with authorship, as we know and believe that the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God. However, it is a matter of interest. It is clear that the author held some authority in the apostolic Church and was probably an intellectual Hebrew Christian. Some scholars suggest the writer was either Barnabas or Apollos, but we will probably never know. For our purposes it is enough to know that the author does not identify himself but that the letter was intended primarily for Jewish believers. These Jewish believers would have been very familiar with the Old Testament and were

experiencing some pressure to revert to their former faith. Some scholars have suggested that Hebrews' intended readership were the 'great number of priests [who] were obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7).

Authorship and audience aside, the very clear theme of the letter to the Hebrews is the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the sole revealer and mediator of God's grace. The prologue which is before us today presents Christ as God's full and final revelation, far surpassing any other limited and partial revelation given before. Jesus is superior to Moses, to any prophet and to the angels.

How fitting that in this Year of Faith we should study this wonderful letter which rejoices in God's Son. At the very heart of a mature and maturing faith is an ever-growing and fresh understanding and appreciation of the Lordship of Jesus. This is what the letter to the Hebrews teaches us over and above everything else: Jesus is the Son, the radiance of God's glory, sitting at the right hand of the Father.

We worship and adore you.

Hebrews 1:1-6 • Psalm 96(97):1-2, 6-7, 9
Mark 1:14-20

The author of Hebrews is endeavouring to win hearts and minds. It appears that there are underhand forces at work, trying to lead people away from their new-found faith in Christ. Perhaps his readers were being enticed to believe that the future kingdom would be under the rule of angelic beings (Heb. 1:4). What is clear is that he is putting up a strong defence of the Christian faith. He is engaged in the serious business of winning souls for Christ and protecting the sheep from the wolves. Clearly, in Hebrews Christ is the supreme being, God made man, higher than the angels. Yet he is like us in all things, including temptation, but never sinning, always resisting, always overcoming.

Hebrews is really a rich and profound reflection on Jesus, the Son of God. During this Year of Faith we strive to keep our gaze fixed upon Jesus Christ, the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Heb. 12:2). In Jesus all our anguish and all our longings find fulfilment. In Jesus the joy of love, the answer to the drama of suffering and pain, the power of forgiveness and the victory of life over the emptiness of death find fulfilment in the mystery of his incarnation, in his becoming man.

Jesus was tempted in every way that we are. Consider this truth, if you will. We can easily bring to mind the fierce and sometimes overwhelming temptations which beset us; Jesus encountered this very same experience. It was by sharing our human weakness that the Lord has transformed us by the power of his resurrection. As Christians we cannot afford the luxury of a negative thought. As Christians we cannot complain, 'Nobody understands me' or 'Nobody knows what I am going through.' This is simply not the case: Jesus knows what we are going through because he has already gone through it. Many centuries ago St Cyril of Alexandria wrote: 'Christ was wearied (John 4:6), hungry (Matt. 4:2) and required sleep (Matt. 8:24). Just as we say that the flesh assumed in the incarnation became his very own, in the same way the weakness of his flesh became his very own – Jesus, the Lord, was 'made like his brethren in all things except sin alone' (Heb. 2:17).'

Lord Jesus, you are not ashamed to call me your brother or sister; you who are holy have made us holy. I put all my trust in you and praise your holy name.

Hebrews 2:5-12 • Psalm 8:2, 5-9

Mark 1:21-28

Are you afraid of dying? Are you afraid of death? Can you talk about death in a way that allows you to face it and come to terms with it? The truth is that in our society death is not considered a polite topic of conversation. As Mark Twain observed, death and taxes might both be certain but we sure prefer to talk about taxes than death. Indeed, as a society we find sex a more comfortable subject than death. Why is this? What is it about death that makes it such a taboo subject? Is it fear? Fear of extinction, fear of oblivion, terror of the unknown?

We live in a world that puts a premium on being sophisticated, smart, scientific people. We don't like to think that we are as terrified of death as our forefathers (and foremothers for that matter) were. We like to think we take it in our stride. The Scriptures reveal that fear of death is, in fact, a universal human condition. The truth is we are terrified of death. How do we know this? The Bible tells us so! The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus came to 'deliver all those who through fear of death were subject

to lifelong bondage' (v. 15). Fear of death came with the fall of man. Death has been part of the human condition since the very beginning. God said, 'For dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return' (Gen. 3:10 KJV). The prophet Joshua prayed as death drew near: 'I am about to go the way of all the earth' (Josh. 23:14). The book of Job reminds us: 'You shall come to your grave in ripe old age, as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season' (5:26).

Jesus came to free us from our fear of death. He is the One who liberates us from the shackles that see death as the end, not the beginning. For Christ vanquished death. He conquered it by being the sinless and perfect offering to the Father. Through him, with him and in him, we are reconciled to the Father, and the gift of eternal life, lost at the Fall, is restored to us once again.

Lord Jesus, you are the Conqueror, the Victor, the Lord of Life: you crushed him who held the power of death and destroyed the hold death had over us.

Hebrews 2:14-18 • Psalm 104(105):1-9

Mark 1:29-39

The letter to the Hebrews is a hard-hitting, punchy and no-messing-around kind of Scripture. If this letter were a boxer it would be a prizefighter, able to deliver a knock-out punch. Hebrews is not for the faint-hearted or those who shy away from conflict or challenge. It is like getting into the ring with the Holy Spirit. Now, some might be offended by this analogy but, as we will learn later on in this magnificent letter, God disciplines those whom he loves (12:7). Admittedly he may knock you out with a punch but he can also, as we know, knock you off your horse!

There are many fascinating aspects to today's reading. The first is that we are left in no doubt as to who the author of Sacred Scripture is: the Holy Spirit. 'Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says...' (v. 7). It is the Holy Spirit who speaks to us, personally and directly, when we read or hear today's reading. The opening quotation from Psalm 95:7-11 is a warning not to harden our hearts. Israel, without a shadow of a doubt, were God's chosen people but they had a habit of disobeying God and hardening their hearts. Do you recognize the same capacity in your own heart? We are often more concerned about

our arteries hardening than we are about our hearts hardening. Yet, just as fatty foods cause our arteries to harden, so sinful disobedience and a turning away from God make our hearts hard and resistant to him.

Do you recognize this hardening in your own life? How can we remedy it? What are we to do? The first thing to do is to be grateful and thank God that you have the insight to be aware this is happening. This is itself a blessing and a grace. The second step is to examine your conscience, asking the Holy Spirit to show you areas of sin in your life or ways of thinking that resist him. Sometimes it can be that we have held onto resentment against someone or that we have refused to forgive and let go of something someone said or did to us. Today is always the day of salvation. Today is the day to repent and turn back. Today is the day to know God's forgiveness, grace and blessing.

Lord, purify my heart. Make it a soft and open heart, ready to receive you and hear your voice day by day.

Hebrews 3:7-14 • Psalm 94(95):6-11
Mark 1:40-45

Rest is an important scriptural idea. The author of Hebrews has three kinds of rest in mind. The first is the rest of the Promised Land offered to Israel as they wandered aimlessly in the desert. The second is God's own Sabbath rest when he took time out from creating the universe. The third is our eternal rest in the Promised Land of heaven. We as God's people are on a pilgrimage to the Father's house and the eternal rest and joy of being with him. Jesus promised this rest to those who follow him: 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' (Matt. 11:28). What is clear from today's reading is that the promise of entering God's rest is held out to us but we can fall short of entering it, and therefore we need to be vigilant and alert to this danger.

This makes sense in most areas of our lives. When things which are of great value to us are at risk we take precautions. We take the necessary action to protect them. In our domestic lives we insure our property against fire, theft and damage. We invest in our careers by taking courses and striving to be the best that we

can. We understand that if we live carelessly and recklessly, there are consequences and implications. But the truth is that our faith can also be at risk. It can be shipwrecked. We can lose our way and become confused and walk in darkness. The good news, however, is that God is always with us. The Holy Spirit is always calling, urging, prompting and guiding us. As St Augustine expressed it so pertinently many centuries ago: 'You have created us for yourself and our heart cannot be stilled until it finds rest in you.'

We find rest in God by striving to do his will. God's will is not burdensome: it is simply to believe in the One he has sent. Having faith in Jesus is how we please God and ensure that our faith grows and matures. For sure we can have 'bad days' and sometimes we don't feel as if our hearts are on fire with God's love, but this is all part and parcel of the Christian life.

Lord, give me a faithful and obedient heart which seeks only the rest you can offer – the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding.

Hebrews 4:1-5, 11 • Psalm 77(78):3-8
Mark 2:1-12

Today's reading from Hebrews is an important one to remember and be familiar with in relation to reading the Bible. We don't tend to do this but it can be good to make a mental note that Hebrews 4:12-16 is about the role of Scripture in our lives.

Reading the Scriptures is not like reading any other book. In Scripture we directly encounter the living Word of God. In a real and wonderful way when we read the Scriptures we experience what John announced: 'we...proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' (1 John 1:2-3). When we read the Scriptures we open ourselves to divine revelation.

God has chosen to communicate himself and the eternal decisions of his will. In other words, when we read the Bible we have an opportunity to share in the divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind. There is no doubt that we know God's existence through the gift and light of human reason (Rom. 1:20). However, it is through

the light of divine revelation that we have access to and penetrate the truths of our faith. Reading the Scriptures is like looking, with eyes of faith, at the face of God (1 John 3:2). Our vocation invites us to hold fast to the Scriptures, to treasure and revere them.

There are many ways of reading the Scriptures: we can take a passage from the Gospels, read a whole book of either the Old or New Testament, focus on the readings from Mass or make a detailed study of a word or truth. What is important, in whatever way we read or study God's Word, is to allow it to speak to us and challenge us. As the author of Hebrews points out, the Scriptures are like a sword, slicing and cutting, penetrating deep within us. They reach parts of us which others cannot reach. They bring to light, unveil, convict, teach and reveal. We have to let the grace of revelation take us by the hand and lead us ever more deeply into the mystery of faith contained in God's Word.

*Lord, create in me a pure heart,
a heart on fire with love for your
sacred Scripture.*

Hebrews 4:12-16 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15

Mark 2:13-17

In a village in Galilee we encounter John's 'sign theology'. As he puts it so simply and beautifully: 'This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee' (v. 11). The question, as always with these signs, is: 'What does this sign mean?' Like all the signs the meaning is profound and many-faceted. St Thomas More said that the Scriptures were such that a mouse could put his tiny foot in them and an elephant wade in their deep waters! What are you – a mouse or an elephant? Don't answer that!

The changing of water into wine is many people's favourite miracle. A wedding in first-century Palestine was a joyous affair with plenty of food and wine, and lasted a whole week. Quite some party, that is for sure! Running out of wine was clearly socially embarrassing for the bride's father but a sign perhaps of how much people were enjoying themselves. The water that was changed into wine was not ordinary water – it was water that had been blessed for ceremonial washing. This special water was not changed into *vin ordinaire*, as the French say, but top-notch wine. Scholars inform us that as a result of this miracle there were now six jars each holding up to twenty-five gallons

of quality wine! What a miracle!! Indeed, it dumbfounded the guests.

Believer or unbeliever, we all understand the message a superabundance of wine gives. It conveys joy, celebration, party and so on. In Israel an abundance of wine was associated with a prophetic turn of speech for the ushering in of the new messianic age (Amos 9:13-14; Joel 3:18). There is also a passage in the Non-Canonical 2 Baruch 29 which echoes this sentiment: 'on each vine there shall be a thousand branches, and each branch shall bear a thousand clusters and each grape produce a cor [120 gallons of wine]...because these are they who have come to the consummation of time.' For John the miracle was a sign of the messianic age, the passing from the old to the new. The wedding feast was a sign of the heavenly banquet to which we are all invited by virtue of our baptism. The bridegroom at this wedding is Jesus. The joy of the heavenly banquet would come after the 'hour' of Jesus' suffering: the cross, his death, his glory.

*Lord, by your cross and
resurrection you have won for us the
gift of eternal life, the joy of heaven
and the promise of sharing in God's
nature.*

Isaiah 62:1-5 • Psalm 95(96):1-3, 7-10

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 • John 2:1-11

It is likely that most of us have, at some point in our lives, found ourselves going through a time that has caused us great anguish, sorrow or pain; a time when, even if we don't show it outwardly, the very centre of our being is crying out. Such experiences, whilst different for every person, enable each of us to have a greater degree of compassion for others in their time of need. It is through the suffering that Jesus experienced in his life that he joins with us and shares in our sorrows.

Even though we know that Jesus suffered terribly, at the back of our minds we can think that it was different for him. But it's a mistake to think like this. He was the Son of God, but he was like us in every way except sin. He felt pain when it was inflicted, he felt the sorrow of his friend's death, he grieved over the future of Jerusalem. He struggled with temptation. If he was to take our place on the cross and offer his life on behalf of all, he had to be a perfect sacrifice.

Jesus did not choose himself for such a task and could not be accused of seeking glory for himself. For in human terms, what was in it

for him? His way of life was the way of the cross, compelled by love for his Father and for all of humankind. Jesus came to face death. Not just physical death, but the death that had separated us from God because of our disobedience. He was to enter into our hell, to abandon himself to the grave, to total separation from his Father, in order that we might enter heaven.

And enter heaven we can. The course of our lives will still bring us through times of suffering, but in our hearts we shall find that we are never alone. Through our baptism we are joined to the body of Christ. Christ is in us and he is our hope, our source of eternal salvation. This life within us is a treasure, a treasure that is far greater than anything we can gain or lose in this life.

Lord, as we turn to you in need, grant us rest. In our rest open our eyes that we may see you. And as we dwell with you and in you, rouse our hearts to love and praise you.

Hebrews 5:1-10 • Psalm 109(110):1-4
Mark 2:18-22

Each of us knows the things we do to cope with stress in our lives. We may run to the kitchen for the chocolate fix, to the television to be distracted, to bed to hide from it in sleep, to our bank balance for security in money, or to our work to drown ourselves in success and in search of praise. What we are doing is like throwing out an anchor, seeking relief and rest from the storm and tides of our lives. But these anchors lose their grip, being only human strategies, and soon we are tossed back into the storm. As St Thomas Aquinas wrote: 'There is no stability in this present life in which the soul may find security and rest.'

In today's reading the writer of Hebrews tells us not to look to the world for our security but to put our trust in God because he does not lie and he does not change (vv. 16-18). God has given us hope, a hope that is 'a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul' (v. 19).

Hope is born of faith. It is through faith that we place our trust in things that we do not see. In persevering in faith, hope springs up in us, like a light that opens our eyes. This is the light of Christ. If

our eyes have become clouded over, if we have lost hope and feel we can no longer persevere through difficult times, then we need to return to our sanctuary, our refuge, our hope, which is Christ.

Turn now not to the things that are outside us, but turn inwards to the grace you received at your baptism, the grace that has taken you through the darkness of death and brought you into the light of the resurrection. Turn now in prayer so that you may once again find the joy and hope of the salvation that has been won for you.

The fact is that if you descend into the depths of your own spirit... and arrive somewhere near the centre of what you are, you are confronted with the inescapable truth that at the very root of your existence you are in constant and immediate and inescapable contact with the infinite power of God. (Thomas Merton, *The Contemplative Life*)

Lord, open my eyes to see the hope to which you have called me, and open my heart to know the joy of your presence deep within me.

Hebrews 6:10-20 • Psalm 100(101):1-5, 9-10
Mark 2:23-28

It is likely that the letter to the Hebrews was originally written to a congregation of Jewish Christian converts. The author understands the dilemmas their new-found faith has presented to them: the cornerstones of their Jewish faith included the role of Abraham, the Mosaic covenant, the law and the priesthood; but what was the relevance of all this to the Christian faith?

The author comprehends the principle, as expressed by St Augustine, that 'the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New'. Many figures in the Old Testament were prefigurements or 'types' of Christ: they foreshadowed the character and role of the Lord. By means of these holy people God strengthened his people's faith at that time, though they would not have understood their significance as pointing towards Christ.

With great wisdom the author explains how Melchizedek was a foreshadowing of Christ. His name means 'king of righteousness' and his title, king of Salem (Jerusalem), means 'king of peace': both these reveal truths about Christ. But deeper than this, the fact that there is no record of his birth or death

is symbolic of the eternal, divine nature of Christ. Furthermore, Melchizedek is portrayed as greater than Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, because Abraham pays homage to him. He is also a high priest, although he lived long before Aaron, whom God appointed as head of the Jewish high-priestly line. The author explains that through this God is showing us that he had always intended to send his Son, who would be our eternal High Priest and who would establish a new covenant of grace, superseding that of the law.

These insights into God's plan must have strengthened the faith of the recipients of this letter as they enabled them to fit the truths they had grown up with into the context of God's eternal plan in Christ. But they can also strengthen our faith as we see that God's loving plan to save us was worked out over centuries: his commitment to his people is unshakeable. We can know that whatever our situation, however far we feel from God, he will not forsake us.

Lord, we thank you that, our Jewish brothers and sisters kept their faith alive for us over the centuries. We thank you too that, from day to day, we can lay hold of your unchanging love for us.

Hebrews 7:1-3, 15-17 • Psalm 109(110):1-4

Mark 3:1-6

The author of the letter to the Hebrews develops the truth that Jesus is our Great High Priest. For us the concept of high priesthood may not initially be helpful, leading us to think of the rituals and sacrifices of the Old Testament and of other religions rather than Jesus. One way to open up this truth is to look at the role of the high priest in the Jewish religion. The high priest wasn't meant to be a remote, cultic figure inspiring awe and dread; rather he was to be close to his people, dedicated to their service, 'appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God' (Heb. 5:1). He was to teach them of God's love and his law, to help them in their disputes and difficulties, to intercede for them and to offer the sacrifices specified by the law.

St Thomas Aquinas said that 'Christ is the source of all priesthood: the priest of the old law acts as a figure of Christ, and the priest of the new law acts in the person of Christ.' Jesus is the perfect priest: he dedicated his life to teaching, caring, interceding for us and ultimately laying down his life so we might be saved. He

has made his Church 'a kingdom, priests to his God and Father' (Rev. 1:6). We all share a common priesthood through our baptism. Some, however, are also called by Christ to the ministerial priesthood. Both these forms of priesthood are precious gifts of God to his Church. All who are called to priesthood know that their service to others cannot but be flawed, as they are beset by weakness themselves and ultimately by death; but Jesus' love is perfect and he is eternal.

So, to believe that Jesus is our High Priest is to understand that he is still labouring as actively for our salvation as during his ministry on earth; he knows us, intercedes for us, teaches us, forgives our sins and sustains us through the Eucharist. As our High Priest, Jesus prays for us, as he prayed for his disciples in the upper room: 'Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one' (John 17:11).

Father, look kindly on all who follow Jesus your Son. Make us one in the fullness of faith and keep us one in the fellowship of love.

Hebrews 7:25-8:6 • Psalm 39(40):7-10, 17

Mark 3:7-12

The conversion of Paul is recounted three times in the Acts of the Apostles. In today's version, Paul is defending himself before the people just as he is about to be brought into the barracks. With his natural sense of theatre, he holds up his hand for silence and begins boldly and flamboyantly. 'Brethren and fathers, hear the defence which I now make before you', he exhorts (22:1), in tones echoed by Shakespeare's Mark Antony: 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.' Paul is addressing his fellow Jews. He speaks in Hebrew, reminding his listeners of his deep grounding in the religion of the Pharisees, whose sacred traditions he was brought up in and educated to practise and uphold. So fervent was he in the past that (as Saul) he persecuted Christians relentlessly, hunting them down to destroy their beliefs, which he considered a mockery of the God he so ardently worshipped. By his own admission, he was cold, unyielding and hard-nosed in those early days.

Although born at around the same time as Christ, Paul never encountered Jesus in the flesh. But his meeting with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus was to turn his life around for good. There is

a strong message for us here. Like Paul, we have never seen Jesus in human form, but we have been granted a privileged relationship with him through our baptism. Also, like Paul, we sometimes persecute Jesus, our brother. We let God down continually. But God is merciful and has graced us with the potential for conversion. Each new day offers us a fresh chance to turn back to Christ and live. All it takes is a fundamental openness to God and a dash of humility.

By reducing the rather arrogant and judgemental Saul of Tarsus to a gibbering wreck on the road to Damascus, by taking away his apparent strength and by blinding him temporarily, God revealed to him the immense power that lies hidden in weakness. Plunging him into the darkness of his own bigotry and brutality, God bathed him in the light of grace. We may be called to walk that road today.

Lord, through the grace of our own baptismal calling, you continue daily to reveal your truth to each one of us. May we be ever open and alert to that truth, like Saul on the road to Damascus, and ready to share our faith in it.

Acts 22:3-16 or Acts 9:1-22 • Psalm 116(117):1-2
Mark 16:15-18

The picture suggested in the opening lines of today's reading forms a lovely contrast to the rather stern image of the apostle Paul we might sometimes have – zealous for the kingdom, to be sure, but maybe a bit uncomfortable to live with! Here we see his deep humanity, as well as his striking pastoral concern for his young co-worker. Paul remembers and addresses Timothy with a deep, tender love, calling him 'my beloved child' (v. 2). He longs to see him again, 'that I may be filled with joy' (v. 4).

Then we have a wonderful insight into the workings of the early Church. Timothy was of mixed background (his mother Eunice was Jewish, while his father was Greek), and this made sense of the Spirit's commission that he preach to both Jew and Gentile. At the same time, faith was already very much a family affair, with Timothy's grandmother, Lois, having been the first to be converted.

The importance of faith passing down through the generations remains just as vital today, perhaps even more so, with many broken families, and so many younger people drifting away

from the Church. It's particularly encouraging to have this very warm little picture of three generations united by their 'sincere faith' (v. 5).

The real power of today's reading, however, comes at the end of this opening to Paul's second letter to his young friend. In essence we have here a kind of mini-guide to living in God's power and living our faith to the full. Paul calls on Timothy, and on us, never to be ashamed of witnessing to our faith. Instead, like Timothy and Titus, whom we also celebrate today, we are called on to build the Church. We may feel daunted by this challenge, but we must always remember that we need not try to do this by our own strength: indeed, we cannot. There may be hardship involved in witnessing, in building the Church, but, as Paul tells us, we have been given not a spirit of timidity, but one of self-control, of power and of love. With Christ with us, whom shall we fear?

Heavenly Father, we pray that we may always seek to fan the flames of your Spirit within us, so that we may find and play our true part in building your kingdom.

2 Timothy 1:1-8 or Titus 1:1-5 • Psalm 95(96):1-3, 7-8, 10
Mark 3:20-21

The Gentiles, like Luke himself, had believed in Christ on the testimony of others, not because they were eyewitnesses to Jesus' life, ministry and resurrection. But attacks on the historical existence of Jesus began to undermine their faith. To build up their faith, Luke wrote down an orderly account of Jesus' earthly life and ministry 'just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word' (1:2).

Luke's Gospel shows the continuity between God's promises made through the prophets and their fulfilment in the person of Jesus. Jesus, reading from the prophet Isaiah the promise that God would send one who would free his people from oppression and imprisonment, and restore their freedom and liberty (Isa. 61:1-2), announced: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (4:21). His words electrified his audience. They had heard this promise many times before. But now Jesus, in front of their own eyes, was saying: 'I am fulfilling this great promise of God. I am the Spirit-bearer foretold by Isaiah and, in the creative power of God's Spirit, I am bringing in a new age of freedom and divine

favour, restoring men and women to health, and casting out demons.' It's not surprising that 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him' (4:20). It's also unsurprising that they could not accept him and 'rose up and put him out of the city' (4:29).

Jesus now stands before us. He still proclaims the Good News, making us see with new eyes that we are loved and forgiven, and leading us into his Father's presence as beloved sons and daughters. He restores to us our inheritance as God's children, freeing us from oppression and liberating us from whatever imprisons us. Do we believe this and go to Jesus to receive his grace and life? Or do we not believe that he can do all things for us and so reject him? Jesus stands before us as he stood before his fellow townspeople and challenges us to come to him for healing and freedom. The choice, however, always remains ours.

Lord Jesus, you restore all things. You break the power of evil. You heal our sins. Help me to come to you with complete faith and confidence. Teach me to fix my eyes upon you.

*Nehemiah 8:2-6, 8-10 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15
1 Corinthians 12:12-30 • Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21*

The author of the letter to the Hebrews reflects on the power of the death of Jesus. Through it the New Covenant has been inaugurated. Jesus is the mediator of that covenant and it is through him – and only through him – that we receive the promised eternal inheritance (v. 15).

The perfection of Jesus' fulfilment of all that God had promised through the law and the prophets in the centuries of Israel's history emerges as the author contrasts the Old and the New Covenants. Central to worship under the Old Covenant were various forms of sacrifice, which made visible the interior sentiments of the people. Every material sacrificial act had its spiritual significance, consecrating national, family and individual life. Underlying the sacrificial rituals was a deep desire for forgiveness, purification and atonement. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered a special tabernacle – the Holy of Holies – and sought atonement for his own sins, the sins of the priesthood and the sins of the nation by sprinkling on the altar the blood of animals that had been offered in sacrifice (Lev. 16).

But in the New Covenant we have Jesus, the new and eternal High Priest appointed by the Father himself; he is the only-begotten Son of God and he is God. It is because he is God that he is the only acceptable offering that can satisfy the righteous, loving justice of the Father. In himself, Jesus is both priest and sacrifice. His sacrifice is a once-and-for-all libation of himself poured out in atonement for our sins. His sacrifice is eternally present before the Father; it does not need to be repeated. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is the greatest and most glorious of God's mysteries. It reveals just how horrendous and appalling our sin is in the eyes of God. It also reveals how deeply we are loved by God, who sacrificed his most precious Son for our sake. It reveals too the profound loving relationship between the Father and Son, into which we can now enter for all eternity not because of any merit of our own but because of the sacrifice of Jesus, our High Priest.

Father, for your glory and our salvation you appointed Jesus Christ eternal High Priest. May the people he gained for you by his blood come to share in the power of his cross and resurrection.

*Hebrews 9:15, 24-28 • Psalm 97(98):1-6
Mark 3:22-30*

It is difficult to exaggerate the evil effect of humanity's sinful rebellion in Eden. Sin caused a fracture of cosmic proportions in our relationship with the good Creator. So far were Adam and Eve removed from God that it was as though they were no longer within his sight; he searched for them and called to them: 'Where are you?' (Gen. 3:9). In our own time the consequences are still very clear. The ruthless savagery and massive scale of human suffering during the twentieth century were appalling.

At the heart of God's self-revelation is the principle of justice. As the perfect Creator of all things, God is incapable of error or deceit; whatever he says or does is true. As God gave humanity life and revealed himself as the source of life, the just consequence for humankind of turning away in disobedience was the opposite – death. That humanity was not totally lost was due entirely to the compassion and mercy of God. We became mere shadows of the marvellous creatures God had created. Separated from the source of life, we could love neither him nor each other. We were enslaved within a nature that was incapable of living the life we were created to live. Under the Old Covenant the

law demanded sacrificial atonement for sin and every year the high priest offered the blood of animals in the temple in atonement for the sins of the people.

But our sinful offence against the perfection of God's love could not be atoned for by animal sacrifice: justice required an offering of similar perfection. That perfection could only be of God himself, in the person of the Saviour promised after the Fall (Gen. 3:15). Taking upon himself our sinful nature, the sinless Messiah reversed the rebellious decision taken by Adam and was obedient to the Father. In offering himself in atonement for sin, the perfect human being satisfied God's perfect justice. Because his sacrifice was perfect it required no repetition: it was for all humanity and for all time – once and for all.

For all who have faith, the cross of Jesus means freedom from bondage to sin and restoration to a loving and intimate relationship with God, the relationship for which we were created. This is the Good News of salvation freely and lovingly given to all who turn to Jesus. It is the hope by which we can live, freed at last from the sin that has held us captive.

Hebrews 10:1-10 • Psalm 39(40):2-4, 7-8, 10-11

Mark 3:31-35

Jesus Christ is the new and eternal High Priest. The writer of Hebrews puts particular emphasis on this aspect of Jesus' ministry. He contrasts Jesus with the temple priests, standing daily to perform their service, offering endless sacrifices yet powerless to expiate sin. These priests can never finish their work, whereas Christ's redemptive work is complete because, as the new High Priest, he has shed his own blood. No sacrifice can be more perfect. And the perfection of his sinless offering is the only sacrifice that can bring a final and definitive deliverance of his people from the power of sin.

Having performed his duty by making that once-for-all sacrifice, he now sits at the right hand of the Father. The writer draws an important symbolic contrast between the standing and the sitting postures. On the cross, Christ spoke the words 'It is finished' (John 19:30). Jesus became incarnate to make us holy. He achieved this potential for us by the power of his cross, which has set us free. Jesus offered his sacrifice once and for all.

The cross draws us into the profound mystery of Christ's suffering and death. Jesus' burning desire to do the Father's will gave him the courage to persevere and the compassion to comfort others. Strong with his Father's strength, he endured the false accusations, the falls, the humiliating crucifixion and the agonizing death, knowing that the power of God's love could transform us all.

The cross of Christ, the eternal High Priest, spells ultimate triumph over evil. Ministering to the bitter end, Christ reaches out despite his own excruciating pain in gestures of reconciliation and forgiveness. His mercy is embodied in that moving prayer, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34); his love in those liberating words to the repentant thief: 'today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43).

Lord, may we know that your transforming love embraces us all, leading us out of darkness into your glorious light.

Hebrews 10:11-18 • Psalm 109(110):1-4

Mark 4:1-20



The Old Covenant was restrictive and prohibitive. The Jewish people were prevented from entering into the sanctuary of God's presence – the repeated sacrifice of the blood of the animals could not atone for sin. Despite the Levitical priesthood and its sacrifices, the people were in a very real sense cast out from God's presence. Jesus' cross and the shedding of his precious blood changed that forever.

We now have the confidence to enter into the Holy of Holies – the Most Holy Place – by and through the blood of Jesus. The perfect priest offered the perfect sacrifice and paid in full the price for the sin of the world. The rubric of temple worship under the Old Covenant meant that a curtain separated the Holy Place (where the high priest could enter) from the Most Holy Place (where no one could enter except the high priest on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement). Jesus' life was no symbol but a living reality – when he died, his body (like the curtain) was 'torn in two, from top to bottom' (Mark 15:38) and the way was opened so that 'we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he opened for us through

the curtain, that is his body' (v. 19 NIV). Jesus is our great High Priest through whom we can draw near to God. We can be sincere, assured in faith, and have our conscience cleansed and purified as we worship the living and true God. In prayer, in worship and in receiving the Eucharist we can enter into God's presence. This is our inheritance, our birthright and privilege as Christians.

What are the practical implications of this revelation, this insight, this knowledge? Our author lays this out for us. First, we can draw near to God (v. 22); we can know and enjoy God's loving presence. There is no room for self-condemnation or negativity, for God is inviting us to come to him. Second, we are called to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess and confess (v. 23); it's not a theory or an abstract idea but a living reality – it's a living hope in a new and living way.

Lord Jesus, you have opened the way for us to come to the city of the living God, to the Church upon Mount Zion, to those whose names are written in the heaven lies. We thank you.

Hebrews 10:19-25 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Mark 4:21-25
