

Happy New Year! Praise be to God for another year! Praise be to God for Mary our Mother! Each new year begins, as it were, wrapped in the tender, protective, maternal arms of Mary of Nazareth, the Mother of God, Theotokos. We implore her help and seek her intercession as this new and special moment in time gets underway. For the truth is we do not know what this year has in store for us!

The tradition is that we enter a new year with either a firm or, more typically, a lukewarm resolve to change some things in our lives – for example, take up a new hobby or, for many, lose weight or stop smoking. Originality in this area is invariably lacking and the same old resolutions are made and the same ones broken. But how should a believer in our Lord Jesus Christ approach the beginning of a new year? What does God want for our lives? What is his plan, his will?

Perhaps the key to these important questions is revealed in the witness of Mary in today's Gospel. In one brief verse Luke captures both beautifully and poetically Mary's approach to life and her relationship with God: 'But Mary treasured up

all these things and pondered them in her heart' (v. 19 NIV). Here is a great resolution for 2014: commit this verse of Scripture to memory because it contains all the treasures and riches of the Christian life and is the key to Mary's spirituality. Mary was the first mystic. She prayed and pondered on the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, treasuring them in her heart and, without a shadow of any doubt, it was in her prayer that she received God's gift of revelation of the mystery of Christ.

This year we can resolve to be like Mary – the perfect disciple, the one who shows us how to pray and ponder on the riches of Christ. To set out to grow, deepen and mature in our prayer life is a wonderful resolution for this new year. We seek Mary's help, protection and intercession, knowing with confidence that God will reward and bless richly and lavishly even our small efforts to grow in daily prayer.

Lord, help me to carve out time and space each day. Grant me the grace to treasure, ponder on and pray on the life of Jesus, especially through the liturgy and the riches of sacred Scripture.

Numbers 6:22-27 • Psalm 66(67):2-8

Galatians 4:4-7 • Luke 2:16-21

We tend to think that the ancient world was strikingly different from ours. And on one level it certainly was. Life without electricity, penicillin and wifi would be intolerable for most of us! However, in one area life has remained remarkably consistent: the human condition. The human heart has remained unchanged for millennia. Our ancient forebears had the same fallen nature as we do.

The gospel was first proclaimed in a world awash with new ways of thinking, new philosophies and new religions. People could choose to align themselves with the thinking of stoicism, hedonism, manichaeism and gnosticism, to name a few of the current philosophies, or they could worship a wide array of pagan gods. Our age is actually not that different. We have New Age with its alternative approach to medicine and ecology, there has been an amazing resurgence of the occult, and in addition we have relativism, consumerism, capitalism, secularism and virulent militant atheism.

The Christian faith, from the very beginning, has had to contend with all manner of strange, weird and distinctly odd ways of thinking which cannot be ignored.

Fundamental to our faith is our belief in the incarnation, that Jesus of Nazareth is true God and true man, that he is co-substantial with the Father and that God is three persons in One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This central truth is what John is defending but also proclaiming in today's reading. Faith can often be weakened and undermined by these competing and conflicting philosophies and, in order to remain strong, we need daily to renew, confirm and affirm our faith and belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. It is this truth which gets attacked more than any other. However, Jesus promised, 'the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you' (John 14:26).

We are called to go out into the world, the marketplace, and bear witness to the truth that Jesus, whom we worship, is God made man. Be prepared today to witness to your faith in the incarnation.

Lord, you are God's only Son, the Eternal Christ, the Son of the Living God, Light from Light, God from God, true man and true God.

John 1:19-28 • Psalm 97(98):1-6

1 John 2:22-28

John the Evangelist is truly the Apostle of Love. This does not mean, of course, that the other apostles were not also focused on this essential and vital Christian virtue, but that over the centuries love has become known as John's signature virtue. His understanding and insight into God's love for us and our call to love our neighbour would take a lifetime to fully appreciate! Today we only have 400 words!

So here is the question we want to ask: from where do you derive your sense of self-respect and human dignity? Different people derive it from different things: for some it is their state in life (priest, religious, married); for others their profession or job; for still others their physique or mental ability. Deep inside us all there is a sense of needing to be affirmed and recognized for who we are. The truth is, however, that we often measure ourselves against other people and this has the effect of either making us feel superior or inferior, or a mixture of both! We are complex creatures in this regard – happiness and joy can sometimes elude us because of our preoccupation with what others think of us.

John blows this way of thinking out of the water because, for him, our dignity and self-respect can only come from one source – God. We are his children. In other words, being a child of God needs to be the foundation upon which we build our dignity and self-respect. This is the solid rock upon which we build our lives. If we choose the sand of achievement, possessions, professional standing and so on, the building of our lives can easily collapse.

But how do we know the love of God? How can we experience it in such a way that it transforms our lives? The answer to this is actually very simple. God reveals his love to us in prayer and all we need to do is stand firm on this revelation every day. God's love is constant; it never changes. God's love for us is a fact in the same way that $2+2=4$ and, according to the irrefutable law of gravity, what goes up must come down.

Lord, teach me to build my life on the sure foundation of your love. Teach me to root my life in this love and witness to the world as a child of a heavenly Father who lavishes his love upon us.

John 1:29-34 • Psalm 97(98):1-6

1 John 2:29-3:6

Many years ago school children would be encouraged to remember lines from the Penny Catechism and then a priest or teacher would ask them to recite their answers to the class. For some this was an encouraging and faith-building experience, wrapped up as it was with warm affirmation and gentle reward from benevolent clergy and religious. Sadly, other less benevolent clergy and religious were harsh, demanding and even punishing if wrong answers were given or the children were unable to recite accurately. Many a grandparent today can recall being given a hard thwack on the hand for getting these things wrong. Most have forgiven such strict discipline but the memory nevertheless resides in the mind and imagination.

These days we don't tend to commit things to memory very much. This way of learning is even frowned upon by the education establishment. However, as we mature and grow in faith we learn that some truths are well worth committing to memory – and a prime example is a verse we find in today's first reading from John's Letter (although nobody is going to have their fingers rapped with

a ruler for not doing so!). In this short verse John encapsulates the very meaning and essence of why Jesus came to earth. We could say that this verse gives the reason for our salvation: 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil' (v. 8).

This simple and profound truth is at the heart of the gospel, for the Son of Man came to engage in a battle, a conflict, with the prince of this world. We don't tend to think of salvation in this way and, if anything, our culture has fallen into a trap that C.S. Lewis warned against: on the one hand to believe in the devil excessively (the occult, tarot cards, witches and so on) and on the other hand not at all. The Church has always taught of the existence of Satan, the devil, and he features throughout the entire Bible, first in the book of Genesis at creation and finally in the book of Revelation, when he is cast out. We are called to do battle with him, confident in the victory of Christ.

Today we wage war on the devil and his schemes by proclaiming the simple truth that the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil and his work. Jesus is Lord, alleluia!

John 1:35-42 • Psalm 97(98):1, 7-9

1 John 3:7-10

The image of the three wise men has become increasingly used over recent years by Christmas card manufacturers who want a product which has a seasonal flavour, but presents the Christian message in a slightly oblique way. Some manufacturers' catalogues, especially those targeted at business users, have precious little artwork that would indicate the Christian theme, and the three wise men are included, perhaps a little grudgingly, for those who insist on a religious dimension. It is a shame that this gospel episode has become, as it were, detached from the message of the incarnation because in Matthew's Gospel the story is used to teach us vital aspects of the wonderful truth that God became man for us.

Familiarity with the story and the memory of the atmosphere of the school nativity play may lead us to miss some vital points. Whilst there are traditionally three wise men (because there are three gifts) Matthew does not actually tell us the number. He clearly uses the literary device of allegory, and does not intend us to take all the details at face value – for example, it would be difficult to identify an individual house by the presence of a star over it!

Matthew is telling us that the birth of Jesus is a global event which would change the course of history, despite the appearance of humble circumstances. He is also telling us that not everyone – indeed relatively few – would recognize Jesus for who he was, but only those who were open to the voice of the Holy Spirit, in whatever form it came. In fact – astoundingly to the evangelist's Jewish audience – it would be Gentiles who were amongst the first worshippers of the Messiah. Finally, and in some detail, he tells us of the duplicitous and seductive voice of the evil one, manifested in the actions of Herod. Paradoxically, Herod was one of the few who did indeed recognize the coming of the Saviour straightaway, but saw it as a threat to be neutralized. And the opposition to Jesus and his message would continue in all sorts of ways through the ages, with the very same intention – to try to extinguish the light of the world.

Lord, help us today to worship with the host of people through the ages who have rejoiced in the truth that you love us so much that you became man for us.

Isaiah 60:1-6 • Psalm 71(72):1-2, 7-13

Ephesians 3:2-6 • Matthew 2:1-12

In a manner of speaking, Capernaum was where it all started. Jesus chose this sizeable bustling town to be his base for the beginning of his ministry. We know that Jesus chose his disciples from that area, starting with what sounds like a remarkably casual encounter with two simple fishermen, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, by the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Archaeological excavations in the region, near to the shore, have revealed beneath the ancient synagogue there a first-century stonework pavement – possibly one on which Jesus walked – and, at the site of the fifth-century basilica, the remains of a contemporary private house traditionally regarded as being Peter's home. The very first rays of light, the light of the world, would shine out from this thriving, unsuspecting town in fulfilment of the prophecy in Scripture.

Matthew's account of the start of Jesus' ministry echoes yesterday's reading which told us of the visit of the Magi. In both passages we read of how, right at the outset, the message of God's goodness and love was opposed by those in power. The first Herod wanted to kill Jesus in his infancy. The second Herod

imprisoned the prophet John, who was preparing the way for the Messiah, in order to silence him. At the start of Jesus' life, the visit of the Magi represented recognition by those who were outsiders but were open to the Holy Spirit. At the start of Jesus' earthly ministry, those who were sick and needy – ordinary people, not the wealthy and powerful – came to him because they were open to God's healing power manifested in the Saviour's touch. It was the openness which was essential for people to take God's message to heart.

In truth, all the people in first-century Palestine were needy – it's just that the sick, the troubled and the weak were more acutely aware of it. Things haven't changed – we are all still needy but in times of sickness, or in times when we are burdened or bruised, we realize it! Matthew is telling us that Jesus is seeking to touch our lives particularly at these times when we recognize our limitations and look to him for strength.

Lord, touch my life and heal me as you healed everyone who came to you. Share my burdens as you have promised, and fill me with your peace.

1 John 3:22-4:6 • Psalm 2:7-12

Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

God is love, but love is not God: it is an attribute of God. This might seem like splitting hairs but actually it is an important distinction. The God Jesus revealed is a divine communion of persons who serve each other in love. The amazing, wonderful and frankly incredible truth about the Christian faith is that by the grace of baptism we are immersed into this love – in a mysterious way we partake in this divine nature, in this communion of love. We may not realize it yet – and the truth is we are all a little slow to catch on – but Pope Francis is calling for a revolution. Of course, he doesn't state this clearly and explicitly: he is a prophet, and prophets use signs. And the signs of this revolution are: his humility, his embrace of people, his openness, his rejection of pomp and circumstance, as well as his love for Jesus and his love for the Church.

And so back to this revolution. From the very beginning the Church has been subversive, a body of people that threatened the established order. The Jews despised the early Church, as Saul of Tarsus illustrated so clearly, and so did the Romans and the

Greeks. What the early Church's enemies found especially confusing was that, rather than sowing a rebellion of discord and hatred, the first Christians sowed a revolution of love and service. They were known for their devotion to God, their willingness to suffer for their faith, their love for their enemies, their ability to forgive. They were leading a revolution of love. And this is precisely what Pope Francis is doing – he is leading a revolution of love.

Over and above everything we are called to a life of love, for in loving we imitate God who is love. Now, as we all know, it's all very well talking about love, but doing love is more difficult. Christian love, *agape*, is rooted in self-sacrifice and service, and grounded in giving to others until it hurts, going the extra mile and not counting the cost. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to begin the revolution in our hearts – to give us hearts that burn with the love of Christ Jesus.

'Let us love our enemies, bless those who curse us, pray for those who persecute us. For love will conquer and will endure for all eternity. And happy are those who live and die in God's love.' (Franz Jägerstätter)

Mark 6:34-44 • Psalm 71(72):1-8

1 John 4:7-10

In general it is hard to believe in something we have not seen. Now, clearly we believe in electricity although we don't see it and we also believe (fingers crossed) that our money is in the bank – we still largely just about trust the banks! When it comes to faith in God, whom we have not seen, Paul argues that in the gift of nature itself we see an intelligent design which reveals the mind of the good Creator and, for this reason, those who refuse to believe are without excuse: 'Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse' (Rom. 1:20). However, there is an even more compelling reason to believe and that is the person of Jesus, God's only Son. John says, 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (John 1:18).

Jesus revealed ultimately who God is. Jesus not only taught the Sermon on the Mount, he lived it; Jesus not only taught the Beatitudes, he lived them. We see

in the Lord divine compassion, forgiveness and tenderness for every human being. We see it supremely in his laying down of his life on the cross. And when we look at Jesus, we see who God is. Jesus revealed that God is love.

Our own lives will change powerfully, day by day, week by week, as we embrace the vocation of love. Somehow – and how this is worked out in our lives is different for everyone – we are called to live like Christ. God has poured out his Spirit of love into our hearts. We live nowadays in a culture which is profoundly secular. It is a society which proclaims tolerance but in fact is often intolerant of religious faith. In such a society, we are called to be beacons of light, of forgiveness and of love. Too often we fail. This must change, and it will change as we repent and turn to the Lord, asking for a time of refreshing and a new outpouring of his love. When we begin to live like Jesus, the world will see God.

Lord Jesus, teach me to love as you loved, to serve as you served and to lay down my life as you laid down your life.

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

1 John 4:11-18

John is known as the Apostle of Love, and, as you might expect, he writes a lot about love.

The theme of his writing could be summed up by the words penned by that famous song-writing duo Lennon and McCartney, 'All you need is love, love is all you need, love, love, love.' The love the apostle John is writing about is not romantic love or familial love or love between friends, although they are embraced within it: he is referring primarily to the kind of love that is displayed in self-sacrifice and laying down one's life, often in the nitty-gritty of daily living. In New Testament terms this is *agape* love.

Around the world this *agape* love is being displayed by people belonging to the St Vincent de Paul Society, who visit the poor, the sick and the infirm in their homes, taking them the Eucharist and being there for them in their need and suffering. The founder of the Society was an inspirational French lawyer called Frédéric Ozanam. We live in an age which needs to be taught about love and, therefore, we now sit at his feet and learn from him:

'The earth has become a chilly place. It is up to us to rekindle a flame of human warmth which is going out. It is up to us to recommence the great work of regeneration even if it means another era of martyrs. Can we remain passive in a world which is groaning and suffering? And, as for us, are we going to make no attempt to live like the saints whom we love? If we do not know how to love God, it seems that we need to see him in order to love and we can only see God with the eyes of faith, and our faith is so weak! But men, poor men, we see with our eyes of flesh. They are there before us and we can place our finger and hand in their wounds and the marks of the Crown of Thorns are visible on their foreheads. Thus there is no possible room for unbelief and we should fall at their feet and say to them with the apostle,

'My Lord and my God.' You are our master and we will be your servants. You are for us the sacred image of the God that we cannot see. Since we know not how to love him otherwise, we will love him in your person.'

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

1 John 4:19-5:4

Bookshops are interesting places. Nowadays you can pretty much touch the zeitgeist or the mood, shall we say, of any particular moment in time or history by seeing what is on the bestseller list. Indeed, if you look at the different genres of books you can get a feel for what people are into today. One of the disturbing newer trends is the growing fascination with the occult, dark arts and New Age, but a trend that has been with us for many years is the popularity of self-improvement books. The marketing of these books is very clever: the covers are designed in such a way that you do literally judge a book by its cover. They promise change, they promise transformation, and they promise that you can by willpower and application overcome any and every problem and challenge you face. In fact, they promise the earth!

John promises no less in today's first reading but his promise is rooted not in a theory or a compulsion to market a book but in a person: Jesus of Nazareth. John asks the question: 'Who is it that overcomes the world?' No sooner has he asked the question than

he also answers it for us: 'Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God' (v. 5 NIV). It is easy to take the gift of faith for granted but we must resist this temptation because it is a deception. In the gift of faith we have received the power to overcome everything that life throws at us. This is the very nature of faith – a faith that does not impact upon the way we live our lives is not a faith: it is simply a theory. The faith that proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the Eternal High Priest, seated at the right hand of the Father, is the answer to every human problem. God's testimony is that in Jesus of Nazareth is fullness of life. It is this truth, this light of revelation, this light of faith, that we must learn, strive even, to rest in and rely upon each day.

'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'
(Rom. 8:38-39 NIV)

Luke 5:12-16 • Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20

1 John 5:5-13

Ponder these amazing, even incredible words written by John: 'And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us' (v. 14). Pretty incredible, right? God wants us to be confident, bold and dynamic in approaching him and making our requests in prayer to him. There is a way in which we have learnt that boldness, confidence and being at ease in matters of faith is a kind of arrogance or conceit or perhaps even prideful. But John wasn't just encouraging his readers: he was actually exhorting them to be confident, bold and dynamic when approaching God. And the reason John was able to teach this principle with such authority is because he learnt it from the Master himself, who taught, 'Ask, and it will be given you' (Matt. 7:7).

Now, of course, there is a subtle point to be made, which is to do with God's will. God will grant us what we want if it is in accordance with his will. So the key thing is to find out what God's will is, and we do this by praying, reading the Scriptures, studying the teaching of the Church, and doing our utmost to love and serve our neighbour.

Simple. Well, of course, this isn't nearly as simple as it sounds: it is a lifelong and arduous challenge, but it begins with us changing the way we think about God.

There is absolutely no doubt from the sacred Scriptures, especially the New Testament, that God wants us to be outrageously bold and confident when we approach him. After all, God is our Father. We are his children. We have the Holy Spirit living in us. So why the timidity, why the fear, why the holding back? The reason for our lack of boldness is because we actually lack faith, and we need to confess that this is what our problem is and repent of it. When we do this, God will pour out anew a bold, confident and assertive faith. The question is: do we really want it?

Lord, grant me a new outpouring of grace and faith that I may know in my life less fear, reluctance and caution. Help me to live as a true child of God, able to approach you, my loving Father, with confidence, boldness and faith, knowing that you love to give good gifts to your children.

Today, as the season of Advent and Christmastide comes to a close for another year, we consider an incident which, in the view of some, caused embarrassment in some quarters of the early Church: Jesus' baptism in the Jordan river. This incident – rather like the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery – reveals something rather shocking and scandalous about Jesus. Since the baptism instigated by John the Baptist was expressly for repentance and Jesus had no sin, why did the Lord insist on being baptized? In Matthew's record of the incident John the Baptist basically protests and resists this action of the Lord's. In response, the Lord in effect calms him down and tells him that this step of baptism was necessary to fulfil all righteousness (Matt. 3:15). By the way, and simply as an interesting fact, these are the first words spoken by Jesus in the New Testament.

The reason Jesus was baptized was to identify fully and completely with the human race he came to redeem and save. Jesus' baptism marks the day when he publicly identified with sinners. He was about to take upon himself the work of being the Saviour of

the world. He would do so by identifying with sinners and taking their sins upon himself. So, when sinners were in a queue to be baptized, Jesus joined the queue. At the moment of Jesus' baptism God revealed himself as Three Persons in One God, Blessed and Holy Trinity: in words spoken from heaven God the Father affirmed his love for his beloved Son; by his appearance in the form of a dove the Holy Spirit hovered over the Son as he had hovered over the earth at creation; and by embracing baptism in the Jordan the Son identified himself with the human race.

Pope John Paul II was once asked what was the most important day in his life. Do you know what he said? He didn't say being ordained, he didn't say being made a bishop or even being made Pope: he said, 'The day of my baptism was the greatest day of my life.'

Lord Jesus, in baptism we are immersed, assimilated, into your death and resurrection. Teach us to go down into the depths of our baptism and discover therein the amazing grace and blessing you have given us – for through our baptism we are born again of the Spirit and are made children of God.

If Mark's Gospel were a newspaper, it would be a red top, a tabloid. Mark wrote his Gospel in such a way that it grabs you. It has pace, urgency and immediacy about it. We see this in today's Gospel, for no sooner has the Lord been tested in the desert than he is baptized in the Jordan, and no sooner has he been baptized than he sets about the task of choosing his disciples. There is no time to spare: the Lord is on a mission. Just as an aside, if you have never read Mark's Gospel in one sitting you really should give it a try. It can be completed in just over an hour and is a fantastic read which really packs a punch!

Mark's record of the choosing of Peter, Andrew, James and John is almost abrupt. We are not privy to any discussion behind the scenes: all we learn is that the Lord says to these hard-working fishermen, 'Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men' (v. 17 NIV). In obeying, these four men were first transformed by Christ, and they then in turn transformed the world. Whatever one thinks of the Christian faith – and many ignore it, trample on it and disregard it –

the truth is that these first apostles were revolutionaries of a kind the world had not known before. They did not embrace a political ideology or a philosophy: they followed a person, Jesus of Nazareth. It was their relationship with him that changed everything.

We are living in an age of meaninglessness, which is rooted in the philosophy of existentialism developed by Jean-Paul Sartre, a rather depressing French academic. This way of thinking has infected the modern world to such an extent that, for many, life literally has no meaning: it is empty and futile. The apostles, and we who follow in their footsteps, know the meaning of life: this isn't to be arrogant or conceited but it is to say, 'I have a reason to live and a reason to die, and the reason is Jesus Christ!' We are the Lord's disciples, his foot soldiers, charged with bringing Christ, the meaning of life, into the world.

Lord Jesus, you call each one of us to take up our cross and follow you. Grant us the grace to accept the call willingly and join ourselves to your suffering, so that we may also share in your glory.

1 Samuel 1:1-8 • Psalm 115(116):12-19

Mark 1:14-20

The Gospels were written two thousand years ago. Their authors were men of their time and age. They were what scholars call 'ancients', which doesn't sound very flattering, does it? This isn't a pejorative term, but is simply intended to identify that they had a mindset which was very different from our modern mindset. In their day there was no Internet, there were no mobile phones, no aeroplanes! Not even the steam engine or the printing press! So when we read the Gospel of Mark or any of the Bible texts we are in effect reading an ancient manuscript. However, when we read or hear this ancient text we filter it through our modern mindset.

Where are we going with this? Well, it is simply impossible to read the New Testament without running into the devil, demons, demon possession and deliverance. Jesus constantly confronted this realm and the Gospel writers recorded incident after incident of the devil and his realm trying to thwart and impede God's work. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus addresses the demonic realm head on. Actually the Lord does it with little fuss and lots of power, commanding the demon to 'Be

quiet!' and 'Come out of him!' (v. 25 NIV).

What do we make of this? Do we believe in the devil and his realm quite in this way? Well, the Church, despite having its fair share of scientists (Vatican astronomers are amongst the best in the world) and learned men and women, has taught since the beginning that the devil and demons are real, and we dilute this teaching at our peril. Now this doesn't mean, of course, that the devil is to blame for everything or that his demons are possessing us left, right and centre. However, it is to accept that evil does exist and we do have an enemy: there is a malign and dark force which prowls around like a lion looking for someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). Although the devil is our enemy and constantly seeks to lead us into temptation (this is why we pray in the Our Father, 'lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil'), God has given us all the grace and strength we need to resist and overcome his schemes and plans.

'He [the devil] does not dare look at you directly because he sees the light blazing from your head and blinding his eyes.' (St John Chrysostom)

1 Samuel 1:9-20 • 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-8

Mark 1:21-28

Day in, day out, the religious orders of the world lift up their voices in a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise. They also pray and intercede for the world. In this sense they are praying for us and for their prayers we are eternally gratefully. Perhaps many discover after death that it was because of these prayers that they came to salvation! Some orders, such as the Carmelites, rise during the night and at dawn as Jesus did. Mark informs us, 'Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed' (v. 35 NIV). Albert Einstein was once asked what would be a good subject to study for a doctoral thesis. He replied, 'Prayer, do a study on prayer; we need to know more about prayer.' Isn't that a remarkable response from one of the world's greatest scientists?

The Scriptures record Jesus praying often. As he prayed in the Jordan river during his baptism, the heavens opened and he received the Spirit (Luke 3:21-22). Before choosing the apostles he spent a whole night in prayer (Luke 6:12-13). Before feeding the five

thousand, he offered a prayer of thanks to his Father for the five loaves and two fishes (Matt. 14:13-21). We know, of course, that he prayed intently before his passion (Heb. 5:7).

We too are called to live a life of prayer. For most of us the challenge is carving out time to be still before the Lord. Clearly, to pray is a battle – the Catechism of the Catholic Church calls it 'the Battle to pray'. One of the things we need to understand about prayer is that God longs and thirsts for our presence as much as we long and thirst for his. Although we are children of God, this does not mean that we are to be immature in faith, and the only way to grow and mature in faith is to learn to pray. The Spirit calls us to take up the challenge to pray, and for some that will mean getting up very early and seeking out a solitary place to pray.

'Prayer presupposes an effort, a fight against ourselves and the wiles of the tempter. The battle of prayer is inseparable from the necessary spiritual battle to act habitually to the Spirit of Christ; we pray as we live; we live as we pray.'
(CCC 2752)

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20 • Psalm 39(40):2, 5, 7-10

Mark 1:29-39

Being diagnosed with leprosy in first-century Palestine turned a person's whole world upside down. Not only did they have to contend with the awful disfigurement caused by the disease, but under the Mosaic law they were forced to become outcasts, untouchables, expelled from the community into which they had been born. Can you imagine what it must have been like to be ostracized? Can you imagine not being touched or embraced? So here is the question: who are today's lepers? Who among us are marginalized, ostracized and demonized?

How about the following for a start: AIDS sufferers, people infected with HIV, homosexuals, drug addicts, prisoners, sex workers, to name but a few? Of course, when we attend Mass we could well be sitting alongside AIDS sufferers, people infected with HIV, drug addicts, homosexuals and ex-prisoners but, since by and large people don't tend to shout about such things, we probably won't realize it.

Jesus, thank God, shows us the way. He reached out in love and in the power of God to lepers and those on the margins of society, and we must do the same – not because

we are in any way morally or spiritually superior but because in a very real sense we are all lepers. We have all been infected with sin and we are all wounded and fallen. The believing community is called to be a fraternity of human beings who know one thing over and above everything else, namely, that we are all beggars supping at the table of God's mercy.

This at least is the theory, but often a strain of self-righteousness infects and distorts our thinking. Only if we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us by the renewal of our mind will our thinking change (Rom. 12:2). The Spirit is always calling, moving and guiding us to think in his way. When we open our hearts, our parishes and our communities, to the outcasts in society, we testify to his all-inclusive love and power. News like this will spread like wildfire, news like this gives compelling testimony to the power of the gospel to transform society.

'To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue it is necessary to know how to lower the defences, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth.' (Pope Francis)

1 Samuel 4:1-11 • Psalm 43(44):10-11, 14-15, 24-25

Mark 1:40-45

Does it require more power to command a paralysed man to rise up from his sickbed or to forgive that paralysed man his sins? Although we don't always appreciate it, our greatest needs are spiritual and are related to the healing of the wounds of our soul and spirit. Clearly, the paralysed man's greatest need was to have his sins forgiven – as it is the greatest need of every single one of us.

As believers we often fail to grasp how shocking the Jesus story is, how utterly scandalous and offensive Jesus was to his fellow Jews. We see this so clearly in today's Gospel reading when Jesus boldly states that another human being's sins are forgiven because he says so. When Jesus says, 'My son, your sins are forgiven' (v. 5), he is basically identifying himself as God, since in the Old Testament only God is capable of forgiving sins. It is no wonder then that the scribes are outraged and accuse Jesus of blasphemy (v. 7).

Jesus is the forgiver-healer. It is significant that Mark chose to present this miracle and Jesus' power to forgive sins so early in his Gospel drama. It shows that the

need for the experience of God's forgiveness was as important to first-century Christians as it is today. Like Jesus' contemporaries our greatest need is to know that our sins are forgiven, and he says to us today, 'My son, my daughter, I absolve you from your sins.'

There is only one type of person whose sins the Lord cannot forgive, and that is the person who refuses to go to him for forgiveness. At the heart of this refusal is a hardening of the heart. God will never trespass upon our free will. He seeks those with humble and contrite hearts, and his Holy Spirit works in us to lead us to heartfelt, sincere repentance. In repentance, we are led to a self-knowledge and awareness of who we are and who God is. God is holy and loving, and we are sinners in need of healing, mercy and forgiveness. We are all beggars in need of God's mercy and, when we discover that mercy, we are set free to know true joy and freedom.

Praise be to God for the gift of mercy and forgiveness. 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.' (Ps. 51:1 NIV)

1 Samuel 8:4-7, 10-22 • Psalm 88(89):16-19

Mark 2:1-12

St Augustine knew a thing or two about sin from personal experience. It is from him that we draw the well-known saying that we should 'love the sinner and hate the sin': actually, to be exact, St Augustine said, 'With love of the sinner, hatred of the sin'. Jesus' understanding of religious practice confounded the establishment of his day – he was a sign of contradiction, a living witness of God's mercy and love. He expelled demons, forgave sin, re-interpreted certain precepts of the Torah regarding ritual purity, and, to top it all, wined, dined and befriended those both the religious and secular society classified as 'sinners and outcasts'.

Jesus' ability to reach out to those on the margins of society invited severe criticism and created a deadly undercurrent of malice from his enemies. They wanted to know why he ate with tax collectors and sinners – they were astounded that anybody religious or faithful to God could do such a thing. Jesus cuts to the chase: 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' (v. 17). The gospel teaches (rather offensively to our modern minds) that no one is

righteous: all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. We all belong to a fallen humanity in need of redemption.

The drug addict who languishes in a dirty room injecting his arm with a Class A drug is clearly in need of God's grace – but so, in God's mind, is a well brought-up young man who experiences no desire to abuse drugs, alcohol or sex. Both, the gospel proclaims, are equally in need of salvation – the drug addict's need is just more obvious, less obscured. The fathers at Vatican II wrote with great insight: 'What revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when man looks into his own heart he finds that he is drawn towards what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his source, man has also upset the relationship which should link him to his last end; at the same time he has broken the right order that should reign within himself as well as between himself and other men and all creatures' (*Gaudium et spes* 13).

Lord, have mercy on me. I am in great need of your grace and mercy.

1 Samuel 9:1-4, 17-19; 10:1 • Psalm 20(21):2-7

Mark 2:13-17

At his baptism Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit filled Jesus with the power to be 'a light to the nations' (Isa. 49:6). Living his life in purity, truth, humility, love, faithfulness and obedience to his Father, Jesus reflected God's light into a sinful world, dispelling the darkness of sin, unbelief and ignorance: 'I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness' (John 12:46). He brought us the light of faith and true knowledge so we could know the Father and do the Father's will.

The Spirit filled Jesus with the power to offer his life in sacrifice for the sins of the world in order that God's 'salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Isa. 49:6). That is why John said of Jesus: 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). As God's Chosen One, faithful and obedient, Jesus 'baptizes with the Holy Spirit' (John 1:33) so that the Spirit will give believers the power to be light to the world and to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. We are light to the world as we live our lives in 'compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and

patience' (Col. 3:12). These virtues dispel the darkness around us just as a lamp placed on a stand 'gives light to all in the house' (Matt. 5:15). We bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth as we seek to live righteous and holy lives, rejecting the temptations that assail us, repenting of the sins we have committed, 'forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other' (Col. 3:13).

By being light to the nations and bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth, Jesus glorified his Father: 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified' (Isa. 49:3). Like Jesus, we give glory to the Father by being light to the world and pursuing righteousness and peace. Ask the Spirit to fill you with power so that you may be light to the world and bring God's salvation – mercy, love, peace and forgiveness – to those around you.

Jesus, my Saviour, you are the light of the world. Fill me with the power of your Spirit so that I may bring your light and salvation to the world.

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6 • Psalm 39(40):2, 4, 7-10

1 Corinthians 1:1-3 • John 1:29-34

Fasting (as opposed to dieting) was commonplace in the ancient world. John the Baptist's disciples fasted either as a sign of their solidarity with John who was in prison or because, as his followers, they had joined, in effect, an order of penitents for whom fasting was an expression of sorrow for sin. The Pharisees were given to fasting but fasted in a way which deliberately attracted the affirmation and recognition of others. Both the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist were scandalized that Jesus' disciples were not also fasting.

Some people approached the Lord and asked him bluntly: 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' (v. 18). The Lord's response is masterful (as you would expect) – he rarely answers an obtuse or contrary question directly but raises the discussion to another level. He responded that his disciples were like guests at a wedding feast, and so it would be unfitting for them to fast. Jewish weddings were (and are) very joyous events, the celebration and rejoicing often going on for a week! Since fasting is associated with sorrow, the idea of fasting during such a time

would be ridiculous. Jesus identified himself as the Bridegroom, the Saviour, the Anointed One of Israel: while he was in the world it was not a time for fasting but for celebration – truly a time would come when fasting would be in order (after his death and resurrection when he was no longer with his disciples).

Jesus ushered in a new order, a new way of thinking, acting and being. He compares the revolution and transformation his presence has on the world to patching an old garment with new, unshrunk cloth or putting new wine into old wineskins, which in ancient times were made of goatskins. As the fresh grape juice fermented, the wine would expand and, whereas a new wineskin would stretch, an old wineskin, which was already stretched to its limit, would burst open and the wine would be lost. Jesus brings a newness that cannot be confined within the old forms. His incarnation, life, ministry, death and resurrection have given birth to a new humanity and a new creation filled and moved by the Holy Spirit.

'Wherever you are on earth, so long as you remain on earth, the Lord is near, do not be anxious about anything...' (St Anthony, Abbot)

1 Samuel 15:16-23 • Psalm 49(50):8-9, 16-17, 21, 23

Mark 2:18-22

The Torah expressly allowed for the eating of corn from a neighbour's cornfield but forbade the cutting down of the corn with a sickle (Deut. 23:25). The disciples were doing nothing wrong as they walked through the fields on the Sabbath plucking and eating corn.

The Pharisees were constantly watching Jesus and his disciples – if it wasn't fasting, it was eating corn on the Sabbath. True to form they confront and challenge Jesus: 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' (v. 24). They make this challenge to him because, although the Torah allowed people to eat corn from a cornfield, the Mishnah considered it unlawful to harvest on the Sabbath, and technically this is what the disciples were doing (Exod. 34:21). Again, true to form, Jesus refuses to respond directly to the challenge but adopts a more lateral and dynamic approach to his detractors. He points them to their knowledge of the Torah and the witness of their forefathers. The idea that godly men may and can do something forbidden has an impressive pedigree: it is exactly what King David did when he entered the temple and ate the

consecrated bread and gave some to his companions, despite the fact that it was strictly only lawful for priests to eat the bread (see Exod. 25:30; 1 Sam. 21).

We must all guard against legalism. Admittedly, many would say legalism isn't the problem today but rather 'laxism', and that a little bit of legalism would be no bad thing! But the problem with legalism, as we encounter in today's Gospel, is that it reduces following God to a set of rules – a case of the letter of the law as opposed to the spirit of the law. Jesus has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we can live holy and pleasing lives in the power of God's grace. Jesus is not only the Lord of the Sabbath: he is the Lord of our lives and the One we should serve and follow. Our vocation is an invitation to live in the power of the Holy Spirit and to radiate the love of God he gives, thus fulfilling the law of love.

Heavenly Father, we dedicate our lives to your Son Jesus. He is the Lord and King of creation and by his grace we are saved and redeemed. 'Christ made my soul beautiful with the jewels of grace and virtue. I belong to him whom the angels serve.' (St Agnes)

1 Samuel 16:1-13 • Psalm 88(89):20-22, 27-28

Mark 2:23-28

The determination with which the Pharisees and others hounded and scrutinized Jesus (in order to catch him out) is testament to their sheer tenacity and mendacity. How they would have truly delighted and rejoiced in Jesus' downfall. What is striking is that his enemies clearly believed he could perform miracles: otherwise they would not have watched him to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. The question for them was not 'Could he heal?' but 'Would he heal?'

Jewish tradition prescribed that aid could be given on the Sabbath only when a person's life was under threat (the mind boggles at how bad someone had to be to receive help). With his keen power of discernment Jesus knew instinctively what his detractors were thinking. He asks tellingly, 'Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' (v. 4). The question breaks through the fog of man-made rules and explodes into the blue sky of human dignity and God's plan to bring health, wholeness and healing. Silence is the enemies' stern reply. This attitude, perhaps more than any other, elicits anger and distress from the Lord. Mark records this moment thus: 'he

looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart' (v. 5).

Anger can be a dangerous emotion – it is only righteous anger (the kind displayed by Jesus) that expresses God's displeasure at wrongful human attitudes of the heart. The Lord heals the man with a public display of his miraculous power – the man's shrivelled hand is fully restored – but remarkably this miracle, rather than softening the hearts of his enemies, hardens them, and they go out and plot how they might kill Jesus. Presumably they saw no contradiction in watching to make sure Jesus did not infringe their tradition but at the same time scheming to murder a human being!

Do you believe that God can heal? Do you have confidence in the power of God's sacraments to heal and restore? Ask the Lord to soften your heart so that you will be open to the grace of the Holy Spirit and able to pray for healing while trusting all to God.

Lord, I believe you can heal. Lord, I believe you can raise the dead. Lord, I believe in miracles. I believe most of all in your loving, sovereign and almighty power to heal, restore and raise us up as his children.

1 Samuel 17:32-33, 37, 40-51 • Psalm 143(144):1-2, 9-10

Mark 3:1-6

What is the Christian faith all about? What is the essence of Christianity? If you had to, and sometimes it's good, proper and right to think this way, how would you sum up what is at the very heart of the Christian life? Some get distracted by all manner of subjects – political arguments or liturgical dilemmas or current issues dominating the headlines. Others are just indifferent – they don't get particularly excited one way or the other; for them being a Christian and going to church is part of their lives and they don't think about it too deeply or indeed that much. There is yet another group of people – thank God! – who have understood and know what the Christian faith is all about and are prepared to make this known.

The answer to the question 'What is the Christian faith all about?' is quite simply: a person. The Christian faith is all about the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the Lord of heaven and earth, and all creation was created by him and for him and one day will be subject to him – even the underworld. We moderns can easily scoff at this idea but Scripture and the Church

show no hesitation in teaching that there is a dark side, a realm of evil where Jesus is loathed and feared. We meet this in today's Gospel: 'whenever the unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." And he strictly ordered them not to make him known' (vv. 11-12).

Our task, if you like, is to penetrate through faith the mystery which is Jesus. The whole point of human existence is to come to know Jesus better and better, more and more. St Augustine understood this and wrote, 'The whole point of this life is the healing of the heart's eye through which God is seen.' We need healing from many things so we can see him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly, day by day.

'Nothing is mine, I no longer have anything but Jesus. No place, nothing, no person, no thought, no feelings, no honours, no suffering can turn me away from Jesus. He is for me honour, delight, heart and soul. He whom I love is fatherland, heaven already. My treasure! My love! Jesus, and Jesus crucified alone makes my happiness!'

1 Samuel 18:6-9; 19:1-7 • Psalm 55(56):2-3, 9-14

Mark 3:7-12

Jesus chose twelve ordinary men to be his disciples, and through God's grace they transformed not just a region or a country but the world! These were not educated men; they did not have a distinguished human pedigree; they were not wealthy or particularly able. They were ordinary in the straightforward sense of the word but were invited to do extraordinary things for God.

Jesus' selection of these men was preceded by a time of worship and prayer to his Father. We do not know the nature of this prayer but we understand that the appointment of the twelve met with the Father's blessing and approval. The fact that this choice included Judas, who the Father knew would go on to betray the Lord, will always remain a mystery. But we must also remember that the Father knew that Peter would betray, Thomas would doubt, and John and James would be violent zealots! And all the disciples would be slow and cumbersome in understanding the signs and wonders unfolding before their very eyes.

The Gospels show us that a small group of nondescript and

unimpressive people can change the world. God chooses the foolish and weak things of this world to confound the wise and the powerful. We tend to think of God choosing individuals to be priests, deacons or religious as being the height of his calling. It is mistaken to think like this because God chooses everyone to follow him in their own way. Those called to the religious life or ordained ministry have not received a superior call. They have certainly received an anointing and a great blessing but this should humble them and move them to pray, 'Lord, I am an unworthy servant, called to lay down my life for you and your people.' No one in a position of authority in the kingdom of God is to lord it over others or create some kind of distinction between God's people. The first apostles were lay people commissioned to apostolic ministry. All of us are equal in dignity by virtue of our baptism.

'Jesus Christ is my all in all, he is my treasure, my life, my bliss, my capital, my temple, my altar, and nothing can separate me from him.'
(A prayer by Macra, a martyr of the early Church)

1 Samuel 24:3-21 • Psalm 56(57):2-4, 6, 11

Mark 3:13-19

The Church exists to evangelize – it's as simple and as straightforward as that. Christian faith is about sharing the gospel, stepping out and telling others the 'good news' about what God has done in Jesus.

It is not just society that has become cynical and hard-bitten towards the gospel: many who go to church have lost their ardour and enthusiasm (although some may never have had much ardour or enthusiasm in the first place). A certain language has evolved about evangelism or evangelization which betrays an attitude of fundamental reluctance. People say things like, 'I don't need to share my faith – I witness by my actions.' In fact, those who say this are in good company: St Francis of Assisi said, 'Preach the gospel at all times – if necessary use words.' However, the truth is that St Francis was so eager to preach and proclaim the gospel that he preached to whoever would listen – even if sometimes it was only the birds of the air and the animals in the field. His heart burnt with a passion to witness to the gospel of Christ.

Today we celebrate the feast of one of the greatest evangelists in the Church's history: the apostle

Paul. His sole mission in life was to win others for Christ, and he was prepared to become all things to all people in order to do so, declaring, 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16). Paul was a man who was intoxicated with Christ. He was filled to the brim with the love of God. For him, the gospel is the power of God which, if proclaimed properly, creatively, intelligently and with love, transforms lives. His message was not social reform or political liberty or economic revolution but simply the person of Jesus Christ, whom he had met on the road to Damascus.

The Spirit wants to inflame in us the same desire, eagerness and enthusiasm to share our faith and proclaim the gospel as that demonstrated by St Francis of Assisi and St Paul. The truth is, as Pope Paul VI wrote so tellingly:

'The good news proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed.' (Evangelii nuntiandi, para. 22)

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

God promised to confer glory on the 'land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations' by shining a great light upon them, a light that would dispel the darkness of those living in a land of deep shadow (see Isa. 9:1-2). This light would confer glory upon them by increasing their gladness, giving them joy in God's presence and freeing them from the burden of the oppression weighing upon their shoulders (Isa. 9:3-4). This light would be a child born to us, a son given to us, a ruler who would be called 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Isa. 9:6). By withdrawing to Galilee and settling 'in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali' (Matt. 4:12-13), Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. He is the light that shines on the land of deep shadow. He confers glory on the land.

The darkness and shadow over the land is the reign of sin and its wages, death (Rom. 6:23). The fear of death overwhelms and oppresses us, robbing us of joy, of the sense of God's presence. This darkness can only be dispelled by Christ, 'the

light of the world' (John 8:12). He alone can disarm sin of its seductive hold over us, conquer Satan, and free us from the fear and bondage of death (Heb. 2:15). Jesus, 'the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25), shines his light upon us, thereby filling us with gladness, freedom and the joy of God's presence, and confers glory upon us.

Christ's light will dispel the darkness of sin and death in our lives as we enter into his kingdom through repentance and then follow him as his disciples. Repentance is necessary for we have to choose decisively to leave the old kingdom of sin and darkness and enter into the new kingdom of God's Son, the kingdom of truth and light and holiness. We must renounce all the ways of the kingdom of darkness, rejecting sin's allurements and seductions: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (v. 17). In order to fill us with gladness, the joy of his presence and freedom from the oppression of sin and death, Jesus further commands us, 'Follow me' (v. 19). Then, as we follow him, he will confer glory upon us.

Isaiah 8:23-9:3 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14
1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17 • Matthew 4:12-23

Attack is said to be the best form of defence, and the scribes had it down to a fine art. They were threatened by Jesus' ministry as it undermined their own position. In today's Gospel their insecurities and self-doubt (as they so often do) give way to anger, resentment and slander. They accuse Jesus of being in league with the devil (v. 22).

Jesus pours scorn on this slander in the form of a parable. The message is plain. If, as they suggest, he is working for the enemy, how can evil cast out evil? The contradiction is bizarre and illogical. Through the parable Jesus reveals himself as the one who ties up the strong man (v. 27). He is the one who has the power to overcome and drive out the forces of darkness. Jesus warns his critics to be very careful in accusing him of having an evil spirit. If they persist in this they run the risk of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (v. 29). Their vicious accusation reveals their failure to recognize the Spirit's work in their midst.

A hallmark of Jesus' life was his open conflict with the power of evil. This is a spiritual conflict in which we too must engage as Satan

attempts to undermine our life with God and our witness to Christ. One who was an experienced warrior for Christ and a master of the spiritual life was St Francis de Sales, whose feast we celebrated last Friday. Francis was born into a noble family in Savoy on 21 August 1567. A talented scholar, he obtained his doctorate in Law in 1591 from the University of Padua. An eligible and wealthy bachelor, the world was his oyster, but he chose the kingdom as his treasure. His desire to devote his life to the Church evoked strong opposition from his family; but eventually, on obtaining his father's consent, he was ordained as a priest in 1593. In 1602 he was ordained Bishop of Geneva. Francis was a prolific writer and produced two great spiritual masterpieces: *Treatise on the Love of God* and *Introduction to the Devout Life*. His wisdom on living the Christian life still speaks to us today:

'We must...prepare ourselves for this warfare with great care and diligence, and rest assured that as many victories as we gain over these lesser enemies so many precious stones will be put into the crown of glory which God is preparing for us in heaven.'

2 Samuel 5:1-7, 10 • Psalm 88(89):20-26

Mark 3:22-30

Jesus is very clear that to do God's will is to belong to God's family. The practical and challenging question we face is: what is God's will for my life today? How am I to obey God's will? When we want something we can be very strong-willed. We can discover within a fierce determination to achieve our wants or desires. Often even the most mild-mannered and easy-going of people find themselves iron-willed and resolute on certain issues. If what we will is good, wholesome and even godly, this is a wonderful impulse. If what we will is bad, unwholesome and wrong, then this is a misguided impulse.

God has given us the gift of free will. We have a remarkable freedom in which we can exercise a choice to obey or disobey God. The very essence of Jesus' ministry was in carrying out and fulfilling the will of his Father. He sought to align his own will with God's and so lived a life of perfect, humble submission to his Heavenly Father. To know God's will for our lives is to experience and know the freedom of being a child of God.

Our knowledge and understanding of God's will is born within us through prayer as we learn to listen and be docile and receptive to the prompting, guidance and movement of the Holy Spirit. We can have an instinctive fear or reticence in seeking out God's will for our lives – fearing perhaps that such insight will stifle or cramp our freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes clear:

'The grace of Christ is not in the slightest way a rival of our freedom when this freedom accords with the sense of the true and the good that God has put in the human heart. On the contrary, as Christian experience attests especially in prayer, the more docile we are to the promptings of grace, the more we grow in inner freedom and confidence during trials, such as those we face in the pressures and constraints of the outer world. By the workings of grace the Holy Spirit educates us in spiritual freedom in order to make us free collaborators in his work in the Church and in the world.' (para. 1742)

2 Samuel 6:12-15, 17-19 • Psalm 23(24):7-10

Mark 3:31-35

The parable of the Sower and the parable of the Good Samaritan must be two of the best-known and popular parables of Jesus. This very fact of familiarity can be an obstacle to our appreciation of all that God wants to say to us through these Scriptures.

The parable of the Sower, which is the subject of our reflection today, is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke, each of whom positions it as the first parable told by Jesus. Mark and Luke clearly both interpret this parable as the key into all the other parables. Mark records Jesus saying: 'Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?' (v. 13). It is quite common in Mark's Gospel for the disciples to lack understanding of the things Jesus says and does (e.g. 6:52; 7:18; 8:17-18), and this is also the case when they hear the parable of the Sower. What is significant is that Jesus indicates a relationship between understanding this parable and understanding all the others.

What is this relationship? Is it that this parable is the easiest to understand? It is unlikely that Jesus would have explained the easiest

parable and left the disciples to their own devices on the harder ones! The parable of the Sower is vital because it addresses the processes which occur when the word of God comes into contact with our minds. The four different types of soil (the path, the rocky soil, the thorny soil and the good soil) illustrate four different kinds of interaction between the word and ourselves.

The parable and its explanation offer more information on the failure of the word to take root than they do on the qualities which made the soil good: the only thing we learn about the good soil is that it bears much fruit. The spiritual life is, in many ways, a battle for the mind. God's word enters our mind but, in order for it to take root and ultimately bear fruit, we need to engage with it so that it is not lost to us but is embraced, appropriated and lived out in our lives.

Lord, help me to take your word and make it real in my life. Let it take root and not fall on deaf ears.

2 Samuel 7:4-17 • Psalm 88(89):4-5, 27-30

Mark 4:1-20

In a sense, Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel is full of what we can call kingdom logic. If you have a lamp, you don't hide it under a bed; rather you put it on a table to let its light shine. The thought of hiding a lamp under a bed is almost comical: what is the point of having a light if you are not going to let it shine? The same applies to Jesus himself. He is the light of the world, and the purpose of his light is to shine. He came to illuminate the world with his light. His light brings into the open all that we would prefer to keep hidden or concealed.

The experience of most of us is that when we do something we know to be wrong we prefer to hide it away from the light. Why is this the case? Is it because when we sin we lose our dignity? When our dignity is undermined we instinctively hide from the light. We are embarrassed, ashamed and guilty, and so we can't bear the exposure the light would bring. When we think like this we deprive ourselves of the possibility of enjoying the healing the light imparts.

We mustn't be afraid of the light, because once the darkness is exposed our healing begins. For this reason we need not try to hide our fears and failings, our weaknesses and insecurities, but let the light of Christ illuminate every corner of our lives, enabling the warmth of his healing compassion to flow into our hearts, renewing and restoring us.

Pope Francis, in his new encyclical *Lumen fidei*, encourages us to draw near to Christ so that his light may shine even more brightly in our lives. How can we help his light to shine this year? By choosing to live for Christ each day; by inviting the light of Christ into our lives and letting him show us the way to repent of our sins and to find healing. In the sacrament of reconciliation we allow the light of Christ to shine into our inmost being, convicting us of sin and leading us towards forgiveness and healing.

Lord, let your light shine on me. Let your kindly light expose the darkness of sin and heal my wounds. This year respond wholeheartedly to the call to follow you, the Light of Life and the Light of the World.

2 Samuel 7:18-19, 24-29 • Psalm 131(132):1-5, 11-14

Mark 4:21-25



St Thomas Aquinas wrote: 'Although our view of the most sublime things is limited and weak, it is a great pleasure to be able to catch even a glimpse of them.' Today we catch a glimpse of one of the most sublime mysteries of all – the teaching of Jesus as revealed in two of his parables.

The parable of the growing seed is unique to Mark. Its theme is focused on the life within the seed. It is the seed's inner life that causes it to grow – how this occurs is a mystery of nature. The seed's growth is independent of the farmer: whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed grows all by itself. If the farmer was asked to explain how this growth occurs, he wouldn't be able to give an answer – the mystery of nature is beyond us all.

As in nature, so in the kingdom. The word of God is the seed. Its growth in our hearts causes us to mature in faith. The word of God has a force and power all of its own. If we were asked to explain how this growth occurs we wouldn't be able to give an answer. It is a mystery of grace. Yet the amazing truth is that by a grace of revelation

we can penetrate the mystery of God. The Spirit wants to lead us deeper and deeper into the mystery of God.

The parable of the mustard seed also looks to nature to teach about the kingdom. The mustard seed produces a common plant used for oil; it is noted for its small size. The parable illustrates that small beginnings can conceal a prosperous future. The seemingly insignificant beginning of the mustard seed cloaks the reality of the end product.

The seed's growth is an image of the life of faith. Our faith is first received into our hearts at baptism, but in eternity the true glory of this grace will be fully realized and we shall marvel at its growth. We are called to fan into flame this gift, nurture this seed, cultivate the life of God living in our hearts. One day, beyond death, the fullness of this life will be revealed in all its glory and its beauty.

'Do you want the Lord to give you many graces? Visit him in the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist and the devil will be powerless against you.' (St John Bosco)

2 Samuel 11:1-10, 13-17 • Psalm 50(51):3-7, 10-11

Mark 4:26-34
