

Today we meet two disciples you might be familiar with: 'Enthusiasm' and 'Caution'. 'Enthusiasm' is keen, eager and full of verve, desire and willingness to give his life to the Lord, promising, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go' (v. 19). Caution, on the other hand, is reticent and reluctant to commit, saying, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father' (v. 21). Do you recognize these two disciples? Are you one or the other, or is there a bit of both in you?

Jesus' response to these two disciples falls very firmly under the category of his harsher sayings, of which, to be fair, there are quite a few. The hard sayings of Jesus need grappling with in a way that what we could call the 'sweeter' sayings don't. We are comforted and consoled when the Lord says: 'Come to me, all who labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' (Matt. 11:28) or, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14:6). But these harder sayings challenge us at a profound level and ask us to consider how serious we really are about following Jesus.

We see that for Enthusiasm Jesus is not the Lord or the Christ but 'Teacher'. Believing that Jesus is simply a great teacher – perhaps even the best the world has ever

known – is not enough to sustain our faith and make us want to follow him. The would-be disciple says he is ready to drop everything to follow Jesus, but Jesus brings him up sharp by giving him an insight into what the reality of following him would mean. Is Enthusiasm really willing to pay the price of following Jesus, even down to that most basic human need of having somewhere to 'lay his head'?

Caution succumbs to the temptation to let his duty to his family overwhelm his devotion to Christ. The challenge of Jesus to him is to put him first above all other attachments, even the most noble and worthy. In doing this we are released to give our lives fully and unconditionally to the Lord – just as the Lord gave his life fully and unconditionally to us.

Lord, just as St Oliver Plunkett gave his life to you and paid the ultimate price for his faith, may we too give our lives in humble and dedicated service.

Genesis 18:16-33 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 8-11 • Matthew 8:18-22
(In Ireland: Ezekiel 34:11-16 or 1 Peter 3:8-18 • Ps 30(31) • John 10:11-16)

Try and imagine the scene painted for us in today's Gospel reading. Imagine that you are one of the disciples in that small fishing boat, being tossed about on the enormous waves. The Sea of Galilee, despite being an inland lake, is notorious for its especially violent and unpredictable squalls and storms which can easily capsize a fishing vessel. No wonder the disciples, despite being experienced fishermen, are petrified – they think they are going to drown. 'Lord, save us! We're going to drown', they cry out (v. 25 NIV). Jesus' response to this potential disaster is to literally sleep through it, totally oblivious to the danger they are facing! The contrast could not be more acute – panicking disciples, peaceful Saviour.

What happens next reveals Jesus' authority and power over creation itself. He speaks to the storm almost as if it is a person who is behaving in a difficult and troublesome way and commands it to be calm and still. The disciples, despite their state of high anxiety, ask the right question: 'What kind of man is this?' (v. 27 NIV). This is one of life's ultimate questions. Framed slightly differently the question is: 'Who do you think Jesus of Nazareth was?' Everybody

must at some stage answer this question.

The most powerful man in the world, Barack Obama, the President of the United States of America, recently said: 'My family, frankly, they weren't folks who went to church every week. My mother was one of the most spiritual people I knew but she didn't raise me in the church, so I came to my Christian faith later in life and it was because the precepts of Jesus Christ spoke to me in terms of the kind of life that I would want to lead.' The point is that Jesus was no 'mere man' – he was God made man. He is the Lord and King, and into the chaos, destruction, fear and panic of our lives he brings his peace. Just as the Lord commanded the waves to be still, so too he commands the waves of our emotions and desires to be still and calm because he is the Lord.

'Don't be afraid for I have redeemed you. I have called each of you by name and you are mine. Though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will be near you, to the very end of your lives.'

Genesis 19:15-29 • Psalm 25(26):2-3, 9-12
Matthew 8:23-27

St Thomas could be described as the patron saint of doubters. Just as Judas is known as a traitor and his name is a byword for treachery, so Thomas is known as the doubter and his name is a byword for this perfectly understandable and human reaction. Because it is easy to doubt – it is a propensity human beings are born with. There are, however, two kinds of doubt: healthy doubt and unhealthy doubt.

Healthy doubt can be part of the process of faith. Francis Bacon once said: 'If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts he shall end in certainties.' The doubt that Thomas displayed was a healthy doubt. His rational mind was basically saying, 'Unless I see the Risen Lord with my own eyes, touch him and feel him for myself, I will not believe.' There is a wonderful honesty and humanity about this position. But if doubt is left to fester, it will become destructive. Jesus confronted Thomas' doubt with his resurrection body. He addressed Thomas' doubts with the truth. But Jesus told Thomas, 'blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (v. 29 NIV). Only faith allows us to touch the divine

and enter a world which God is able to turn upside down – as he did in the resurrection of Jesus.

An unhealthy doubt is dangerous. This is the kind that Charles Darwin, the father of evolutionary theory, had. He said, 'I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation...[D]isbelief crept over me at a very slow rate but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress.'

Faith is like a fire kept alight by the flame and wind of the Spirit. Of course, and this is an important point to understand, Thomas worked through his doubt to a magnificent proclamation of faith when he declared, 'My Lord and my God!' (v. 28). Today we celebrate this great saint of the Church and give praise to God for his witness as one who came to believe in the risen and glorified Lord Jesus.

Lord, teach me that the world does not want our doubts or uncertainties, as it has enough of its own: the world cries out for believers who testify to a confident and mature faith and confess with their lips and proclaim with their hearts, 'Jesus Christ is Lord.'

Ephesians 2:19-22 • Psalm 116(117)
John 20:24-29

Believers are not immune from all manner of evil thoughts which assail and bring their own unique onslaught day after day. These evil thoughts lurk in the dark recesses of our hearts, making us feel ashamed. They can be murderous thoughts like, 'I wish so and so was dead' or, 'I could kill him'. Or lustful thoughts and desires towards an individual, which we know to be wrong and sinful. Of course, these thoughts and desires are only temptations, and if we resist and stand against them in the name of Jesus they leave us. Generally we associate evil thoughts with the following: murder, adultery, fornication, etc.

In today's Gospel Jesus accused the so-called teachers of the law of sinful thoughts. He asked them: 'Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?' (v. 4 NIV). What evil thoughts were they having? Matthew informs us: 'At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"' (v. 3 NIV). Their thoughts were evil because they refused to believe that Jesus could forgive sins. For, of course, who can forgive sin except God alone? Jesus came to heal us body and soul but it is our soul which is in greatest need of healing – it is our soul which

needs to receive the forgiveness of our sins and the knowledge of God's mercy and love.

Jesus could forgive sin because he is God. In fact, Jesus is the only One who can forgive us our sin. We must resist falling prey to evil thoughts which undermine our faith. As we have seen, this includes questioning and doubting God's ability to forgive us our sins. We may resist going to the sacrament of reconciliation because we think that our sin is too great or that God's mercy and forgiveness does not extend this far. This is a kind of blasphemy because no sin is outside of God's mercy and forgiveness.

There is a very simple formula in the Christian life and it is this: know God's forgiveness – forgive others. We are called to grow and mature in our understanding that God is a God of forgiveness and mercy, and because we are recipients of this grace we forgive and hold out mercy to others.

Lord, preserve me from evil thoughts in my heart which question or undermine the great gift of forgiveness held out to me, moment by moment, day by day, by the Father of mercy.

Genesis 22:1-19 • Psalm 114(115):1-9
Matthew 9:1-8

Human society likes to demonize people and create categories. We do it all the time – sometimes we don't even realize we are doing it! We make caricatures out of people and act out of our preconceived ideas instead of judging each individual on their own merit. And nowadays we are helped on our way by the media which delights in pointing the finger. We do this with drug addicts, prostitutes, prisoners and so on.

The problem sadly extends into the Church so that people who fall into these categories find themselves unwelcome. This should not be so. Grace invites everyone to the table of salvation – including drug addicts, prostitutes and prisoners. In fact, it could be argued and indeed illustrated that God has a preferential love and holds out a special hand of mercy and kindness to those on the margins of society. How do we know this? Simple – we see precisely this in today's Gospel which recounts the story of Jesus' calling of Matthew.

It is hard for us to grasp how hated, despised and reviled Matthew was as a tax collector. Think how you would feel if before Sunday Mass your parish priest pulled you to one side and

asked you to sit next to and take care of someone who was a drug addict, prostitute and ex-prisoner – all wrapped up in one! In the Jewish society of Jesus' day tax collectors were loathed. They were collaborators with the occupying Romans and worked closely with them to tax their own people. They were especially despised because they took a cut from the tax they extracted.

Jesus smashed through every social convention by reaching out to Matthew and, in doing so, revealed the transforming power of grace. He changed a despised tax collector into a beloved disciple. He invited himself into Matthew's home and opened his heart to him. If we examine our hearts we can see a strain of self-righteousness in us. We like to think that we are better, holier and more righteous than others, but the truth is that we too need the healing of the Physician. We are all just beggars at the table of God's love, mercy and kindness. Today we contemplate Jesus' words:

'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.' (vv. 12-13)

Genesis 23:1-4, 19; 24:1-8, 62-67 • Psalm 105(106):1-5
Matthew 9:9-13

Food has always been the primary human obsession for without it we die. Our early fathers were preoccupied with one thing: eating and surviving. Our consumption of food and drink in the western world is staggering. For example, America spends twenty-five billion dollars every year on beer alone. However, as one half of the world consumes, the other starves. This basic inequality is a scandal and should shame us all.

We are a society which starves itself in the name of fashion and beauty but does not fast. Fasting is a discipline which has, rather like many tried and tested disciplines, fallen by the wayside. It will only be recovered if we rediscover its benefits as individuals and as a Church. The Bishops of England and Wales have encouraged us to fast on Fridays or eat fish. How seriously this is being taken is hard to assess. Jesus' disciples did not fast while he was them – a state of affairs which caused great scandal – but a time came when his disciples did indeed fast. Fasting is a response to the Spirit.

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to the Far East, had this to say about fasting, 'In Shansi I found Chinese Christians who were accustomed to spend time in fasting

and prayer. They recognized that this fasting, which so many dislike, which requires faith in God, since it makes one feel weak and poorly, is really a divinely appointed means of grace. Perhaps the greatest hindrance to our work is our own imagined strength: and in fasting we learn what poor, weak creatures we are who need every morsel of God's grace and mercy.' Fasting then, is not an end in itself. Its goal and purpose is to draw us closer to God. We learn when we fast that we do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the Lord our God. Fasting need not be extreme or over the top. To recover it, perhaps we need to take small steps: first denying ourselves part of a meal or a snack, and then moving towards fasting for half a day and then a full day, and so on. What is important is that we listen to the Spirit and act in obedience to him.

Lord, teach me to impose a fast on myself – a fast that denies myself not just food but also gossip and all that prevents me from loving my neighbour as I should.

Genesis 27:1-5, 15-29 • Psalm 134(135):1-6
Matthew 9:14-17

It is said that religion and politics should not be discussed in polite society. There is a fair bit of truth in this because invariably these two subjects create heat and light. Sex and death used to have the same effect, but nowadays as a society we seem more comfortable at least talking about sex, albeit in a shallow and superficial way. In parish and Church circles it is the word 'evangelism' that carries a taboo. For sure, there will be conferences on the subject or books written, but rarely (if ever) will you hear in a Sunday homily the importance of our call to evangelize and spread the gospel. But it is this call which is the subject of our Gospel passage today: the commissioning by Jesus of seventy-two disciples to go and preach the gospel.

The message that we do often hear from our church pulpits is that if we are good, kind and loving, then that could/might possibly be evangelizing. Since Pope Francis was installed, the famous quote attributed to the wonderful saint in whose honour he has taken his name, 'Preach the gospel, if necessary use words', has taken on fresh significance. This has led, sadly and even tragically, to 'evangelism' and the more

Catholic and get-out-of-jail term 'evangelization' becoming one of those 'don't mention the war' terms. Why is this?

Well, the truth is that we don't want to come across as 'Bible bashers' or 'over the top', and we understand instinctively that our beliefs and faith should not be imposed. This is good, noble, true and proper. Who on earth wants to impose anything on anybody? However, there is no escaping the fact that our faith invites us to hand it on, to pass it on to others, to share the Good News. John Lennon famously said: 'Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now. I don't know which will go first – rock and roll or Christianity.' Lennon had a point: the *raison d'être* of the Church is to grow and spread to the four corners of the earth. Unless we rise up and embrace our call, we in the West may witness his words coming to pass.

Lord, give me the heart of an evangelist. Create in me a heart to win souls for Christ and tell others the Good News.

Isaiah 66:10-14 • Psalm 65(66):1-7, 16, 20
Galatians 6:14-18 • Luke 10:1-12, 17-20

Today's reading gives us two great examples of humility and faith. Although an important figure in his community, the ruler was not ashamed to come and ask Jesus for help. His faith was so strong that he believed Jesus could raise his daughter from the dead, if he only came and touched her. The woman with a haemorrhage had been suffering from the condition for twelve years. Her hopes of healing had been raised many times, only to be dashed and, as well as her physical suffering, she would have had to cope with being stigmatized as unclean by the community. This is why she was too ashamed to approach Jesus openly, but she had faith to believe that just touching his garment could heal her. Jesus responded with compassion to the humility, faith and neediness of these two people. He got up instantly to go to the ruler's house, where he took the little girl by the hand and brought her back to life. He did not rebuke the woman who touched him, but told her that her faith had healed her.

Humility and faith are the qualities that will lead us to approach Jesus and open ourselves to him. Humility enables us to recognize our neediness, to know

that we are sinners in need of forgiveness and healing, and faith helps us to believe that Jesus has the power to heal us. We can be sure that he will not turn away anyone who comes to him asking for help. We do not need to be good or holy people to come to Christ: we can come before him just as we are, and know that he will not condemn us but will pour out on us his love, mercy and forgiveness. He longs to comfort us, to take away our guilt and to deliver us from the power of the sins that cripple our lives. He wants to do far more for us than we imagine, but we often put up barriers that stop him blessing us fully. Let us have the humility to open ourselves to his work in us, and accept the abundant gifts he wants to give to us.

Lord Jesus Christ, we know that by the touch of your hand you can heal us and restore us to life. We beg you to pour out on us your healing compassion and love, so that we may become the people you want us to be.

Genesis 28:10-22 • Psalm 90(91):1-4, 14-15
Matthew 9:18-26

The Bible has some very tricky and difficult bits – both the Old Testament and the New. Tricky and difficult because we live in a different world from that in which the various books were first written. Times have changed, that is for sure. The eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus viewed the world through a different prism. Theirs was a rural and primitive culture. We live in a modern, sophisticated and technological culture complete with smartphones, iPads and the Internet – a world the ancient peoples could never even have imagined. This is simply a fact of history.

The liturgy of the Church draws on the Scriptures to teach us about our faith and on occasion there can be a conflict. For example, in today's reading Matthew records that Jesus healed a man who was 'demon possessed and could not talk' (v. 32 NIV). Nowadays we do not associate being mute with demon possession. In fact, truth be told, demon possession is totally outside our experience and is relegated to Hollywood and the film industry, which, if you excuse the pun, make a killing from the whole horror genre. Indeed, when *The Exorcist* was released, Catholics were encouraged to boycott it. Yet

the film is a powerful portrayal of the tension between a priest psychiatrist who does not believe in demons and a priest who is an official exorcist and clearly does.

So what does the Church teach? Just as the Church believes in miracles, so she also believes in the existence of demons. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, 'This dramatic situation of the whole world, which is in the power of the evil one, makes man's life a battle: The whole of man's history has been the story of dour combat with the powers of evil, stretching, so our Lord tells us, from the very dawn of history until the last day' (para. 409). The Church from the very beginning has taught that the devil is a created being who is the enemy of Christ, the Church and every believer. Every time we recite the Lord's Prayer, we pray, 'Deliver us from evil.'

'St Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our defence against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray. And do thou, O prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God thrust into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world for the ruin of souls. Amen.'

Genesis 32:23-33 • Psalm 16(17):1-3, 6-8, 15

Matthew 9:32-38

The Twelve Apostles were a motley crew, that is for sure. They were men with dubious past records. Judas, probably the most qualified and able among them – as why else would he have been put in charge of the purse? – was an especially tricky and unreliable chap. And, on the subject of unreliability, what about Peter, who was emotional, impulsive and at times vindictive and violent? James and John were zealots who were eager to rain down God's anger and fire on those who opposed them. And then, we have Thomas, the doubter and cynic, who was downright stubborn in his refusal to believe that the Lord had risen from the dead. The other apostles got off lightly as their weaknesses and failures are not recorded by the Evangelists. In addition we have Paul, who was made an apostle because of the amazing revelation he received from the Lord on the road to Damascus: he was – and we should be honest about this – a truly violent and murderous individual prior to his conversion. God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.

These men of God were about as far removed from your typical media caricature of a priest or cleric

as it is possible to get. They were largely uneducated and uncouth men, earthy and unsophisticated, to say the least. Except, of course, the highly educated Paul, but he was the exception. What does all this teach us? What is the point of this observation? The point is this: the God we worship and follow, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, transforms ordinary and fallen men and women and raises them up to the height of holiness. The Holy Spirit so took hold of these first disciples of Jesus that they became not just a force to be reckoned with but the catalysts God used to change the world.

We follow in their footsteps: we have received the same grace and the same Holy Spirit; we have the same opportunities for change and transformation. God is sending us out, just as he sent them, to change and transform the world in the power and in the name of Jesus.

Lord, today we pray for our bishops, because they follow in the apostolic tradition and carry forward the apostolic succession. This is a position of love and service, commitment and radical witness to Christ. Help and strengthen them to fulfil their high calling.

Genesis 41:55-57; 42:5-7, 17-24 • Ps 32(33):2-3, 10-11, 18-19

Matthew 10:1-7

Today we celebrate the feast-day of St Benedict but also pray for Benedict our Pope Emeritus. When the latter became Pope in 2005 he explained why he chose the name Benedict:

Filled with sentiments of awe and thanksgiving, I wish to speak of why I chose the name Benedict. Firstly, I remember Pope Benedict XV, that courageous prophet of peace, who guided the Church through turbulent times of war. In his footsteps I place my ministry in the service of reconciliation and harmony between peoples. Additionally, I recall Saint Benedict of Nursia, co-patron of Europe, whose life evokes the Christian roots of Europe. I ask him to help us all to hold firm to the centrality of Christ in our Christian life: May Christ always take first place in our thoughts and actions!

Today, on St Benedict's feast-day, we reflect on his role as patron of Europe. Europe as a continent has a wonderful and rich Christian legacy. However, despite this heritage the practice of the faith has suffered serious decline here as opposed to, say, in Africa, where it is thriving. Why is this? What happened in Europe to cause this? The truth is that in every era ways of thinking have conspired to undermine the

gospel. However, a number of what we can call 'isms' have taken hold in Europe: secularism, relativism, atheism, consumerism. Each of these 'isms' is underpinned by the agenda to push God and faith to the margins of society, to drive God out of our culture. A war is raging for the soul of Europe, a war which we are called to engage in. How do we fight this battle? By responding generously and enthusiastically to the call for the 'new evangelization', which involves reaching out to those who have lapsed from the faith, and asking God for the grace to re-present the gospel to them.

There is no doubt that it is not just the 'isms' that undermine faith but also Church scandals and poor witness. Today we ask for the intercession of – St Benedict – that we would experience a fresh outpouring of the Spirit in our lives, giving us a heart to live Christlike lives and witness to our faith.

Lord, help Europe recover its rich and strong Christian heritage in a way which leads many to know the joy of conversion and the peace of the love of God poured into hearts.

Proverbs 2:1-9 • Psalm 33(34):2-11
Matthew 19:27-29

The problem with evangelism or evangelization is that it is not easy, can be very challenging and involves at least some rejection and ridicule. Nice! No wonder we are rushing to get involved. Not! Jesus' instructions to the disciples he sent out do not fill us with great confidence that spreading the gospel is going to be easy or straightforward. We are being sent out 'like sheep among wolves'; we will be 'handed over to governors and kings' and 'arrested'. Furthermore, we will be on the receiving end of hatred and almost certainly persecution. Well, that is the bad news: the good news is that God is with us.

Of course, Jesus' words came to pass because for many of the early centuries of the Church's life this is exactly what happened. Christians were slaughtered for their faith. Tertullian was not kidding when he said that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church. Christians were subject to brutal religious persecution. The Roman Emperor Nero lit up the Roman sky with the burning bodies of Christians (and women and children were not spared); others were crucified or daubed with tar and set alight. Still today, in some parts of the world Christians are imprisoned

and even martyred for their faith.

Thankfully, we are not persecuted in this manner. However, the truth remains that evangelism, the sharing of our faith, its proclamation and its defence, is not for the faint-hearted. And perhaps this is the rub, as Shakespeare would say. We don't do it because, frankly, it is too difficult and challenging, and we mostly want a quiet life. All of this is understandable and human but God calls us to step out of our comfort zones. St Thomas Aquinas said, 'To teach and witness in order to lead others to faith is the task of every preacher and of each believer.' We are called to share our faith – it is intended to be a natural expression of who we are, the source of our joy.

We Catholics have a lot to learn in this area from other traditions. Consider, if you will, William Booth's words to Rudyard Kipling, revealing as they do that he would do anything to win someone to Christ: 'Young man, if I thought I could win one more soul for Christ by standing on my head and beating a tambourine with my feet, I would learn how to do it.'

Genesis 46:1-7, 28-30 • Psalm 36(37):3-4, 18-19, 27-28, 39-40
Matthew 10:16-23

Jesus was under no illusion that bearing witness to him would result in persecution or suffering in one form or another. This was true then and it is true now. The reason is that, as Jesus explains, 'a student is not above his teacher nor a servant above his master' (v. 24 NIV). In other words, if they treated Jesus like this they will treat us in the same way (v. 25). The reality is that the gospel message both attracts and also repels. Many are attracted by Jesus and the call to serve God, whilst others resist, fight against it and want to shoot the messenger. How are we to behave in the face of such resistance, indifference or just outright antagonism?

The answer to this lies in our relationship with God and understanding his love for us. The Spirit works in us to enlarge our understanding and appreciation of how deeply God the Father loves us. God the Father, the Creator and Lord of the Universe, knows when a small sparrow drops to the ground and dies. Furthermore, our heavenly Father knows how many hairs there are on our head – truly a remarkable mathematical feat but also indicative of how intimately he knows us.

And herein lies the key to evangelism and being an evangelist: not to focus too much on the negative. Jesus would never lead us astray and his warnings about the difficulties and challenges we face keep us real and rooted, but our main focus should be on God's love. For at the very heart of evangelization is the grace to tell people about the love of God. It is this message and this message only that wins hearts and minds, and it is this sublime truth that transforms the world.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and himself a remarkable evangelist, rode the length and breadth of England on horseback to win souls for Christ. He said once, 'The church has nothing to do but save souls; therefore spend and be spent in this work. It is not your business to speak so many times, but to save souls as you can, to bring as many as you can to the joy of repentance and the glory of conversion to Christ.'

Lord, by the grace of your Holy Spirit give me the wisdom to want to win souls for God and to lead just one person to this joy this year.

Genesis 49:29-33; 50:15-26 • Psalm 104(105):1-7

Matthew 10:24-33

Catholic social teaching has largely owned the Parable of the Good Samaritan and in a way rightly so, because it highlights the care and solicitude we owe every human being, but particularly those in dire need physically, emotionally or spiritually. However, ask yourself, if you will, whether there is a deeper meaning to the parable? Are we missing something? Is the parable simply about being good and kind and decent to your neighbour? We can be sure, absolutely sure in fact, that because Scripture is divinely inspired, there are always layers of revelation to uncover and a deeper meaning behind every verse.

Some of the early fathers of Scripture scholarship, such as Origen, St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, discerned in the Parable of the Good Samaritan a much deeper meaning than helping our neighbour. They approached the parable allegorically – in other words as a device in which the characters or events in the parable represent or symbolize real people and real events and communicate a hidden and profound message. Approaching Scripture allegorically can open up deeper and deeper layers to its meaning. Some theologians dislike this approach because they fear that we can read

into the text significance which the original author did not intend. But they themselves often approach Scripture in the wrong way, studying and dissecting it like a Shakespeare play or another ancient text. Scripture is the divine Word of God and by its very nature there are always hidden depths to plumb.

So, for today, let us consider an allegorical understanding of the parable. Jerusalem represents heaven and Jericho the earth or the world. The robbers are the devil and his demons. The priest represents the Torah (the Jewish law) and the Levite the Prophets. The victim beaten, bruised, wounded and left half dead by the roadside is you. The Good Samaritan is Jesus, and the donkey is Christ's body which bears the weight of the broken body of the victim of this terrible robbery on the open highway. Finally, the inn represents the church, our place of healing and sanctuary. The Good Samaritan's promise to return is a reference to Jesus' coming again in power and glory.

Lord, open my eyes, my ears and my heart to understand the hidden depths of your Word and to be taught by the Spirit of the riches and treasures contained in every letter, every word.

Deuteronomy 30:10-14 • Psalm 68(69):14, 17, 30-37

Colossians 1:15-20 • Luke 10:25-37

Peace can mean many things. For some it can mean the absence of war while for others no more than mutual toleration. Neither of these definitions captures what is meant by peace in the biblical sense. Jesus is, of course, the Prince of Peace and greeted his disciples after the resurrection with the words, 'Peace be with you.' Yet today we learn in no uncertain terms that he did not come to bring peace but a sword (v. 34). Does this seem like a contradiction to you? After all, did not the angels chorus, 'on earth peace among men' (Luke 2:14) and did not the Lord himself say, 'Peace I leave with you' (John 14:27)?

Jesus came to bring peace between men and women and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, but there is a way in which to follow Jesus, radically and uncompromisingly, involves conflict and tension. Conflict and tension with the devil, with the world, with non-believers and even with members of the same family. Drawing from the prophet Micah, the Lord promises not peace but war, not tranquillity but conflict and tension.

Jesus' vision of discipleship is exclusive. There is no point in beating about the bush on this

point. If we listen to the words of Christ, we are left in no doubt that to follow him we have to be worthy of him. And to be worthy of the Lord we have to make him number one in our lives. It's a tough teaching, isn't it? We certainly need the wisdom of the Spirit to understand it.

This does not mean that we seek out trouble and confrontation – on the contrary – but it does mean that we are called to an exclusive relationship with Christ our Saviour and Redeemer. It does not mean that we are extremists or fundamentalists but it does mean that at the core of our being we have made a fundamental decision, an essential choice, to give our lives to Christ every single day. The Lord is worthy of all our focus, dedication and devotion.

'Pierce, O most sweet Lord Jesus, my inmost soul with the most joyous and healthful wound of your love, and with true, calm and most holy apostolic charity, that my soul may ever languish and melt with entire love and longing for you, may yearn for you and may long to be dissolved and to be with you forever.' (Prayer of St Bonaventure)

Exodus 1:8-14, 22 • Psalm 123(124)

Matthew 10:34–11:1

The Scriptures are full of words of comfort, consolation and solace. They tell us of the eloquent beauty of our good Creator and about his love, forgiveness and mercy. And yet at the same time the Scriptures are also full of words of challenge, rebuke and the call to repent. We encounter the latter and not the former today. The Lord in no uncertain terms chastises and rebukes three cities (Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum) and their inhabitants for their refusal to believe in him despite the signs, miracles and wonders performed there. So serious is their refusal or reluctance or indifference that the Lord says that the fate of Sodom on the Day of Judgement will be more bearable than that of these three cities (v. 24). Sodom was destroyed by fire and brimstone (Gen. 19:24).

This kind of language is rather foreign to us today. The idea of God being vengeful and wrathful and calling down fire and brimstone is at odds with our understanding of God as the Father of the prodigal son or the God of comfort and compassion (2 Cor. 1:3). Having said that, there is no escaping Jesus' reaction to the cities and people he identifies as resisting the gospel.

So what are we to make of this? How do we interpret it, understand it and apply it to our lives? We know for certain that God hates sin but loves the sinner, and we know that God is holy and we are called to be holy. We also know that a fundamental truth of the Christian message is that, wherever we are on our journey (newly converted, recently received into the Church or even the Pope), God calls us all to repentance, which is about a change of mind, a change of heart and a change of behaviour.

However, sometimes, before this grace can happen, we need a change of heart and attitude towards repentance. There is a way in which nowadays we have lost a sense of sin – sin has become a rather old-fashioned idea. If only sin really and truly were an old-fashioned idea and likewise our need for repentance! The Spirit works in our lives to move us to repentance and to soften our hearts towards God and our neighbour.

'He who commits sin does what is not pleasing to God but he who repents of his sin does what is most pleasing to God.' (St Robert Bellarmine)

Exodus 2:1-15 • Psalm 68(69):3, 14, 30-34

Matthew 11:20-24

Jesus revealed many amazing things about God, his heavenly Father. For example, he taught that heaven rejoices when we repent (see Luke 15:7, 10). He also taught, as we see in today's reading, that God the Father is pleased when we receive the gift of revelation (v. 26). So there we have it – it's as simple as that – in order to make God happy we need to repent of our sin and be open to receiving the gift of revelation into the mysteries of our faith.

This way of approaching our faith is rather different from a new emphasis today. Many RE lessons in our schools and probably most RCIA courses put the accent on what we can do for God. The teaching leans towards the external expressions of faith rather than the inner or interior life. So, for example, we are encouraged to serve the poor or to give to charity or to do good, etc. This emphasis, of course, underlines the truth that faith without deeds is dead (see Jas. 2:14). However, it does need to be set in balance with teaching about repentance and revelation, which has to do with our inner or interior life.

How do we receive revelation?
How do we enter more deeply
into the mystery of faith? We do

this by asking the Holy Spirit to lead and show us, but, having said that, the Spirit has put up some signposts to help us along the way. The first signpost says: 'Pray and be still for I am God.' In prayer we have an opportunity to learn to listen to God speak to us in the quiet of our hearts. We can also read the Scriptures and hear God speak to us through his Word. The second signpost says: 'Be open to having the Spirit show you new things about old truths.' One of the reasons why we don't receive much new insight into our faith is because we don't expect to. Try this exercise: pray the Our Father slowly, thinking about each word and phrase. Then do the same with the Creed. As we do so, the Spirit will do his work – leading us to repentance, giving us revelation, and pouring out his love and joy into our hearts.

'I tell you that, as by the brightness of the sunshine, you know that it is day, so divine revelation is known by the brightness of illumination given it by God.' (St Vincent Ferrer)

Exodus 3:1-6, 9-12 • Psalm 102(103):1-7
Matthew 11:25-27

Sometimes the conclusions garnered from new scientific research strike us as rather obvious. On the other hand, it is comforting when truths we know by instinct and intuition are confirmed. Take, for example, the conclusions of archaeologist Professor Ian Morris who writes in his recently published book, *Why the West Rules*, that the love between husband and wife or parent and child is natural and bred into us over millions of years. Friends, it seems, came on the scene much later. Homo sapiens, humans like us, arrived 150,000 years ago. For the first 100,000 years, according to Morris, they stubbornly refused to talk to each other. Networks of friends weren't possible until about 9000 BC, when humans in the Middle East started farming and the first villages appeared. Friendships outside of kith and kin evolved slowly among the human family. They were based on an inevitably limited range of shared interests – in foraging or farming, for example.

Our friendships today – most would agree – are, for the most part, still based on shared interests. When the Church was born, however, a radically different understanding of human society

was ushered in. In Christ we are related by faith – we become brothers and sisters, not simply friends or acquaintances.

Well, that is the theory or the ideal of what we strive for so that we are welcoming to strangers and outsiders. Everyone deserves to be embraced and loved by the parish community. Each person is close to Jesus' heart and deserves the special affection and active love of the Church, particularly the clergy. All those in our parish community who are weary, burdened, isolated and lonely should find rest for their souls because of the gentle and humble welcome, reception and embrace they receive in their local parish community.

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' (vv. 28-30 NIV)

Exodus 3:13-20 • Psalm 104(105):1, 5, 8-9, 24-27
Matthew 11:28-30

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction! A bizarre photograph has emerged of an Orthodox Jew wrapped from head to toe in a clear plastic bag, aboard an Israeli airliner. It is thought that the man belongs to the Kowhai, a sect that believes that they are descended from the priests of ancient Israel and must not come into contact with the dead, as this will make them impure. Rules on this are so stringent that even flying over burial grounds is strictly forbidden. Rabbi Youssef Shalom Elisha, leader of the Lithuanian Hared, who died last year aged 102, suggested that wrapping oneself up in plastic was an agreeable solution. Whether this story is a hoax or a practical joke, it is hard to know. What we do know is that the Kowhai and others like them take the letter of the law very seriously indeed.

In Jesus' day the Pharisees were just the same. In the Jewish faith, the Sabbath is a day of rest, and in the Christian faith the Sunday is a day to cease from work so that we can remember God's covenant love with us. The Pharisees tried to protect the Sabbath with rules and regulations ensuring that no work was done on this holy day, but these became so extensive and

burdensome that keeping them overshadowed the goal of any religious rule – growing closer to God. The danger is that the focus becomes directed on keeping the rule rather than on our relationship with God.

Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees is a wonderful example of how he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfil it, and of how he lived by the Spirit and not the letter of the law. To help them understand he pointed to two examples of where the rule was broken to serve a higher purpose: the first was by David, when fleeing from King Saul in order to attend to the needs of his hungry men, and the second by the priests who served in the temple every Sabbath. Jesus declared that someone greater even than the Sabbath was in their midst. God incarnate stood among his people. The One for whom the Sabbath was designed was with them.

We must guard against an overly legalistic approach to our faith. At the heart of faith is the Spirit and not the law.

Jesus, you continually reveal yourself in our midst. Let me see you more clearly and draw near to you today.

Exodus 11:10-12:14 • Psalm 115(116):12-18

Matthew 12:1-8

Today we read one of the most disturbing and shocking verses in the whole Bible. 'But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus' (v. 14 NIV). Disturbing and shocking because the Pharisees were deeply religious and committed men. They belonged to a religious, spiritual and social elite. They were the leaders of Israel in many ways, but in this single, simple and powerful verse we learn all we need to know about them. They were capable of plotting to murder Jesus of Nazareth. It is impossible to know how they squared that impulse with their faith but square it they obviously did.

What had happened to them to make them think like this? Could this ever happen to us? They knew murder was breaking one of the Ten Commandments; they knew it was a crime. Something was going on in their lives which made them first think and then act in such a murderous and cruel way. To understand this is to begin to understand the depths of our fallen human nature. The Pharisees had allowed their hearts to become hard and callous. Their faith was rooted in the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law. Their faith was grounded in obeying the

external law and was not a faith of the heart. Their faith was less about their relationship with God and more about protecting their own interests. Sound familiar?

We can all fall into the same trap as the Pharisees and end up killing the work of God in our midst, because our hearts become hard. One of the ways in which we can guard against our hearts becoming too hard is by reading the Scriptures with the focused aim of drawing from them a deeper insight into the mystery of Christ. This is what Matthew does in today's reading: he was drawing deeper insight from the writing of the prophet Isaiah. He saw that Jesus was latent in the Old Testament and was able to recognize those Scriptures which testified about him (e.g. Isa. 42:1-4). There are many Scriptures in the Old Testament that do this, and the more we spend time reading and contemplating on them, the more insight we will draw about Jesus from them.

Lord, soften my heart to the power of your Word. Teach me to mine the Scriptures in such a way that my heart burns with a love for your wisdom, truth and life.

Exodus 12:37-42 • Psalm 135(136):1, 10-15, 23-24

Matthew 12:14-21

Luke, in a story unique to his Gospel, gives an account of a remarkable and beautiful incident in Jesus' life. Mary of Magdalene, whose feast we celebrate tomorrow, is traditionally associated with the Mary before us today but scholars think that it is unlikely to be the same person, believing this woman to be Mary of Bethany. What is clear is that, like Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany loved the Lord. In this account, she did not wash his feet with her weeping or anoint his body with expensive nard but she showed that one thing was needed, and that was to sit at the Master's feet and learn from him.

There has always been a tension between the contemplative arm and the apostolic arm of the Church. The contemplatives are accused of being too focused on prayer whereas the apostolics are criticized for being too preoccupied with social action and not placing enough emphasis on the interior life. Of course, this is too simplistic but, nevertheless, there is an element of truth in it. It is, however, hard not to feel some sympathy for Martha, who in this understanding embodies the apostolic approach. Mary can come across as a kind of 'goody two shoes' (and nobody likes a 'goody

two shoes'). Martha, on the other hand, has no airs and graces; she is a worker and not a shirker. Clearly both women were serving the Lord, but Mary, in Jesus' own words, chose what is better. This doesn't mean that what Martha was doing in that moment wasn't good or noble or worthy, or even the right thing for her to be doing: it simply means that ultimately sitting at the Lord's feet and learning from him who is humble and gentle of heart is the goal of our faith.

The great saints of the Church did not hesitate to serve others practically. It was said of St Catherine of Genoa, for example, that she used to be so preoccupied in prayer that she appeared to be in a trance. However, if others needed her she would stop praying immediately to respond. Pope Francis is calling us all to serve others in a spirit of love and charity, but all service of God must be first rooted in prayer and hearing God speak through his Word.

Lord, grant me your peace and clarity that I may, like Mary, sit at your feet every day and learn from you.

*Genesis 18:1-10 • Psalm 14(15):2-5
Colossians 1:24-28 • Luke 10:38-42*

Today we celebrate the feast-day of one of the greatest women in the whole of the Bible. Clearly, Mary, Mother of God, has pride of place, because she is our mother in faith. Mary Magdalene, however, could be seen as our sister in faith.

Of course, Mary Magdalene is often identified as being a woman of ill-repute, a prostitute no less, but, in fact, there is no record of this in the Scriptures. We are simply told that seven demons were cast out of her (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9). As a result she received the blessing and grace of being delivered by the Lord from whatever bound her. Some suggest that it could have been a complex illness of some kind or maybe even some mental suffering or anguish. What we know for sure is that she dedicated her life to following Christ.

The Evangelists are especially sensitive to Mary's closeness to the Lord during his last days on earth. She remained with him at the foot of the cross, staying when all the disciples except John had fled. She was at his burial and, most striking and significant of all, she was a witness of the Risen Lord. God confounded the wisdom of an age in which women were regarded as second-class citizens and were not

considered to be reliable witnesses in court. Ancient societies were misogynist and patriarchal but God showed that this way of thinking is a nonsense in the kingdom of God. Consider that God chose Mary to be the first person to witness the greatest event in human history – before Peter and the other disciples. We venerate her for this.

Mary can be seen to represent all women since the beginning of time who have witnessed Christ's resurrection in their lives. In a way, in the kingdom of God gender should not be an issue. We are equal before God but we have different roles, different charisms and different strengths. Mary's role was to support the Lord – it was a role of love and service, and this is the legacy she has left us. She was truly one of the greatest disciples, and today we cherish her memory, celebrate her life and strive to emulate her courageous witness.

Lord God, help us to follow the example of Mary Magdalene, who shows us that we are all called to live a life of humble service, sincere repentance and courageous witness for Christ.

*Exodus 14:5-18 • Exodus 15:1-6
Proper of Saints: John 20:1-2, 11-18*

The absence of parables or metaphors in John's Gospel is striking – unlike the synoptic Gospels, which are heavily laden with parabolic teaching. The only one is the one we are reading today in John 15. It is actually, to be fair, more of a metaphor than a parable.

The vine was an important symbol in Hebraic religious thought. It symbolized Israel. In the many references in the Old Testament the accent tends to be on how Israel is a vine that has not borne fruit and must therefore be pruned and cut back (see e.g. Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 15:1-8). Every gardener knows that unless an infected or unfruitful branch is cut out, there is a risk that the whole tree may be infected, leading in the long run to its death. It doesn't require rocket science to understand at least the sense of this Scripture.

But what does it mean for us right now in our own lives and in the challenges each of us faces? Jesus made it clear that it was by the fruit in our lives that others would know that we were his disciples (Matt. 7:20). The fruit of the kingdom are the fruit of the Spirit, and it is these that we are to produce and cultivate (see Gal. 5:22). However, in order to be fruitful, like the vine we need

to be nurtured and fed. We bear fruit for the kingdom by remaining in Jesus – by feeding from him and having our thirst quenched by him.

What does this mean practically? It means that we carve out time to be with the Lord in prayer. It means we devote some time every day to reading the sacred Scriptures. It means that we commit to grow and mature in a sense of awe and amazement at Christ made present to us in the Eucharist. This is what Europe needs more than anything else. A new commitment from us to remain close to the Lord and know in our lives a spiritual renewal or even revolution where Christ is proclaimed through our witness of love and service.

Lord, thank you for the witness of St Bridget of Sweden who produced great fruit in her own life. We thank God for the Bridgettine Order present in our midst, who by their dedication to the Passion of Christ and our Lady show us how to remain in Christ.

*Galatians 2:19-20 • Psalm 33(34):2-11
John 15:1-8*

Jesus mainly taught in parables. Only occasionally does he express himself directly regarding an immediate issue or problem, as, for example, on the subject of divorce: 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her' (Mark 10:11). About one-third of Jesus' teaching is in parable form.

Why is this? The first reason is that Jesus was a speaker not a writer. Jesus did not write down his teaching. It did not come down to us directly but was handed down by oral tradition and only recorded in the Gospels much later. The parables seem very spontaneous, meeting different needs and addressing different situations and circumstances. It would seem as if the purpose of the parables was to get us to think and to challenge our preconceptions about God and the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' teaching represents a vast spectrum of styles and approaches, all of which serve to illustrate his understanding of how to communicate with our hearts and our minds. They were based on everyday sights and sounds and activities that were commonplace to his hearers.

Jesus could not be accused of being a boring or unexciting teacher of the truth. He didn't preach long

sermons with even longer words which no one understands. He knew that all that was needed was a simple and clear proclamation of God's kingdom which excites and stimulates the mind and heart – just like the parables.

The liturgy, in her wisdom, does an interesting thing today. We are encouraged simply to read the Parable of the Sower – no explanation, no unpacking, no 'this is what this means' (the Lord's explanation comes later in the chapter). A word of warning, however: when hearing and reading today's Gospel the temptation is to think: 'Oh, the parable of the Sower – I know this one! I have been hearing it since I was a young child – there's nothing new to learn here.' In the Parable of the Sower, there are, however, many different layers to explore, enjoy and be enlightened by – if we open ourselves up to the leading of the Spirit. Let it challenge your preconceptions about God and the kingdom of heaven!

Lord, give me ears that I may hear, eyes that I may see, a heart that I may embrace in love and truth the rich treasure of your teaching.

*Exodus 16:1-5, 9-15 • Psalm 77(78):18-19, 23-28
Matthew 13:1-9*

Have you ever done anything you are ashamed of and embarrassed by? Have you ever gone into the privacy of your room and 'died' at the fool you have just made of yourself by something you said or did? If you have, you are in good company! Welcome to the human race!

Perhaps there have been other times when it's a family member or friend who has done something that has made you want to curl up and die. It is possible, likely even, that this is how James and his brother John felt when they looked back on the incident, retold in our Gospel today, in which their mother approached the Lord on their behalf. In the spirit of all ambitious mothers she set about securing her two sons a position of power and authority in Jesus' kingdom. Although her name is lost to history she clearly was no shrinking violet and was bold and confident in approaching the Lord.

The Lord takes the opportunity to teach about love, service and humility. No matter the age, this teaching is badly needed because the vast majority of us misunderstand what true greatness is. From time immemorial greatness has been identified with position, power, rank, status, wealth – all

those things which give birth to arrogance, conceit and lording it over others. Basically Jesus dropped a huge bombshell on our understanding of power and position. For he, the Lord Jesus Christ, the holder of the highest and most powerful position not just on earth but in the whole universe, humbled himself and took upon himself the mantle of a servant. So the bottom line for Christians is, if you want to be great, valued, esteemed and so on, serve.

Praise God for Pope Francis who is displaying just this kind of attitude through his pontificate. Consider his position: he is head of the Church and head of a state but he willingly washes the feet of young prisoners. This is the Pope we want, and these are the kind of priests we want and the kind of lay people we want. James did indeed undergo the same baptism as the Lord: he underwent the baptism of martyrdom and, according to tradition, was beheaded.

Lord Jesus, you call us to be servants and to seek greatness not by lording it over others or by control or by being authoritarian, but through self-sacrifice and loving service.

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 • Psalm 125(126)

Matthew 20:20-28

Every day, whether we realize it or not, a great war or battle is being fought. It is a clever war and involves subtle warfare, but relentlessly all over the world this conflict rages. The battle is an interior one: the battle is for our mind; the battle is for our heart; the battle is for our soul.

The Parable of the Sower is one of Jesus' most familiar parables. It stands alone as a key parable and in a very real way is the key to all the parables. Although the liturgy invites us to pray on Matthew 13:18-23 today, we would like to journey briefly over to Mark's rendition, in which Jesus engages in a fascinating discussion with his disciples. After telling the parable Jesus senses the disciples' bewilderment and, let's face it, confusion. The meaning and depth of the parable seems to pass them by. Jesus says, not without some exasperation, 'Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?' (Mark 4:13).

The Parable of the Sower explores our inner life and the interior working of God's word in our lives. It is also an exploration of the battle for the mind which occurs in us day after day. The conflict rages over whether God's word

will produce fruit in our lives and whether it will be able to break through and overcome the mindsets and temptations which threaten to drown out the gentle voice of the Spirit. The challenge we face every day is: how are we going to make our minds good soil for the seed of God's word to be implanted and grow in us?

The tools for this cultivation are tried and tested, but it is only through using them for ourselves that we can hope to plough the soil of mind and heart. For it is through prayer, reading the Scriptures, spiritual reading or lectio divina, examining our conscience, frequenting the sacrament of reconciliation, and seeking actively to love and serve others that we grow and mature in the spiritual life and produce a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Lord God, day by day may I produce fruit for the kingdom – the fruit of repentance, the fruit of prayer and the fruit of spiritual exercises which keep me fit and strong to serve in God's kingdom and able to resist the temptation and seduction of the evil one.

Exodus 20:1-17 • Psalm 18(19):8-11

Matthew 13:18-23

The Parable of the Weeds is unique to Matthew's Gospel. Its theme addresses the difficult and thorny issue of God's judgement and our propensity to play the judge. God knows the Church is made up of saints and sinners, the good and the bad, those who live exemplary lives and those who do not. The Church is a motley crew, that is for sure. However, that is its beauty, its wonder and its glory. Jesus died for us all and God the Father loves all his children – obedient and disobedient, those on the road to sanctity and those far from it. We, however, are less forgiving and less compassionate, and so the parable is addressed to us and our tendency to become self-righteous and judgemental.

One of the perversities of British culture is the tabloid press. Of course, most western countries have a tabloid press but the one in Britain is especially virulent and vicious. Quite why this is the case, given the British reputation for fair play and decency, is hard to understand. Interestingly, and not a little confusingly, the head of the tabloid industry is Rupert Murdoch, himself a Catholic and a Knight of St Gregory to boot. The tabloid strategy is to titillate and tease, on the one hand, and then

judge and condemn, on the other. Rarely do we feel sorry for a public figure exposed as a hypocrite for a sexual misadventure or scandal – be it a politician, celebrity or indeed leading prelate, priest or churchman. However, have you ever thought about how God thinks about such things?

The Parable of the Weeds sheds light on this because at the heart of the parable's message is this simple word: leave all judgement to God and refrain from judging others harshly because you can never know what is in their hearts and what they are going through. Sadly, Christians can have a reputation for being judgemental and harsh, particularly towards sexual sin – other peccadilloes such as greed or financial impropriety or pride or arrogance make us less morally indignant. God is merciful and kind to all and we 'put on Christ' when we understand that there but for God's grace go we and judgement remains with God alone.

Heavenly Father, create in me a new heart which is less prone to judge others and more ready to hold out the hand of mercy, kindness and forgiveness to all those who have fallen or are in trouble.

Exodus 24:3-8 • Psalm 49(50):1-2, 5-6, 14-15

Matthew 13:24-30

Albert Einstein was once at a lecture in New York when, as the lecture finished, a student who wanted to go and study for a doctorate asked him what area of study he could recommend. Einstein replied, 'Study prayer: we have got to find out more about prayer.' The student, himself a scientist, was gobsmacked: he thought the Nobel Prize winner and world-famous physicist would point him towards nuclear studies or further work on the atom but no, he recommended prayer.

Today we encounter Jesus' teaching on prayer, which is more radical, challenging and life-changing than we may at first realize because it encourages an approach or attitude to prayer which we might not share or even appreciate. The Lord Jesus positively and unambiguously encourages a bold, confident, even brazen attitude towards approaching God in prayer. The Lord wants us to cultivate a way of praying that is hopeful, expectant and sure of God's goodness and generosity.

No prayer captures this more beautifully and perfectly than the Our Father, which the Lord himself taught us to pray. The Our Father is

the Magna Carta, the blueprint, for all prayer. Despite being so short and compact it encapsulates the essence of prayer and the very heart of our relationship with God. St Augustine said of the Our Father: 'If you run through the petitions of all holy prayers, I believe you will find nothing that is not summed up and contained in the Lord's Prayer.'

Jesus further uses the story about a persistent neighbour, who has the hind of a rhino and simply refuses to take no for an answer, to reveal that God the Father is not like the unwilling neighbour, but is a generous, kind and benevolent provider for his children's needs. 'Who is God?' and 'What is God like?' are the most important questions we can ask. Today's Gospel sheds a dazzling light on these eternal questions. We discover who God is more through prayer than any other spiritual exercise, for it is in prayer that the Spirit works in us to expand not just our minds but our hearts, our imagination and our horizons.

'The Lord's Prayer is the best of all prayers. All prayer requires five excellent qualities which we find here – our prayer needs to be confident, ordered, suitable, devout and humble.' (St Thomas Aquinas)

Genesis 18:20-32 • Psalm 137(138):1-3, 6-8

Colossians 2:12-14 • Luke 11:1-13

John 11 is one of the most powerful chapters in the entire Bible. It makes for compelling reading. It tells the story of one of the most awe-inspiring miracles Jesus performed: the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead.

We are informed by John that Lazarus had already been dead for four days – this miracle was therefore certainly no mere resuscitation. Many Jews believed that the soul remained near the body for three days after death in the hope of returning to it. If this idea was in the minds of the mourners, by the time Jesus arrived, with at least four days having passed, all hope was truly gone – Lazarus was as dead as dead could be.

Martha, whose feast we celebrate today, goes out to meet Jesus as soon as she hears he is approaching, while her sister Mary remains at the house. Faced with the tragedy of her brother's untimely death Martha displays a remarkable faith for she proclaims, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world' – echoing the words of Peter's great confession (v. 27, cf. Matt. 16:16). When Peter made his proclamation, Jesus declared that the revelation of this truth could come only from

God the Father. Martha's faith was richly rewarded with surely one of the greatest miracles in the entire New Testament.

In the context of this most amazing miracle is found the shortest verse in the whole Bible, 'Jesus wept' (v. 35). How wonderful that the One who had the power of life and death, who would show that he is the Resurrection and the Life, should weep so openly for his dead friend. If we knew the heart of God we would weep too because it reaches out to us in our need, poverty and humanity. Jesus' words to Lazarus are his words to us: 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go' (v. 44 NIV). Through the grace of baptism the Lord speaks these words to us because this grace ushers in the new life of the Spirit and the opportunity for us to live as God's children and inherit everlasting life.

Lord, you promised that if we believed we would see the glory of God. The glory of the risen life in us is the glory of being fully human, fully alive, enjoying God's presence in this life and in the life to come.

*Exodus 32:15-24, 30-34 • Psalm 105(106):19-23
Proper of Saints: John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42*

Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Weeds brings us into contact with a world beyond our own. We struggle naturally to see beyond this world of ours and find it hard, if not impossible, to see anything other than what we can discern with our five senses. We are, understandably, earth-bound creatures. However, our vocation invites us to look beyond what we see and know with our senses, and see how God sees. Jesus makes it clear that in the Parable of the Weeds he is alluding to a future happening at the end of time, when the world we know so well will be wrapped up and a final judgement will take place when God will separate the wheat from the chaff.

This apocalyptic language doesn't sit very comfortably with us today. Subjects such as the end of time, judgement and the second coming of Christ are not, to be fair, the stock-in-trade of preachers, teachers, priests or deacons. Why this is the case is not entirely clear – the teaching of the Church has not changed since the beginning, including its teaching on the final judgement. Paul makes the following clear statements: 'So each of us shall give account of himself to God' (Rom. 14:12); 'For we must all appear before the judgment

seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body' (2 Cor. 5:10). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews affirmed this teaching also, 'it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment' (9:27).

This can all seem rather depressing and harsh. Who can stand before God as righteous? Not one of us. On the day of final judgement none of us will be able to stand before God because of our own righteousness, but only because of the merit of the saving death of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Just as in our earthly relationships love casts out fear, so too with God: our love for God and our knowledge of his love cast out all fear of his judgement. In fact, we welcome it because God's judgement means being purified, cleansed, healed and set free from sin.

Lord, teach me to live my life in such a way that I fear coming under your judgement, not like a slave who is afraid of his harsh master, but like a lover who is afraid of offending his beloved.

*Exodus 33:7-11; 34:5-9, 28 • Psalm 102(103):6-13
Matthew 13:36-43*

St Ignatius was well and truly a man of the world. Prior to dedicating his life to serving Christ he was a soldier and a pretty able one at that. In battle, however, one day his leg was shot through with a cannonball. By all reports the shot literally went right through the bone – entering one side and leaving the other. His life hung in the balance but, remarkably, it was saved.

During his long convalescence from this injury St Ignatius passed the time by reading. He was by all accounts a bit of a ladies' man and enjoyed reading about knights of the realm winning the hand of a beautiful woman in marriage. However, on reading one such tale he realized that rather than finding it uplifting and it giving him strength, it had the opposite effect on him – it had an unsettling impact on his soul. Then he noticed that when he read a book on the life of Christ he found his spirit soaring and his heart being filled with a joy and happiness he had not encountered before. St Ignatius was undergoing what we might today call a 'conversion experience'. Through this process he was able to discern God's call in his life and as a result dedicated his entire life to serving God and the Church.

We celebrate the feast day of St Ignatius today and remember that this soldier of the world who became a soldier for Christ founded one of the greatest religious orders – the Jesuits, the Society of Jesus – which became a powerful missionary movement. Today one of his children – Jorge Borgoglio, Pope Francis, himself a Jesuit – stands in the shoes of St Peter. St Ignatius is a wonderful example of the man in Jesus' parable who found treasure in a field and sold all he had so that he could acquire it (Matt. 13:44). He found the greatest treasure of all: Christ in him the hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

We have received the same grace as St Ignatius: we are baptized and the same Holy Spirit who was available to him is available to us also. As we ask for insight and revelation to understand the height, depth, length and breadth of God's generosity to us, we will, like St Ignatius, give ourselves wholeheartedly to God and his service.

'Pray as if all depended upon God; work as if all depended on you.' (St Ignatius of Loyola)

Exodus 34:29-35 • Psalm 98(99):5-7, 9

Matthew 13:44-46
