

Daily Reflections

Tuesday 1 July

Matthew 8:23-27

We can be sure that Jesus loved and prayed the Psalms. What must he have thought when he read this: ‘For he commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths; their courage melted away in their calamity; they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits’ end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven’ (Ps. 107:25-30). These prophetic words were spoken many centuries before the event recorded in today’s Gospel and speak into the tumultuous storm the Lord and his disciples encountered on the Sea of Galilee.

Lake Galilee is 600 feet below sea level and prone to sudden and violent storms which sweep down from the hills causing violent squalls on the lake. The Jewish people have a deep fear and reverence for the sea and believe that, as the psalmist vividly portrays, only God could control such a powerful, unbridled element (see Exod. 14:21-31). Read together, the psalm and Gospel account capture powerfully the disciples’ experience. Bear in mind, of course, that these men were seasoned fishermen. They would have been in no doubt that this particular storm would result in the boat capsizing and almost certain death. They were, we can safely assume, being deadly serious when they cried out, ‘Save, Lord; we are perishing’ (v. 25).

A key to this Scripture is found in verse 27: ‘What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?’ Jesus sheds light on the root of their fear: ‘Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?’ We might think this a little harsh given they were about to drown! Yet they were in the presence of Jesus, who is the Lord of sky and sea, of heaven and earth. We know what sort of man this is: he is God made man, the Lord, the Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity who took on human flesh.

Lord Jesus, whatever tumultuous storms I have to face in my life, whatever trials or trauma I have to undergo, you are with me, and you hold me up and give me strength.

Amos 3:1-8; 4:11-12 • Psalm 5:5-8

Matthew 8:23-27

Wednesday 2 July

Matthew 8:28-34

In some Bibles Jesus' words are carried in red. In these six verses from St Matthew's Gospel the only word which appears in red in such Bibles is the word 'Go!' 'Go' in this context means also 'depart' or 'leave' and is addressed to the demons who held the two men in their dark grip. This kind of scene is not your typical event at a Sunday Mass or at a parish fête. We are not used to dramatic deliverances or exorcisms today. Nevertheless, every diocese has an official exorcist, appointed by the bishop, to minister to those caught in the devil's hold.

Of course, there is a way in which we can be rather cynical about demon possession and the demonic realm, and this is, to be fair, understandable. It smacks of supernatural thrillers like the film *The Exorcist*. However, our faith has never shied away from the existence of evil and the reality of personified evil. In fact, it is nigh impossible to read the New Testament without recognizing that the writers saw a very clear duality between good and evil, God and the devil, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Of course, the science of psychiatry and psychology has come a long way over two thousand years and we have discovered that some of the illnesses for which the devil took the blame in the past are actually the result of medical or psychological ill health.

Such medical advances do not, however, mean that we can sweep the devil and demon possession under the carpet and claim we are more sophisticated and knowledgeable than our forebears. Revelation teaches us that, in the very beginning, an event occurred that altered the course of human history. This event, which tradition calls 'the Fall', was the rebellion of the Archangel Lucifer. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, 'The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing' (para. 391). We must cultivate a healthy respect for the mystery of evil and the demonic realm because, as Peter taught, the devil 'prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour' (1 Pet. 5:8).

Lord, I resist the devil and all his devious schemes by the power of your name, the cleansing of your blood and the victory of your cross. 'In the name of Jesus, "Go!"'

Amos 5:14-15, 21-24 • Psalm 49(50):7-13, 16-17

Matthew 8:28-34

Thursday 3 July

John 20:24-29 • St Thomas (Feast)

St Thomas is often thought of as a very modern saint. Many of our contemporaries relate to his scepticism, his doubt and his struggle to believe. But perhaps, in adopting him for our own age, we fail to acknowledge how relevant his doubt has been for people of every age.

We tend to think of doubt as an enemy, but is it really that simple? We tend to like things in black and white in this respect: we have faith or we do not have faith; we believe or we doubt. But life is never quite as straightforward, never quite as black and white, and we need the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to understand the role doubt plays in our lives. So often when we are in the grip of doubt or unbelief we tend to assume that we are losing our faith or that our faith is weak and unstable, when in a large number of cases the opposite is true.

We walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) and we perceive God as in a mirror, which in New Testament days only provided a dim and partial reflection (1 Cor. 13:12). We are, it is true, enlightened by God but faith is often lived in darkness, uncertainty and struggle. Faith is often severely tested and the world we live in can seem far removed from the one promised us by faith. In the course of our lives most of us have experiences of evil and injustice, of suffering and of the death of loved ones, and these seem to contradict the Good News of the gospel, and shake our faith profoundly and become a temptation against it.

So, you see, Thomas isn't so much a saint for this modern era as a saint for every era because faith is refined and tested in the furnace of doubt. Doubt, rather like temptation, can actually strengthen our faith. Faith is actually more of a cry from the heart; it is a searching and an impulse deep within us which longs to know the Living God. In our reflection on today's Gospel, rather than focusing on Thomas's doubt and refusal to believe, we should, in fact, focus on his faith because he moved through doubt and unbelief to proclaim Jesus as his Lord and his God.

Lord, blessed are we who have not seen but believe. St Thomas, apostle of faith – pray for us.

Ephesians 2:19-22 • Psalm 116(117)

John 20:24-29

Friday 4 July
Matthew 9:9-13

There is a well-known saying that many believe to be true, but they are wrong: ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ This is blatantly ridiculous because the point is that we cannot help ourselves. At a profound level we are hopeless and helpless because our nature is subject to sin and death – even the best of us are fallen. God is not like a headmaster, praising and rewarding the children who do their homework and work hard, and frowning on those who sit at the back of the class and smoke behind the bike sheds! And while we are on the subject of misconceptions, here is another one: God calls the righteous to follow him, those who are moral and upright. To dispel this misconception, we need only to look at today’s Gospel reading.

While he was on earth Jesus attracted those on the very margins of his society. These people clearly enjoyed his company – much, it has to be said, to the consternation and indignation of the Pharisees. Of course, the Pharisees were not all bad! However, even a superficial reading of the Gospels reveals them to be resistant to Jesus and his teaching. They were certainly scandalized by his reaching out to those perceived to be public sinners. Their question to the disciples – ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ (v. 11) – has resounded down through the centuries, exposing a mindset about the Christian faith that has inflicted much damage. The word ‘sinners’ on their lips was obviously a reference to prostitutes (as if the prostitute epitomized the person who had fallen away from God). It is striking that the Pharisees did not have the courage to ask Jesus this question directly. According to Matthew the Lord overheard it.

The Lord’s answer to their question is, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick’ (v. 12). The truth is that we are all sinners, and what do we sinners do? We sin in many varied and different ways. Even today, we tend to think of sexual sins as being worse than other sins, but what about pride, arrogance, hypocrisy, looking down on others and clericalism (a sin Pope Francis has attacked head on)?

Lord, grant me a kind and generous heart towards all men and women. Teach me to understand that none of us is righteous: we are justified by and through the blood of the Lamb.

Amos 8:4-6, 9-12 • Psalm 118(119):2, 10, 20, 30, 40, 131
Matthew 9:9-13

Saturday 5 July
Matthew 9:14-17

Pope Francis has been a fresh of breath air. His refusal to embrace many of the trappings of his office has sent a wonderful message of humility and solidarity to believer and unbeliever alike. This is not to say that Pope Benedict wasn't humble or anything like that: it is simply to highlight Pope Francis's decision to eschew the palatial accommodation reserved for the Pope, preferring to live, in effect, in a simple boarding house. Actually, he says that for him it is not a renunciation, since for his own wellbeing he needs to be around other people. The point we are trying to make is that Pope Francis is not afraid of change. This is in stark contrast to the vast majority of human beings. Most of us, if we are honest, are rather resistant to change and doing things differently. Our watchword is: 'We have always done it this way; why change it?' or, in more modern parlance, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'

This is the very mindset the Pharisees and John the Baptist's disciples had adopted with relation to fasting. The Jews fasted for the same reasons we fast today, with one notable addition. We fast to express grief at the loss of a loved one, to show repentance for sin, and to grow closer to God and rely on him, not on our own strength. The Jews added to these motivations the desire to usher in the coming of the promised Messiah. Of course, we don't fast for this reason because the Messiah is already among us. However, we should perhaps fast and pray for the coming of the Lord again, his second coming.

God is always doing something new and exciting in our midst. God is always calling us to think with the Spirit and be open to his work among us. Perhaps the Spirit is calling us to revive the discipline of fasting and praying for the Lord's return. What is important is that we fast in the spirit and not under the law or by the power of the flesh. For when we live by the law or the flesh, our works are often done so that others can see them and then we run the risk of losing our reward.

Lord, open my mind and heart to the new ways the Spirit is working in my life, in the lives of others, in the Church and in the world.

Amos 9:11-15 • Psalm 84(85):9, 11-14
Matthew 9:14-17

Sunday 6 July

(A) Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Matthew 11:25-30

Today's Gospel reading is an especially beautiful one. It reveals (and 'reveals' being the operative word) a very wonderful truth about God and his nature, expressing it in a way that no mere human mind could express. In other words, these words of Jesus come straight from God's own heart and it is as if he is speaking them directly into our own lives. We can divide these five verses into three categories: the Father's delight (vv. 25-26); the relationship between the Father and the Son (v. 27); and the grace of revelation (vv. 28-30).

Jesus teaches us that God the Father delights to pour out a gift of revelation upon his children. 'Revelation' in this context is all about us having the grace to enter more deeply into the mystery of God. In the Christian faith there are no new truths, simply the ancient revelation of Scripture, the Creed and the teaching of the Church, and it is in these truths that we immerse our minds and hearts. And as we do so, the Holy Spirit opens up our minds and hearts to see hidden depths, a new meaning, a fresh interpretation or a word of nuance which touches us deeply and moves us to love and worship God. This is not the preserve or reserve of a few blessed people – this is a birthright of our baptism. We are supposed to be a people who receive light and revelation from God.

However, this grace – which we could call 'a grace of revelation' – comes to us as we decide to carve out time and space to pray, study the Scriptures and be still before the Lord. In a way prayer can be understood as a time set aside to invest in this grace of revelation. We can see this as the desire of the Father's heart. In response he opens up his mystery to us. The more rooted our lives are in receiving revelation and insight from God, the more we know God's joy, and the more we rejoice in God's plan of salvation and his work in this world. Today we have an opportunity to experience the delight of our heavenly Father as we penetrate the mystery of his Son and receive the grace of revelation that brings us peace, joy and happiness.

Praise the Father, the good and holy Creator who blesses his children with the grace of revelation and the gift of deep and lasting joy.

Zechariah 9:9-10 • Psalm 144(145):1-2, 8-14

Romans 8:9, 11-13 • Matthew 11:25-30

Monday 7 July
Matthew 9:18-26

Today's Gospel invites us to pray and reflect on Jesus' healing ministry. Matthew relates how a synagogue ruler approaches Jesus to ask him to come and raise his daughter from the dead! Jesus sets out to respond to the man's seemingly impossible request, but is interrupted on his way by an incident involving a woman with a long history of suffering from haemorrhages. Jesus takes time out to respond to this woman's need before continuing on his journey to the house of the synagogue ruler.

Matthew doesn't name the synagogue ruler, but we know from the parallel passage in Mark's Gospel that his name is Jairus (see Mark 5:22-43). A ruler of the synagogue was a layman with administrative responsibilities for the upkeep of the building and supervision of the worship, although sometimes the title was simply honorary. The synagogue ruler kneels before the Lord – in Matthew's record he doesn't call him 'Lord' or 'Master' but by kneeling he shows respect and acknowledgement that he is before someone who is great and who has authority.

While the synagogue ruler approaches Jesus publically, the woman suffering from haemorrhages reaches out to Jesus in the most private of ways, hoping not to be noticed. We do not know the precise nature of her painful and humiliating condition, which would have made her ritually unclean, but we are told that it had been going on for twelve years. Mark gives us the added detail that she had spent all her money going to different doctors to seek a cure.

Jesus raises the synagogue ruler's daughter and heals the woman of her condition. The Greek word for 'heal' actually means 'save'. In these two miracles we encounter both physical healing ('be healed of your disease', Mark 5:34) and spiritual salvation ('go in peace', Mark 5:34). The Lord holds out the same grace and blessing to us. We are all in need of God's healing touch and we avail ourselves of this in many ways: through prayer, our reading of the Scriptures and in the sacraments of the Church, supremely in the Eucharist. Like the synagogue ruler and the woman, however, we must be lowly and humble and seek out the Lord confident of his loving touch and healing grace.

Lord, I bow before you as the Lord and the Giver of Life. Heal me and I am healed, forgive me and I am forgiven, restore me and I am restored.

Hosea 2:16-18, 21-22 • Psalm 144(145):2-9
Matthew 9:18-26

Tuesday 8 July
Matthew 9:32-38

The Bible can be hard to read at times. It is, after all, an ancient book – the New Testament two thousand years old, the Old Testament close to three thousand! How remarkable it is, then, that the words of Scripture transcend the centuries and continue to address every time, every place, every heart. We encounter today, however, an incident which is outside the experience of most of us: the powerful deliverance of a demon-possessed man. Realizing something truly amazing was occurring in their midst, the amazed crowd of onlookers declared, ‘Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel’ (v. 33 NIV).

Despite this explosion of God’s grace and power the religious authorities were not impressed. Now, as we are often at pains to highlight, among the Pharisees there were many good men – devout Jews who were faithful to their traditions and loved God. Men such as Nicodemus, who sought the Lord out at night to discuss his teaching, and Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy Pharisee who provided the tomb in which Jesus was buried. However, there can be no escaping their general resistance to Jesus and the rather contrary and antagonistic stance they adopted towards him. On this occasion, apparently upset by the crowd’s wonder at the miracle of deliverance, they said: ‘It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons’ (v. 34 NIV). The Pharisees were blinded by jealousy at this new work of God in their midst. They felt threatened by Jesus, by his miracles and by his power over evil.

We can be rather like the Pharisees ourselves and fail to recognize that the gospel is a message with power that can transform not just our own lives, but the whole world. If we truly lived as Jesus lived, we would be able to recognize evil and drive it out with prayer and intercession, calling upon the blood, the name and the cross of Christ. Lives lived in this way prepare the ground for the new evangelization because the harvest is indeed plentiful and the Lord needs workers who will take up the sword of righteousness and resist the devil.

Lord, I pray in your name that the light of Christ would shine into my life, and in your name I would drive out selfishness and a lack of hope and expectancy in the power of the gospel to transform the world.

Hosea 8:4-7, 11-13 • Psalm 113B(115):3-10
Matthew 9:32-38

Wednesday 9 July

Matthew 10:1-7

From the very beginning the Church faced cruel and relentless suffering. To be a Christian was to carry a price on your head – whether man, woman or child. The first believers were seen as outlaws, revolutionaries – a curse to be stamped on and stamped out. This is a simple fact of history, which is why Tertullian, the second-century theologian, came to the conclusion, ‘The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.’

The first believers were ordinary men and women who laid down their lives for their faith (1 Cor. 1:26). How moving are these words from the letter to the Hebrews, capturing something of the onslaught unleashed upon them: ‘They were stoned, they were sawn in two; they were killed with the sword;...afflicted, ill-treated – of whom the world was not worthy’ (11:37-38). This was the Christian world for three hundred years. This was the lot of believers as Roman emperor after emperor inflicted a brutal reign of terror upon them. We are privileged to stand on their shoulders.

However, truly miraculously, in the fourth century the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to the Christian faith and everything changed. Christianity went from being hounded and persecuted to the religion of choice for aspirational and upwardly mobile citizens of the Roman world – the Christian faith was positively *de rigueur*!

Yet it is an odd fact of church history that the Church flourishes more during times of intense persecution than it does during times of peace and harmony. Why is this? Perhaps it is because at such times the truth and reality of faith come into sharper focus. Life is short; we are pilgrims passing through this life on our way to the Father’s house. Times of persecution and adversity make us clarify what is important in our lives. Consider this challenge from C.S. Lewis: ‘I believe that there are too many accommodating preachers...Jesus Christ did not say: “Go into the world and tell the world that it is quite right.”’ The gospel is salt of the earth, light to the world, a sign of contradiction and a sign of the cross.

Lord Jesus Christ, send me out into the world to be a living witness of your truth and love. May I do so with courage, conviction, gentleness and respect but always with joy and great boldness, embracing trial and suffering with grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hosea 10:1-3, 7-8, 12 • Psalm 104(105):2-7

Matthew 10:1-7

Thursday 10 July
Matthew 10:7-15

On a certain stretch of the M6 Motorway an advertiser has taken it upon themselves to buy a hoarding, hoist it up on a lorry and position it in a field where it can be seen by the traffic hurtling past on one of the busiest roads in Europe. The advert says simply: 'God is dead.' It is bizarre, and quite what the advertiser's intentions are it is hard to know. Furthermore, whether the advertiser realizes it or not, they are quoting Nietzsche, the German philosopher. Nietzsche was no friend of the Christian faith, that is for sure.

Nietzsche also famously said, 'Show me that you are redeemed and then I will believe in your redeemer.' Now, to be fair, he had a good point. Jesus' commission of his disciples is the same yesterday, today and forever. We are sent out in the same way as they were all those centuries ago. We take with us the same life-changing message. We are to be Spirit-filled evangelists; men and women full of the joy, hope and optimism of the gospel of Christ. We are not to be sourpusses, killjoys – mean-spirited, narrow-minded, judgemental, harsh and lacking in mercy or compassion. We are to show the world that we are redeemed and that we know the Lord.

St Augustine said: 'No fragrance can be more pleasing to God than that of his own Son. May all the faithful breathe out the same perfume.' We are to be the aroma of Christ, giving people the opportunity to breathe in the fresh perfume of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit in our lives. Where there is no joy, we strive to put joy. Where there is no love, we work to put love. Where there is no forgiveness, we hold out forgiveness. This is what it means to be a Spirit-filled evangelist.

God is not dead; God is alive. We know that our Redeemer lives because he lives in the Church, his body, but he also lives in every believer, by the fruit and grace of baptism. We are living in challenging times but, in the same way that Jesus was sent by the Father, we are being sent by him to evangelize and win the world for God.

Lord, may I witness today that I am redeemed; may I give off the fragrant perfume of Christ's joy and love, and share his promises easily and confidently with others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9 • Psalm 79(80):2-3, 15-16
Matthew 10:7-15

Friday 11 July

Matthew 19:27-29 • St Benedict (Patron of Europe) (Feast)

Before the Second Vatican Council (1963–65) Mass in the west was celebrated in Latin and Bible reading was not actively encouraged: this was more encouraged with the Council and the promulgation of Dei verbum. Today, as beautiful and as wonderful as the Latin Mass is, Mass is celebrated in the vernacular language of each country and, thankfully, the reading of the Bible is encouraged and supported.

One of the reasons why the reading of the Bible was previously discouraged was because of the danger the Church saw in people misinterpreting and misunderstanding it. The Bible is, in this sense, a dangerous book. The Scripture scholar Origen, for example, castrated himself because he wanted to be a eunuch for the kingdom – this was clearly a too-literal interpretation, and a painful one at that! St Francis of Assisi, having heard the Lord say to him, ‘Rebuild my church’, literally took up his pick and shovel and began to work on a church building that had fallen into disrepair. However, he soon came to a deeper understanding that the Lord meant him to be a witness of spiritual renewal and change! When Jesus taught that if our eye causes us to sin we should gouge it out, he was speaking metaphorically, not literally.

Now this is not to say that following Christ does not call for a radical choice, because it does: choosing to follow Christ requires a willingness to lay down our lives, to die to self and live for God. Not many of us will literally have to lay down our lives, not many of us will be brutally persecuted. Nevertheless, there will be sacrifice, there will be a giving up of our own way and a seeking out of the will of God. The point, though, is this: our Father in heaven sees our sacrifice, he understands what we have given up, he feels our pain and knows our suffering. God is the God of reward, blessing and grace who lavishes his love, mercy and kindness upon us. He has blessed us with the promise of the life to come, eternal life, but he also blesses us today with the knowledge of his love and the great gift of fellowship with other believers.

Lord Jesus, I pray and long for your return when all things will be made new and the kingdom of justice, love and truth will be established in your name. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Proverbs 2:1-9 • Psalm 33(34):2-11

Matthew 19:27-29

Saturday 12 July
Matthew 10:24-33

Witnessing to our faith is not easy. It definitely takes courage and not a little wisdom, tact and grace. Our society is becoming increasingly secular (worldly), and although a secular society should tolerate religious views, we appear to be entering a time when the Christian faith is treated less well than other faiths. There is a certain antipathy or antagonism to the Christian faith and perhaps even more to the Catholic faith with its strong teaching on sexual morality and ethics. To stand up as a believer, and a Catholic believer at that, can trigger a host of reactions and responses, which means that, whether we like it or not, we will be mocked and ridiculed to some extent.

The gospel has both a sweet and a bitter side to it: sweet because of the many blessings and graces we receive, but bitter because, like the Lord himself, we will be subject to trial, persecution and suffering. Jesus was accused of being Beelzebub (the devil) and we should expect no better treatment (v. 25). Yet in the midst of our suffering and trials we can have confidence in God. By God's grace we can learn not to be afraid no matter what trials and difficulties we face.

If we don't give testimony, if we don't share our faith, then it is unlikely that we will undergo much persecution. But to those prepared to step out in faith, to take a risk and trust in God, the Father promises to give heavenly wisdom and strength. To witness for Christ means that Christ must increase and we must decrease. This does not mean that our personalities are diminished or we become robotic or take on a false persona: it means that by dying to self we allow Christ to live in us.

It is Christ living in us that makes the Christian life so attractive. We learn to bear witness to the fruits of the Spirit – to Christ's love, Christ's joy, Christ's love of the Father. We learn also the meaning of the truth that we have been crucified with Christ, and the life we live in the body is the life of Christ. The vocation to live the life in the power of the Spirit is a life built on the knowledge that the Spirit of the Living God resides in us.

It is no longer I who live but Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour who lives in me.

Isaiah 6:1-8 • Psalm 92(93):1-2, 5
Matthew 10:24-33

Sunday 13 July

Matthew 13:1-23 • Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Parables were a common device employed in storytelling in the ancient world but the parables of Jesus are unique. They reveal a mind of greater depth and clarity than ever before or ever since known in human history. Men and women of learning the world over, whether believers or not, recognize in the parables of Jesus the hand, work and mind of human genius. Believers recognize the hand, work and mind of God. When we contemplate the parables, especially the Parable of the Sower, we leave the world of human understanding and enter the mystery of God. Even the disciples did not understand the meaning of this parable at first: they had to come to Jesus and ask him to explain it to them.

The Parable of the Sower teaches us that the word of God, like seed sown in a ploughed field by a farmer, needs to take root in our hearts and minds. It is God who provides water and sunshine to make it grow. We for our part need to ensure that the soil of our lives is prepared to receive it. It needs to be tilled, and the stones and weeds need to be removed. Without this essential preparation the seed will not be able to flourish: the roots that it produces will not be able to go down deep into our lives; the young seedling will be strangled and choked, and eventually uprooted.

But what is this divine life? This divine life is God's word. We hear this word in Scripture or in prayer and it brings God's wisdom, light and life. For example, we might hear the word: 'Forgive your brother and sister. Let go of resentment, know you are forgiven.' This word spoken into our hearts is from God. If we hold on to this word, protecting it and cultivating it, we learn to forgive and let go of the anger or hurt or resentment.

God speaks his word to us in many and varied ways. Here is a word from God for us today, 'Cherish and revere the parables. Seek to understand the Parable of the Sower and its hidden depths. Ask the Holy Spirit for insight and for the grace of revelation.'

Lord God, by your grace may I produce fruit in my life by cultivating a heart which is open to receiving the gift of revelation and insight and so enter ever more deeply into the profound mystery of faith.

Isaiah 55:10-11 • Psalm 64(65):10-14

Romans 8:18-23 • Matthew 13:1-23

Monday 14 July

Matthew 10:34–11:1

Jesus was a radical and a revolutionary. We don't tend to associate these words or ideas with the Lord since the Church as an organization is law-abiding and part of the establishment. Nevertheless, Jesus was a revolutionary and he was hounded by the civil and religious authorities of his day. He was perceived as a threat to national stability and was deeply troublesome to the ruling class of his day. Jesus incurred the wrath of the religious establishment because he challenged their hypocrisy and shallowness. He also proclaimed that he was the fulfilment of the law and the prophets, that he could forgive sin and that God was his Father – with the clear implication that he was God's Son. In the end those he troubled wanted rid of him and he was executed as a common criminal.

Jesus is a paradox. He is the Prince of Peace but he also came wielding a sword – not, however, the sword of a typical revolutionary but the sword of truth, love and redemption. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: 'The peace of Jesus is the cross. But the cross is the sword God wields on earth. It creates division. The son against the father, the daughter against the mother, the member of the house against the head – all this will happen in the name of God's kingdom and his peace. That is the work which Christ performs on earth.' The truth is that whenever the gospel is actively proclaimed and put into practice, it will always provoke conflict and tension. This is because the way of the cross and the way of life are at odds with the way of self and the way of death. We do not deliberately seek conflict or division but, as we proclaim the gospel, it divides because it challenges us at the very core of our being.

The call to discipleship is very demanding – it demands our heart, our strength and our very lives. If it does not make these demands on us, then we are not disciples. We are being invited by Pope Francis to choose the way of discipleship: to opt for a simpler lifestyle, to choose to serve the poor and to lay down our lives for others.

Lord God, your word is sharper than any two-edged sword – it divides and purifies, and cuts through the hardness and selfishness of our hearts that we may serve the Living God with enthusiasm and joy.

Isaiah 1:10-17 • Psalm 49(50):8-9, 16-17, 21-23

Matthew 10:34–11:1

Tuesday 15 July

Matthew 11:20-24 • St Bonaventure (Memorial)

We human beings have a remarkable capacity to avoid talking about things that matter – topics such as death, politics and sex. These subjects are guaranteed to get everybody hot under the collar, and so, we conclude, are probably best avoided. And the Church isn't exempt from 'no-go areas': there are a whole host of topics that are currently out of vogue – including heaven (rarely discussed or preached on), hell (heaven forbid!), the second coming of Jesus (many clergy fear being labelled extreme if they preach on this – despite it being at the heart of our faith), and sin and repentance (a definite no-no these days!).

The problem – and for sure it is a problem – is that these are some of the key tenets of our faith. If people do not understand these concepts they cannot understand the Christian life. An understanding of sin and repentance is, for example, fundamental. If we fail to speak about sin and repentance, people cannot understand salvation and redemption – the very reason Jesus came. Sin and repentance became unpopular because of an over-emphasis on guilt and failure in the past. But what we all need to understand and appreciate about repentance is that we don't have the grace to repent and turn away from sin in and of ourselves. It is the Holy Spirit who moves and compels us to repent and turn away from our sin. As St John Chrysostom reflected: 'Repentance is not the work of man: as the prophet Jeremiah says: "Make me repent, Lord, and I shall repent."'

The problem with sin and repentance, if we can put it like this, is that it is far easier to see other people's sins and failings than it is to see our own. However, the Holy Spirit gives us the grace to look at our sin, invite his light to shine into our hearts and come before God in repentance before we think of focusing on the shortcomings of others. The reason why repentance is hard is because it invites us to receive the gift of self-knowledge and self-awareness and face up to ourselves, but this is the only way we can be set free from our sin.

Lord, teach me to repent of my sin, turn away from darkness and remove the plank from my own eye and not even presume to remove the splinter from someone else's eye. Amen.

Isaiah 7:1-9 • Psalm 47(48):2-8

Matthew 11:20-24

Wednesday 16 July
Matthew 11:25-27

Every teacher experiences delight when a student makes a breakthrough in understanding. But added to the joy at the satisfaction the student feels is a sense of mystery – the teacher has presented the concepts but can't provide the gift of understanding that he or she sees dawn in the other's mind. At a far deeper level, this was the source of Jesus' joy and thanksgiving when he saw that some of those he had been teaching were starting to understand his message. He must have seen in their expressions that they had realized that God was their Father and they could count on his loving mercy and aid. Significantly it was those without formal education, not the Pharisees and lawyers, who were grasping these truths – the learned remained proud and suspicious.

Jesus praised the Father for this because he knew that this process of understanding was the gift of the Father to those who desired to know the truth: only the Holy Spirit, sent from the Father, could have enlightened their minds in this way. But Jesus wants us to experience the same enlightenment. He wants to bring the gospel alive to us so that we have a deeper understanding of it and can apply it to our lives and draw from it hope and consolation. Jesus promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to teach us: 'the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things' (John 14:26). Paul knew profoundly what it meant to be taught by God and he prayed that others might experience this grace, 'that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know the hope to which he has called you' (Eph. 1:17-18).

The Lord wants our experience to be like that of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. 'Did not our hearts burn within us...while he opened to us the scriptures?' (Luke 24:32). We can be humbly expectant, especially in our times of prayer and Scripture reading, that if we open our hearts to him he will send his Spirit to teach us.

Father, we thank you that you have revealed yourself to us in your Son Jesus Christ, your living Word. Help us always to seek the kingdom he came to bring.

Isaiah 10:5-7, 13-16 • Psalm 93(94):5-10, 14-15
Matthew 11:25-27

Thursday 17 July
Matthew 11:28-30

In claiming to be able to grant them 'rest' Jesus was revealing his true identity to his Jewish audience. For them rest was rooted in the Genesis account of creation wherein God rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:3). In commanding them to observe the Sabbath, God had reminded his people that he had brought them out of slavery in Egypt (Deut. 5:12-15). Resting from work on the Sabbath, therefore, involved knowing the freedom to unite themselves with God, behaving like him and obeying him; it meant participating in the repose of the Creator.

This promise of Jesus remains unchanged and vital for us in today's frantic world. Amidst all the turmoil of self-gratification, social upheaval and stress around us Christ still warmly invites us to bring him our weariness and burdens. Are we weary of the relentless pressures of work or bringing up a family in a godless world? Are we weary of coping with ill-health in ourselves or others? Are we burdened by guilt for past sin or for persistent sin in our lives? Are we burdened by hurts and resentments from past experiences? Do fear, anxiety, anger, depression and confusion tend to dominate our daily lives?

No burden is too heavy for our Saviour, no sin too shameful or embarrassing: he gave his life willingly on the cross that we might be set free, comforted and healed of all that prevents us from living the new life he came to bring us.

In exchange for our burdens Jesus offers us his 'rest'. That does not mean idleness or passivity; rather it is a prayerful recognition in faith of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. As we enter into a deeper relationship with him we shall be set free of the burdens which weigh us down.

'For whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labours as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest' (Heb. 4:10-11).

Heavenly Father, we thank you for granting us, in your Son, a new life of peace and freedom. Deepen in us day by day a desire to be united with you in him for all eternity.

Isaiah 26:7-9, 12, 16-19 • Psalm 101(102):13-21
Matthew 11:28-30

Friday 18 July
Matthew 12:1-8

The disciples, tired and hungry, plucked and ate ears of corn, an action considered the equivalent of reaping on the Sabbath, which was forbidden labour:

‘Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.’ (Exod. 20:8-11)

The rabbis went on to classify thirty-nine kinds of work as forbidden, including reaping. The Pharisees, who appear as the leaders of the opposition to Jesus in the Gospels, protest against this unlawful act.

Jesus gives them a full and detailed answer. First, he compares the disciples’ act to that of David and his followers in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. In both cases a commandment was broken out of the need to satisfy physical hunger. Second, he speaks of how the priests are allowed to perform acts of work in the Jerusalem Temple on the Sabbath. The law permitted this so that worship in the Temple was not disrupted – Jesus is claiming that he is greater than the Temple! Third, he quotes from Hosea 6:6, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’ (NIV), to criticize the Pharisees’ faulty scale of values. Jesus respects the holiness of the Sabbath, and gives it its authentic interpretation: ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27).

Jesus, as the Son of Man, has the ultimate authority over the Sabbath and even more right than David or the priests in the Temple to overrule the Old Testament legislation regarding the Sabbath. Jesus, in the Gospels, is always using opportunities to reveal more of who he is. Here he reveals that ‘the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath’ (v. 8).

Father, we thank you that you have revealed yourself to us in your Son, Jesus Christ. Give us the faith always to trust in your Word.

Isaiah 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8 • Isaiah 38:10-12, 16
Matthew 12:1-8

Saturday 19 July
Matthew 12:14-21

The debate between Jesus and the Pharisees over the origin of his powers came to a conclusion with the healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (vv. 9-14). The Pharisees no longer sought to understand Jesus but now conspired to destroy him.

With this rising opposition, Matthew reminds us of the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa. 42:1-21) concerning the servant of the Lord – a figure who would be called to suffer for his role in God's plan. This passage from Isaiah is discussing the liberation of Israel from the rule of the Babylonians by Cyrus of Persia. Israel is the chosen people, the servant of the Lord – a servant upon whom the Spirit of the Lord has fallen, a servant who is the mediator in a covenant between God and the nations. It was Israel's destiny to be a light on a hilltop to redeem the nations, but in order to fulfil its destiny Israel would need to be liberated from its own darkness and captivity.

Israel's need parallels that of the whole of the human race. It is a need which was fulfilled in Jesus, the true Servant of God. At his baptism Jesus is confirmed as the Servant of God, as the one upon whom the Spirit falls, the one whom the Lord has chosen, and with whom he is pleased (Matt. 3:16-17).

Jesus is the Light, the one who will redeem the nations, the one who brings freedom. Jesus proclaimed justice to the Gentiles. He went to the very limits of the demands of love by giving his life for the redemption of all.

In the face of hostility Jesus did not use violence. Instead, he was gentle and humble, touching all those who came to him in need. He neither broke a bruised reed nor quenched a smouldering wick.

Jesus remained faithful to his calling as a servant. We too are servants of the Lord. Let us pray that the Spirit of the living God will fall upon us and fill us with the love of the Servant King, that we will seek not to be served but to serve.

'I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.' (Ps. 9:1-2 NIV)

Micah 2:1-5 • Psalm 9B(10):1-4, 7-8, 14
Matthew 12:14-21

Sunday 20 July

(A) Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Matthew 13:24-43

Good news is precious these days. There is little enough of it in our papers and on our television screens! As we contemplate the evils of our world – the injustices, abuses of power, and injuries to the most vulnerable and to children – we can quickly lose hope. People ask how a God so good and so powerful can allow such things to happen. Inwardly we too may often be baffled. How can the love and hope of the gospel exist in a world so full of suffering and evil?

Jesus' story of the wheat and the weeds has some encouraging answers. First, it is clear that the man sowed good seed in his field; any evil is the work of his enemy. So we cannot blame the bad things in our world on God. Then, given that there are bad things everywhere, it is striking that the owner of the field seems less perturbed by them than do his servants. He is content to let weeds and wheat grow together until the harvest. The world is a mixed bag of good and evil, and the Church is composed of saints and sinners. Our own lives too are a mixture of good and evil. We need to be patient – with ourselves and with others – as we strive for the perfection God seeks (Matt. 5:48), looking kindly upon shortcomings and failure. After all, judgement belongs to the Lord, and only at the harvest can the true nature of the plant be judged.

The glory of the Church now is the holiness of ordinary, weak and sinful men and women. It is the shining of small stars in the darkness. The bright shining of the sun will follow the final separation which the Son will accomplish at the close of the age (v. 43). So let us strive for purity in an impure world, not losing our hope because of the darkness against and within us, but trusting always in the Lord who sowed his good seed in us at baptism. He waits confidently for his seed to bear fruit – let us share his confidence and rejoice.

‘For there is no god, other than you, who cares for everyone, to whom you have to prove that your sentences have been just.’ (Wisd. 12:13)

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19 • Psalm 85(86):5-6, 9-10, 15-16

Romans 8:26-27 • Matthew 13:24-43

Monday 21 July
Matthew 12:38-42

The Jewish people lived with a real sense of expectation of and longing for the messianic age. They believed that God would usher in this age with power, signs and miracles. For them the Messiah was a powerful, mighty and judgemental figure who would crush Israel's enemies and establish God's reign. Jesus, who claimed to be the promised Messiah, was an enigma wrapped up in a mystery! He did not come in power but performed powerful miracles. He did not enter the stage of human history with trumpet blast and pomp but came in humility and service. The Jews saw in him the power and glory of God, and were both attracted and intrigued and repelled by him. The statement 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you' (v. 38) is arrogant and belies an attitude which the Lord is quick to condemn: 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah' (v. 39). Jesus referred his detractors to the lessons of history.

The Ninevites (a wayward and rebellious people) repented and turned back to God when they heard the preaching of Jonah. The Queen of the South (or Sheba), a woman of tremendous wealth and power, travelled vast distances to listen to the wisdom of Solomon. These stories show that God's work brings about great changes in people's lives. Jesus was no Jonah or Solomon but the Son of the living God. Jonah was swallowed by the fish and remained in its belly for three days – in the same way the Lord Jesus was swallowed up by death and remained in the bowels of the earth for three days. Jesus' death and resurrection (the sign of Jonah) speaks to us a better word than the Old Testament prophets or the wisdom of the ages – it proclaims the greatness of God, before whom we bow down and worship. Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection invite all men and women to repentance and change. The sign of Jonah is for all ages – revelation is complete. We await the second coming, the return of Christ.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are greater than all but you came in humility to save and redeem. You invite all men and women to bow their knee before the name of Jesus and proclaim him as the Servant King and Lord of All.

Micah 6:1-4, 6-8 • Psalm 49(50):5-9, 16-17, 21, 23
Matthew 12:38-42

Tuesday 22 July

(Memorial) St Mary Magdalene • John 20:1-2, 11-18

Today we are celebrating the power of love experienced in our relationship with Jesus. Mary Magdalene had had her first experience of that love on the day when Jesus had delivered her from seven demons. From that time onwards it had continued to draw her to him, right up until the day she had witnessed his crucifixion.

Mary Magdalene did not need to go to the tomb, but her presence there at such an early hour reflects her need just to be near Jesus and to gain relief from an aching heart, suffering from the loss of a love that had filled every corner of her life. At the sight of the empty tomb her mind was thrown into confusion. Now, in desperate need of consolation, she did not know where to find her Lord. Is it any wonder that John describes it as 'still dark'?

How like Mary's our journey in faith is. We know Jesus, we have tasted of his love, yet sometimes his love sets us along a road that can appear to lead us to a tomb, a place where we struggle to see him. We can feel lost, alone and desolate. Mary's first reaction was to run to the others in sorrow and dejection. But after they had been and gone, it was Mary's love that compelled her to keep looking; it was her devotion and loyalty that meant that she didn't abandon her pursuit of her Lord. In her tears, and in her despair, he came to her: he met her at the tomb. Even then she couldn't perceive his presence. Only when he called out her name did she recognize his voice. At that moment the darkness turned to light, her eyes were opened, and she saw the risen Lord. Now Mary did not run to the disciples in despondency: she went with a heart rejoicing, ready to proclaim to all that she had seen the Lord.

Mary's example should encourage us to be confident that in every situation in our lives the Lord is present. It is as we draw near to him that we hear his voice calling us to proclaim the power of the resurrection and compelling us to live as witnesses of his love.

Lord, you call me by name and lead me to the joy of your resurrection. Though there are times when I struggle, help me always to proclaim your love to the world.

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20 • Psalm 84(85):2-8

Proper of Saints: John 20:1-2, 11-18

Wednesday 23 July

John 15:1-8 • St Bridget of Sweden (Patron of Europe)(Feast)

‘St Bridget of Sweden was born of an aristocratic family in 1303 at Finsta in Sweden. She was a lay woman happily married to Ulfa, a good Christian man to whom she bore eight children. Those who have received a vocation to the consecrated life and lay people will feel that she is close to them. Without abandoning the comfortable condition of her social status, she and her husband enjoyed a married life in which conjugal love was joined to intense prayer, the study of sacred Scripture, mortification and charitable works. Together they founded a small hospital, where they often attended the sick. Bridget was in the habit of serving the poor personally. At the same time, she was appreciated for her gifts as a teacher, which she was able to use when she was required to serve at Court in Stockholm. This experience was the basis of the counsel which she would later give from time to time to princes and rulers concerning the proper fulfilment of their duties. But obviously the first to benefit from these counsels were her children, and it is not by chance that one of her daughters, Catherine, is venerated as a saint.

‘St Bridget had a profound sense of the mystery of Christ and the Church. Her profound union with Christ was accompanied by special gifts of revelation, which made her a point of reference for many people in the Church of her time. Bridget was recognized as having the power of prophecy, and at times her voice did seem to echo that of the great prophets of old. She spoke unabashedly to princes and pontiffs, declaring God’s plan with regard to the events of history. She was not afraid to deliver stern admonitions about the moral reform of the Christian people and the clergy themselves (Rev. 4:49; also 4:5).

‘Bridget stands as an important witness to the place reserved in the Church for a charism lived in complete docility to the Spirit of God and in full accord with the demands of ecclesial communion. In a special way too, because the Scandinavian countries from which Bridget came were separated from full communion with the See of Rome during the tragic events of the sixteenth century, the figure of this Swedish saint remains a precious ecumenical “bridge” strengthened by the ecumenical commitment of her order.’ (Blessed Pope John Paul II)

Galatians 2:19-20 • Psalm 33(34):2-11

John 15:1-8

Thursday 24 July
Matthew 13:10-17

The disciples were baffled as to why the Lord spoke to the people in parables. They were stretched and challenged by this new teaching. Jesus' teaching caused them to think, to use their minds – in this he was different from the religious teachers they were used to hearing! They were perplexed and confused. The originality and depth of Jesus' parables tested them profoundly. They weren't being difficult or obtuse – they just didn't comprehend.

And so in today's Gospel Jesus seizes the opportunity to lead them further into the meaning of his parables. He begins by affirming his disciples. In effect he says: 'You understand much more than you know.' Or in other words: 'You have received much more than you can currently understand.' What was it they had received? They had received knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. If they didn't grasp their meaning now, a time would come when they would. What was important was their attitude, their disposition, in short their hearts.

The Lord addresses an attitude that he sees as spiritually destructive. It poses a threat to people's ability to receive his teaching, preventing them from being receptive and open to the Holy Spirit. Oddly it often afflicts those who are very involved in their faith. Jesus, quoting Isaiah, describes such people as those who see but do not see, who hear but do not hear. He laments and grieves over this paradox: they hear but never understand; they see but never perceive.

Why is this? Why are some afflicted in this way? It is because their hearts have become hard. Deep within they refuse to accept God's teaching. They have become proud, stiff-necked and resistant. A hard heart is an unteachable heart and in this state unreachable. It is only the Holy Spirit who can reach it. The Spirit heals such hearts. A hard heart melts as it responds to the teaching and leading of the Spirit.

We should not judge or condemn, for we need to recognize that it's easy for our own hearts to become hard. Each of us can find ourselves resisting the Spirit. Our challenge is to ensure that our hearts are open and receptive to his work in our lives.

Holy Spirit, open my heart to your teaching. Holy Spirit, grant me the humility to root out the sin that hardens hearts and the pride that resists your grace and love. Holy Spirit, heal my heart.

Jeremiah 2:1-3, 7-8, 12-13 • Psalm 35(36):6-11
Matthew 13:10-17

Friday 25 July

Matthew 20:20-28 • St James (Feast)

The Gospel of Matthew records for us an episode in the life of James and his brother John which reveals a human but flawed aspect of their character. Through the intervention of their mother they wish to have a place of honour beside Jesus when he comes into his kingdom. Jesus challenges them: 'Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?' (v. 22). They reply that they can. Their zeal and enthusiasm make them answer rashly and prematurely. Commenting on this, St John Chrysostom wrote: "We can!" Fervour makes them answer promptly, though they really do not know what they are saying but still they think they will receive what they ask for.'

Jesus goes further, prophesying that they will indeed suffer for him and his kingdom. St John Chrysostom paraphrases his words thus: 'You will be found worthy of martyrdom; you will suffer what I suffer and end your life with violent death, thus sharing all with me.' Jesus, the Son of Man, did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

'See how imperfect they all are: the two who tried to get ahead of the other ten, and the ten who were jealous of the two! But, as I said before, show them to me at a later date in their lives, and you will see that all these impulses and feelings have disappeared. Read how John, the very man who here asks for the first place, will always yield to Peter when it comes to preaching and performing miracles in the Acts of the Apostles. James, for his part, was not to live very much longer; for from the beginning he was inspired by great fervour and, setting aside all purely human goals, rose to such splendid heights that he straightaway suffered martyrdom.' (St John Chrysostom)

Lord God, you accepted the sacrifice of St James, the first of your apostles to give his life for your sake. May your Church find strength in his martyrdom and support in his constant prayer. 'Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials.' (Jas. 1:2)

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 • Psalm 125(126)

Matthew 20:20-28

Daily Reflections

Saturday 26 July

(Memorial) SS Joachim & Anne, Parents of the BVM • Matthew 13:24-30

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but when all were asleep his enemy came and sowed darnel among the wheat.” Now as the Lord himself explains, the darnel is the offspring of the evil one. They bear this mark because they behave the way he does: they are seeds of his sowing, and his children by adoption. Harvest time will be the end of the world, for although it began long since and continues now through death, only then will all things come to an end.

‘The reapers are the angels, for they are, and will be especially at that time, the servants of the king of heaven. As Scripture says: “Just as the darnel is collected and burnt in the fire, so it will be at the end of the world. The Son of Man”, who is also the son of the Father Most High, “will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all evildoers and every cause of sin.”

‘And so the Lord’s servants, the angels of God, seeing the darnel in the field, that is, wicked and impious folk living among good people, and that even within the Church, said to the Lord: “Do you wish us to go and gather it up?” In other words, “Shall we kill them, to remove them from the earth?” But the Lord’s reply was: “No, for fear that in collecting the darnel you may also uproot the wheat.”

‘How then would the wheat, the good people, be uprooted as well if the angels gathered up the darnel, cutting off the wicked by death to separate them from the just? The fact is that many godless sinners who live among people who are upright and devout repent in time and are converted, and by learning new habits of piety and virtue they cease to be darnel and become wheat. And so some wheat would be uprooted in the gathering of the darnel if the angels snatched the wicked away before they repented...This is why he who sees everything before it comes into being would not permit the darnel to be uprooted until the appointed time.’ (St Gregory Palamas)

Heavenly Father, your desire is that all men and women be saved. Give me a heart that judges no one and a spirit that prays for all who are lost and far from you.

Jeremiah 7:1-11 • Psalm 83(84):3-6, 8, 11

Matthew 13:24-30

Sunday 27 July

Matthew 13:44-52 • Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

In the stories of the treasure and the pearl we see people living normal lives. They have plans for tomorrow, and things to do today. Then everything is changed. Today's agenda becomes unimportant and their plans for tomorrow are completely changed. Why? They have discovered a life-changing treasure. Life will never be the same again. Imagine a Saturday evening: you are at home watching the lottery numbers being drawn. Then you realize that the numbers facing you on the screen are the numbers you have chosen. You are now a millionaire! It would definitely change your plans for the rest of the evening and the rest of your life!

In these parables Jesus invites us to imagine. He wants us to see how wondrous a thing it is to have him present in our lives. Have you ever dreamed what you would do if you won the lottery? Share some of it with your family, help a favourite local or national charity, or the missionary effort of the Church, or famine victims. Maybe a holiday, a new house, or car, or...? We could waste hours dreaming about the possibilities.

Jesus asks us to dream another dream, one that will bring us greater joy. The treasure Jesus offers is himself. He invites us to dream about the possibilities which are opened to us by his presence, and all the blessing he brings as he enters our lives. It might bring us joy to win the lottery and be able to help others, but it is an even greater joy to know Christ Jesus (John 15:15).

The men in the parables are giving up things of lesser value for the real treasure. Paul puts it this way: 'But whatever gain I had...I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ' (Phil. 3:7-8). When he was called by Christ he was willing to let go of what he had thought to be valuable in order to hold on to Christ, the real and lasting treasure.

'Everyday let my proclamation be: "Jesus Christ loves me; he gave his life to save me; and now he is living at my side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free me."' (Evangelii gaudium 164)

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12 • Psalm 118(119):57, 72, 76-77, 127-130

Romans 8:28-30 • Matthew 13:44-52

Monday 28 July

Matthew 13:31-35

The mustard seed is nature's version of 'good gifts in small parcels'. It was the smallest seed used by Palestinian farmers, yet, conditions permitting, could produce a tree over ten feet tall. The smallness, hiddenness and insignificance of the seed belied its power to produce fruit. Yeast is also rather like this. Although its presence is hidden, bread will not rise or bake correctly without it. Jesus told these parables to teach us some very important lessons about the spiritual life.

The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast reflect truths displayed in the life of Jesus and the power of the gospel. Dr James Allen Francis, in his poem 'One Solitary Life', tells the story of Jesus. He was born of peasant stock into poverty in an obscure Palestinian hamlet. He worked as a carpenter until he was thirty. He lived the life of an itinerant preacher for three years. He owned no home and never married. He had no credentials, no university education. He never travelled more than 200 miles from his home. When he was a young man the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends deserted him and one denied ever knowing him. He was turned over to his enemies, forced to endure the mockery of a trial, and eventually crucified between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he owned on earth – his coat. When he was dead, he was taken down from the cross and laid in a borrowed grave. Yet this hidden and apparently inconsequential life has become the very centrepiece of human history. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever mobilized, all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the history of the world as much as this one solitary life.

There is a saying, 'Never judge a book by its cover', and this story of 'One Solitary Life' and the story of the mustard seed are surely all the evidence we need for why we must not judge others, no matter how they may present. There is no telling what lies within a person, what talent, what capacity.

Lord, teach me to be ever in awe of you, in awe of your power and your authority. Teach me not to judge, lest I be judged, but to seek out the good in others.

Jeremiah 13:1-11 • Deuteronomy 32:18-21

Matthew 13:31-35

Tuesday 29 July

Luke 10:38-42 • St Martha (Memorial)

Martha had the gift of hospitality. She was clearly one of those who are comfortable and at ease in opening their homes and serving others. However, those who possess this wonderful gift can sometimes have a darker side. The dark side can perhaps be best expressed by the notion that they don't suffer fools very gladly! They may have a great talent for organization, but this can on occasion leave a trail of wounded and upset people who have struggled to live up to the expectations and standards the host or hostess insists on.

Luke, master story-teller that he is, brings us into the nitty-gritty of having Jesus come for dinner. He takes advantage of a minor domestic crisis to teach us a profound lesson about the spiritual life. It appears there is a basic inequality in the kitchen! Martha is doing all the work and Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet. Martha is direct in her complaint: 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?' (v. 40). The Lord's response captures in a moment the tension between the contemplative impulse and the desire to serve in all of us. He responds not with irritation or indifference but with compassion and love: 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her' (vv. 41-42).

We are called to invite Jesus into our lives every day. St Teresa of Avila wisely taught: 'To give our Lord a good hospitality, Mary and Martha must combine.' In other words, we have to have something of both these women in order to serve the Lord. We need to sit at the Master's feet and learn from him. When we do this, like Mary, we choose the better part. All service of God needs to be rooted in a prayer life. But it's also true that our spending time with him will surely draw us to want to serve. In one sense Mary needs Martha, because it is thanks to her that Mary is praised. We too should thank Martha because her human response has served to teach us to strive to choose the better part.

Lord Jesus, teach me to choose the better part and to spend time with you in prayer, and may my prayer lead me to want to serve you in my brothers and sisters.

Jeremiah 14:17-22 • Psalm 78(79):8-13

John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42

Wednesday 30 July

Matthew 13:44-46

The discovery of treasure was a favourite theme of ancient stories. We can imagine how people living in poverty would have warmed to stories in which the finding of untold riches transformed the life of the hero. Perhaps we still dream in the same way today as we buy our lottery tickets!

Jesus' parables of the treasure and the pearl have a different emphasis. In both his stories the discovery leads to a transformation of life. The finder is filled with joy at locating the thing of great value. But the outcome is not to revel in the luxury of riches; rather it is necessary to give up everything to possess that which is truly priceless. The message is that the kingdom is so important, so valuable, that it must be given absolute priority. When we find the kingdom, we discover that to receive it, we have to be willing to give up everything else.

There are differences in the ways the two men in Jesus' parables find the thing of great value. For the first man, the uncovering of the treasure in a field seems to be a matter of chance. We're not told that he was searching, or that he had made any great efforts. But when he found it, he immediately recognized its worth. His discovery filled him with joy. We need to recognize that sometimes we chance upon the kingdom in the midst of everyday life. We may not be looking for it: we may be simply going about our daily business when it strikes us. Suddenly the truth of the gospel hits us. We encounter a person in whom we truly see the face of Christ. Somehow the hand of the Lord seems to reach out and touch us when we least expect it. Then it's a question of recognizing the treasure that's already there.

In contrast, we are told that the merchant found the pearl of great value only after a search. We can imagine him spending years on his quest, determined that one day he would find what he was looking for. Sometimes we too need to search. We need unflagging determination if we are to find what is of true value. Sometimes it may seem that our search will never come to an end. Jesus exhorts us never to give up. The truth is that as we are searching, so too God is searching for us. And his search will not be fruitless.

Jeremiah 15:10, 16-21 • Psalm 58(59):2-5, 10-11, 17-18

Matthew 13:44-46

Thursday 31 July

Matthew 13:47-53 • St Ignatius of Loyola (Memorial)

Jesus was a master at using details of everyday life to illustrate spiritual truths. In today's Gospel he uses a parable about fishing to teach about the kingdom of heaven. One method familiar to fishermen on the Sea of Galilee was the use of a dragnet. This would take in all kinds of fish, and the bad would then have to be sorted out from the good. Jesus compares this to the kingdom of heaven and the final judgement when good and evil will be separated.

There are, perhaps, two distinct views of the Church: one that it is an assembly of good people destined for heaven, and the other that it contains a mixture of saints and sinners who will only be separated by God at the last day. This second picture is clearly what Jesus has in mind. In this world the Church should welcome anyone without judging or condemning them. It is not for us to judge others, and some of those who seem most devout may be further from God than those who seem great sinners. Only God knows what is in the heart. But though we should not make judgements ourselves, we should always bear in mind that there will be a judgement when all will have to give an account of their lives before God.

For many this may be an alarming idea, and the images of judgement in the Scriptures may seem terrifying. We should certainly not treat this judgement lightly, but as Christians we can have confidence in the salvation won for us by Jesus Christ. 'In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, because perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4:17-18). Our confidence comes from God's love for us manifested in Christ. The God who loved us enough to send his Son into the world to die for us will not abandon us if we are faithful to him. We need to recognize that we are all sinners worthy of condemnation, but Jesus has come to gain us forgiveness by giving his life for our sins.

Lord Jesus, help us to trust your promise that we can be freed from guilt as we come to you in sincere repentance. May our hearts be moved to forgive others and not to judge them harshly.

Jeremiah 18:1-6 • Psalm 145(146):2-6

Matthew 13:47-53