

Wednesday 1 July

Matthew 8:28-34 • St Oliver Plunkett (Feast in Ireland only)

In today's passage from Matthew's Gospel it is wonderful that the two demoniacs are set free, by Jesus, from the evil spirits that had tormented their lives – but what had the poor pigs done to deserve having the spirits transferred to them, and with such drastic consequences? What was Jesus thinking? Didn't he realize that his action would not endear him to the local population, whose livelihood was being so threatened!

It is really worth paying attention to the scenario that Matthew paints in describing this strange incident. From a Jewish perspective, the scene is one of utter uncleanness. In the first place, the territory of the Gadarenes was a pagan, non-Jewish area. The sense of uncleanness is heightened by the presence of the two demon-possessed individuals living among the tombs – the place of the dead. Also within Jewish tradition, pigs were regarded as unclean animals. Every detail Matthew has recorded implies a deeply dark place – a place, indeed, where evil spirits would precisely be at home.

Within that context, there are two aspects of the account that now stand out as highly significant. In the first place, two human beings have somehow become entrapped within that world dominated by evil. Is Matthew intending us to recognize in this scene an image of the world fallen under the power of the Evil One? In the second place, Jesus himself enters into this dark scene with the express purpose of liberating the enslaved men. Is this then an image of the incarnation – of Jesus entering our world to redeem humanity from the fallenness that brought us under the power of the evil enemy?

If we follow this line of thought, we can begin to see a whole significance in the drowning of the pigs. Jesus entered our human condition. He took our sin upon himself and even appeared to permit the Evil One to have victory over him. But Jesus' death was not the victory of the enemy, but the defeat and overcoming of the enemy's hold over the human race. Are we invited to see in the pigs a prophetic image of Jesus himself, drawing to himself all of humanity's tribulation and by death destroying it?

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you entered the darkest depths to rescue our lives and restore us to God.

Proper of Saints: Ezk 34:11-16 or 1 Pt 3:8-18 • Ps 30(31) • Jn 10:1-16

Proper of Season: Gen 21:5, 8-20 • Ps 33(34):7-13 • Mt 8:28-34

Thursday 2 July

Matthew 9:1-8

Today's text, in which Jesus announced that the paralytic's sins were forgiven, are often quoted, along with other similar incidents in the Gospels, to show the divinity of Jesus. As the religious leaders objected, Jesus was claiming a divine prerogative by forgiving sins. It seems that Jesus cured the physical ailment of the paralytic in order to confirm the divine claim being made in the forgiving of sins, first declaring to the onlookers, 'But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...', and then saying to the paralytic, 'Get up, take your mat and go home' (v. 6 NIV).

Perhaps, in the light of the previous passage in the Gospel concerning the liberation of the two demoniacs, we might also recognize something about Jesus that is not so immediately obvious from the text. Yesterday we saw Jesus entering into the Gadarene territory and suggested that this was also a metaphor for the fact that Jesus, the divine Son of God, has entered into the darkest recesses of our fallen world and taken upon himself the very condition of fallen humanity, and by dying has liberated all of humankind from the enslavement to sin and the power of the evil one.

In highlighting this deeper truth and revelation about Jesus, Matthew is reiterating the theme of the Suffering Servant (found especially in the Old Testament in Isaiah 53 and read every year on Good Friday). That Jesus is the Suffering Servant prophesied in Isaiah is a prominent and underpinning reference in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). This interpretative key for understanding the life and mission of Jesus begins in the Gospels with the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan at the hands of John the Baptist. Jesus is baptized not because he is a sinner in need of repentance but because the mission he received from his Father is precisely to take upon himself 'the iniquity of us all' so that 'by his wounds we are healed' (Isa. 53:6, 5 NIV). From the moment of his baptism Jesus undertakes the Suffering Servant role and bears within himself all of our sins. One further implication of this is that when Jesus speaks of forgiving sins, it is not simply a matter of his divine authority, but also the result of his personal carrying of the sins of those to whom he grants forgiveness – including ourselves!

Genesis 22:1-19 • Psalm 114(115):1-9

Matthew 9:1-8

Friday 3 July

John 20:24-29 • St Thomas (Feast)

It is rather unfortunate that Thomas has been saddled with the label 'doubting' because of his one moment of struggle with coming to terms with the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Perhaps it has happened for our sake. If one of the apostles could have a moment of doubt, then it makes our own doubts less problematic and perhaps gives us a way also of overcoming them. Thomas was gently chided for not believing until he had actually seen the risen Jesus. Jesus describes as 'blessed' those who believe without seeing. While it appears comforting that faith without seeing is blessed, what of the question of how doubts might be overcome?

It is important to realize that the final chapters of John's Gospel are really an account of the progress that the apostles made towards full resurrection faith. It really seems that none of the apostles simply believed. There were a number of factors that brought about a full, lively faith in the risen Jesus. The climax perhaps comes with the beloved disciple's declaration 'It is the Lord!' in John 21:7.

Before that moment a number of things had already happened: Peter and the beloved disciple had experienced the empty tomb; the disciples had heard the testimony of Mary Magdalene, who had met the risen Lord in the garden; and twice Jesus had appeared among them, saying, 'Peace be with you!' (on the second occasion Thomas was also present). A third appearance followed, this time on the shores of Galilee when the apostles were having a fruitless time of fishing. At the Lord's invitation, a new cast of the net led to a great haul of fish. Then, finally, the exclamation, 'It is the Lord!'

It is all of these elements that lead to faith. For us the only missing element is the visible appearance of Jesus before his ascension. We have heard the testimony of others; we know of the empty tomb; we have heard the proclamation of the gospel message. Jesus' greeting 'Peace be with you' is a summary of the effect of his death and resurrection. Peace is the consequence of the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of the covenant relationship with the Father. We have received the gift of the Spirit. Perhaps we have also experienced the Lord rescuing us in a time of struggle. We have indeed been blessed even though we have not seen.

Ephesians 2:19-22 • Psalm 116(117)

John 20:24-29

Saturday 4 July

Matthew 9:14-17

In the Gospels there are a few occasions when Jesus is associated with the title of bridegroom. One of these occurs in the context of John the Baptist explaining to his followers or disciples that they had no need to be jealous because the people were beginning to flock to Jesus rather than their master. The Baptist clearly recognized his own role and part in God's plan of salvation; it was right that he should decrease and Jesus should increase. John described himself as the 'friend of the bridegroom' while the bride belongs to the bridegroom (see John 3:29). It is both strange and interesting that John should use this language of bride and bridegroom since neither he nor Jesus were married.

In today's reading we meet John's disciples again. John had clearly taught them to practise fasting – an ascetical discipline associated with acknowledging sin and doing penance. Why, they wanted to know, wasn't Jesus teaching his disciples to do the same? In spite of the Baptist's earlier words to them, they had not grasped the significance of Jesus and the fact that their own master's whole purpose was to prepare the way for Jesus, whose sandal strap he declared himself unworthy to untie (John 1:27). Perhaps what is most remarkable is the extent to which John the Baptist understood who Jesus really is, even though he may have experienced a moment of doubt while he was in prison ('Are you the one who was to come...?', Matt. 11:3 NIV).

We are in a position now to appreciate Jesus' reply to John's disciples: 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?' Jesus is reminding them of what John had told them. On this one occasion, Jesus uses the same title 'bridegroom' in reference to himself. It is time to ask the significance of this.

We have to look to the Old Testament, where there is a recurring theme (e.g. Hosea, the Song of Songs) of the relationship between God and Israel being described in terms of a marriage. Israel (Virgin Israel) is the bride brought into a marriage covenant with God. When Israel turned away from God and allowed their religious practices to become tainted with pagan gods, the prophets spoke of this as adultery. In the person of Jesus, God himself has come among his people to restore or rather to establish a new covenant relationship – a covenant that will be sealed with his blood!

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

Matthew 9:14-17

Sunday 5 July

Mark 6:1-6 • Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Today we break the sequence of readings from Matthew's Gospel because it is a Sunday and our reading is from Mark. However, there is a deep connection with the Matthew text from yesterday in which we were introduced to the idea of Jesus as the bridegroom who has come to re-establish the marriage covenant with Israel. This Marcan reading does not contain the marital theme, but the idea of the covenant is very much present.

The Church has chosen a reading from the beginning of Ezekiel to accompany the Gospel reading and to throw light upon it. So it is really worth reading the few verses from the prophet. God is showing the prophet that he is sending him 'to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels' (Ezek. 2:3). Significantly, God announces that this people 'have transgressed my covenant even unto this day' and 'are children of a hard face, and of an obstinate heart' (Ezek. 2:3, 4 Douay-Rheims Bible). Clearly Jesus is seeing himself in the same terms, walking in the same footsteps as the prophet Ezekiel. The people of Jesus' own district were scandalized by him. In spite of their marvelling at his wisdom and the great miracles they had heard of him performing, they could not get beyond his humble origins from among them. They were not willing to recognize the presence even of a prophet, let alone one who had come to bring about a new covenant!

With sadness, Jesus knew that there was a hardness and rebelliousness in them like that of their ancestors. How could they possibly see him as the 'bridegroom'? Perhaps this raises the question of our own response to Jesus. Can we recognize the full importance of Jesus and his place in our lives? Or do we in any way resist letting him be the one who calls us into a deep personal relationship? Giving our lives to him is giving ourselves to the covenant with God. Anything short of this can amount to rejection of Jesus.

It is significant that the very next verse following the Mark reading today says: 'And he called to him the twelve'. In the light of the rejection by the people, Jesus began to establish a new bride, a new covenanted people – now centred on the twelve! It was the beginning of the Church, the new bride of God. Today we gather in the liturgy as Jesus' spouse.

Ezekiel 2:2-5 • Psalm 122(123)

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 • Mark 6:1-6

Monday 6 July
Matthew 9:18-26

Resuming the readings from Matthew's Gospel we encounter Jesus working more miracles. Let's keep in mind the 'bridegroom' theme from last Saturday's reading. Jesus' miracles are an important element of his work of bringing about a new covenant relationship between God and his people. This work involves also healing and restoration. The bride has become damaged and wounded through sin and the breakdown of intimacy with God. The restoration of the bride requires that the bride be made new and her wounds healed.

It is interesting to notice today that there are two miracle stories – one inside the other. While Jesus is on his way to raise up the dead daughter of the (Jewish?) official – is this the Jairus mentioned in the other Gospels? – a woman touches the hem of his garment. We are told that she has been subject to bleeding for twelve years. Her healing is instantaneous. 'Take heart, daughter,' Jesus encourages her, 'your faith has healed you!' (v. 22 NIV). We perhaps barely notice that Jesus calls her 'daughter'. Something more significant is going on even than the wonderful healing she has experienced Through her union with Jesus, by touching in faith the hem of his garment, she has become part of the now-restored bride, part of the New Covenant.

It is worth mentioning at this point that in the Catechism of the Catholic Church the picture chosen to illustrate the section which covers the Church's liturgy and sacraments is one of ancient origins depicting this very incident. The clear message is that the effect of touching the hem of Jesus' garment is the same as the effect of participating in the Church's liturgy and touching, or being touched by, the sacraments. Through the sacraments and liturgy we are drawn into the New Covenant relationship with God in Christ. We are part of the 'bride'. If, like the woman in today's reading, we approach the liturgy and sacraments with faith, the wounds of our own sin will also be healed.

And, finally, the raising of the official's daughter from the dead. Perhaps we can be permitted to see more deeply into this in the light of what has just been said about the woman Jesus called 'daughter'. The children of the bride (the Church) and bridegroom will be raised from the dead by Jesus.

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

Tuesday 7 July
Matthew 9:32-38

Today's reading takes us to the end of chapter 9 of Matthew's Gospel and to the end of a section. Chapter 10 begins a new section in which the focus is on Jesus instructing the twelve apostles. Our reading today is a sort of transition. It raises the question of leadership.

On the face of it, the passage is about an act of deliverance by Jesus. He sets a dumb man free from an evil spirit. While this produces amazement among the people, the Jewish leaders have a different response. They judge that Jesus is somehow in league with the evil spirits and that it is by the power of the devil that he casts them out. Strangely, nothing more is said about this. Jesus simply continues his work of teaching and healing. But then the text says: 'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.'

These words of Jesus refer back to the book of Ezekiel (ch. 34), where we find God lamenting over the state of his people on account of the failure of those who were called to be the shepherds of Israel. Jesus is manifesting the same divine concern about the people that was expressed by God through the prophet Ezekiel. In fact, when the text speaks about the 'compassion' that Jesus felt, the very word implies 'the divine compassion'. We see Jesus filled with this compassion in several other places in the Gospels. Interestingly and significantly, in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), we are told that the Good Samaritan was 'filled with compassion' – a clue to his true identity!

That the Jewish leaders fail to recognize the source and motivation of Jesus' works and teaching is a clear indication of their own failure in leadership and shepherding. Why do they not have the divine compassion? Why do they not recognize the distress of the sheep or lift a finger to heal and deliver them? In the next section of the Gospel (ch. 10), Jesus will begin to train the new leadership and shepherds – the twelve apostles!

The final verses of our reading are an invitation to pray that the Lord would send labourers to his harvest (a different but similar image to that of shepherds and sheep)! So let us pray today for the shepherds in the Church, that they would be filled with compassion for the sheep.

Genesis 32:23-33 • Psalm 16(17):1-8, 15
Matthew 9:32-38

Wednesday 8 July

Matthew 10:1-7

Jesus sends out the twelve, telling them not to go into pagan territory or to any Samaritan town, but to 'go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (v. 6). In other words (and to go against a familiar proverb), preach to the converted.

Matthew wrote his Gospel for a Jewish audience, and his prime motivation was to prove to his readers that Jesus was indeed the Messiah for whom they had been waiting. In this passage, Matthew describes how Jesus wanted his apostles to be missionaries among the Jews, to show them where they had been going wrong and how they could put things right. Matthew's Gospel is critical of Judaism as it was lived in his time. For example, Matthew criticizes the Jewish leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, for their understanding of righteousness (5:20) and for their hypocrisy (23:1-36). But what message is there in this Gospel reading for us today?

Una Kroll is a retired medical doctor and former Anglican priest who is now a Catholic. She writes in her autobiography *Bread Not Stones: The Autobiography of an Eventful Life* that in 1980 she had a spiritual breakdown: 'For the next seven years, I felt like an "empty shell", but I continued to go to church and do all the usual things that Christians do. My reason for doing this was my desire to go on believing in the face of unbelief...' We may have friends and family who are having a similar crisis of faith. How can we support them? Others among us may have become like the religious leaders that Matthew criticized, and lost our focus on that which is really important, instead concentrating on the fine detail of our faith.

Belief in Jesus, belief in his gospel, belief in how we should live out our faith, goes beyond the rubrics of the liturgy. Our faith is lived out by what we do for others who need our help and support. The message of this Gospel might also be a personal 'wake-up' call to renew our own faith and strengthen our relationship with Jesus by praying for spiritual renewal. The message for modern apostles is, then, as it was for the original twelve: go to the 'lost sheep'.

'Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease,
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.'
(John Greenleaf Whittier)

Genesis 41:55-57; 42:5-7, 17-24 • Psalm 32(33):2-3, 10-11, 18-19
Matthew 10:1-7

Thursday 9 July

Matthew 10:7-15

We can only imagine what the first disciples thought, as they set out together on foot through the dusty hillside tracks – possibly two by two, without spare clothing, without money, to bring the gospel message to the scattered villages of Palestine. Obviously they would have had a measure of uncertainty, even if it were unspoken, because we all like to undertake new enterprises fully prepared and with a ‘safety net’ of personal possessions to see us through if things get tough. Being realistic, the disciples probably felt not only physically unprepared, without their worldly goods to hand, but also mentally and spiritually unequal to the task which lay before them. All of the Gospels chronicle the apostles’ slowness to understand Jesus’ message, their ability to get things wrong and their lack of faith throughout the whole of Jesus’ ministry. and yet it was in this seemingly unprepared state that Jesus deliberately sent them out into the countryside to spread his word.

Right at the outset, Jesus warns them that they can expect a very mixed response, with reversals as well as successes. Some people will receive the gospel readily and some will be apathetic or even hostile, and the disciples’ reception will reflect that. Yet despite this, the Gospel spreads through the countryside, people are healed and the disciples find that their own perceived inadequacies do not seem to matter so much. Elsewhere in the Gospels, the disciples return with joy (and by implication, surprise) that even the demons submit in Jesus’ name (Luke 10:17).

In truth, most of us, too, spend a reasonable proportion of our lives feeling unequal to the tasks which lie before us. And yet, as with the disciples, it seems that this matters less to Jesus than it does to us. Perhaps the underlying issue is one of trust – if we are relying on our own abilities, our own possessions, then we are in effect seeking to be self-reliant; but if we feel inadequate to achieve what we feel God is calling us to do, we have no option but to place our trust in Jesus. Maybe this is the whole point – that God wants us to trust in him alone rather than to seek independence.

Lord, help me to remember that in my weakness I have access to your strength, and in my emptiness I have access to the fullness of your love.

Genesis 44:18-21, 23b-29; 45:1-5 • Psalm 104(105):16-21

Matthew 10:7-15

Friday 10 July
Matthew 10:16-23

‘I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden’. These lines from a once-popular song give the gist of Jesus’ message to his disciples in today’s gospel. He warns them to expect physical violence, humiliation and betrayal. They will be hated, targeted. Their lives will be far from comfortable.

Jesus puts the cards on the table for his bewildered disciples, since their woes look set to worsen rather than to abate. They will be given the necessary resources to acquit themselves creditably in the teeth of inevitable opposition. They must trust in God, who is on their side and whose Holy Spirit – when the time of persecution draws near – will inspire them with the right words to utter at the correct moment. If they stand firm to the bitter end, God will save them. so ar, so good... but in the next breath Jesus is issuing both another challenge and an important reminder. ‘When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next’, he tells them (v.23). Although Judaeo-Christian teaching always urges the disciple to be strong and persevere in faith and service, even the Lord himself expects us to use our common sense, and at times even our tongues and our legs, to escape unnecessary trouble.

Verse 16 provides a summary: ‘Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.’ Imagine being encouraged to resemble a serpent, that creature whom we first encounter in Genesis and whose image always and everywhere is one of deception twisting, turning, back-biting and catching a person unawares! Jesus does not admire the serpent’s machinations, but aims to bolster the ingenuity and shrewdness of his followers, whilst encouraging them to temper their cunning with the innocence of doves.

Doves are attractive and beautiful, gentle and graceful. It has been said that problems are not worth worrying about, as often they cancel each other out. This is surely true of the serpent and dove syndrome. If we were all serpent, we would lose our grasp of beauty and truth; all dove, and we would be trampled underfoot by the less scrupulous of this world. Neither the serpent nor the dove is the ideal for discipleship. Together, though, they make a good ‘partnership’, as we await the coming of the Son of Man.

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

Saturday 11 July

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

Peter's response to Jesus in this Gospel reading could appear to be a very human one: "What about us?" he said to him. "We have left everything and followed you. What are we going to have, then?" (v. 27 JB). There is a view that human nature is fundamentally self-interested. But is it? A growing body of research has found that human nature is at least as co-operative as it is competitive, at least as kind as it is selfish. Peter has not been motivated to give up everything for a promised reward – that he has already done by the time he has this conversation about the reward of renunciation.

St Benedict is another example of someone who was not motivated by self-interest. He gave up his inheritance and opted for a simple, slower life, in pursuit of the Truth rather than in pursuit of pleasure. In the modern world we can be impatient to get to the end: our focus is on completion rather than the process. St Benedict took time to really focus on the Word of God and let this work within him. In one story about his life, a poor man came to the monastery begging for a little oil. Although St Benedict commanded that the oil be given, the cellarer refused because if he gave the oil as alms, there would be none left for the monastery. Angry at this distrust of God's providence, St Benedict knelt down to pray. As he prayed, a bubbling sound came from inside the oil jar. The monks watched in fascination as oil from God filled the vessel so completely that it overflowed, leaked out beneath the lid and finally pushed the cover off, cascading out onto the floor. This is as Jesus promises in today's Gospel reading: if we trust in Christ, if we sacrifice anything for him, we 'will be repaid a hundred times over' (v. 29 JB).

'Gracious and holy Father,

please give me:

intellect to understand you;
reason to discern you;
diligence to seek you;
wisdom to find you;
a spirit to know you;
a heart to meditate upon you;
ears to hear you;
eyes to see you;
a tongue to proclaim you;
a way of life pleasing to you;
patience to wait for you;
and perseverance to look for you.

Grant me:

a perfect end,
your holy presence.
A blessed resurrection,
And life everlasting.'

(A prayer of St Benedict)

Proverbs 2:1-9 • Psalm 33(34):2-11

Matthew 19:27-29

Sunday 12 July

(B) Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Mark 6:7-13

Today we hear how the apostles ‘went out and preached that men should repent’ (v. 12). The words ‘repent’, ‘repented’ and ‘repentance’ are mentioned over 100 times in the Bible. But what does this term actually mean? In the Bible, the word ‘repent’ comes from the Greek word *metanoia* which means a change of heart. This is what repentance is about: changing our hearts and minds. It has to be a change of heart and mind because the Bible tells us that true repentance will result in a change of actions. Being a penitent is not just about wearing ‘sackcloth and ashes’, but looking into our hearts and changing the way we live.

The doctrine of repentance as taught in the Bible is a call to make a radical turn from one way of life to another. This is an encouragement and endorsement of the early Gentile Christians for whom Mark wrote his Gospel. But the message remains relevant to our lives today. Repentance is about reviewing and renewing our faith. Pope Francis has said that ‘If you don’t listen to the Lord, if you don’t accept correction and if you do not trust him, your heart has not yet repented.’

Thomas Merton, in his book *No Man is an Island*, writes about the example of St Dismas, the penitent thief:

God does not demand that every man attain to what is theoretically highest and best. It is better to be a good street sweeper than a bad writer, better to be a good bartender than a bad doctor, and the repentant thief who died with Jesus on Calvary was far more perfect than the holy ones who had him nailed to the cross. And yet, abstractly speaking, what is more holy than the priesthood and less holy than the state of a criminal? The dying thief had, perhaps, disobeyed the will of God in many things: but in the most important event of his life he listened and obeyed. The Pharisees had kept the law to the letter and had spent their lives in the pursuit of a most scrupulous perfection. But they were so intent upon perfection as an abstraction that when God manifested his will and his perfection in a concrete and definite way they had no choice but to reject it.

Amos 7:12-15 • Psalm 84(85):9-14

Ephesians 1:3-14 • Mark 6:7-13

Monday 13 July

Matthew 10:34–11:1

Of the many blessings which accrue from a faithful living-out of the gospel, outward peace does not always, as it were, ‘come with the kit’. Jesus admits this in today’s gospel. He is not declaring conflict to be good news but simply citing it as a regrettable by-product of the strife and tension which arise when some people proclaim and try to live the gospel without compromise, whilst others – sometimes much-loved family members – openly reject some aspect of it. Matthew must be referring here to the friction which existed between followers of Christ in his own community and fellow Jews of the time who felt that the universal thrust of Jesus’ teachings somehow jeopardized the promise made specifically to the chosen people according to the Hebrew scriptures.

We are always torn, as Jesus himself must have been during his earthly life, between a desire to love someone unconditionally, offering them plenty of affirmation, and a constraint to point out the error of their ways and at least tentatively to suggest that there may be a better way to live in closer union with God.

Polarities worry us today, even in the spiritual life, so we tend to opt for a ‘both/and’ approach. It is one way of incorporating several moral positions without passing judgements. Sometimes Jesus seems to be encouraging us toward the more definitive either/or approach, where the Gospel message is right and anything short of it verges between being incomplete and downright wrong. What he would surely have opposed, though, given his insistence on God’s law of love, would be the kind of dismissive unconcern which can emanate from our being too sure of our stance on something. If followers of a particular religious or political system begin to get on our nerves, we can fall into the trap of a dangerous impatience and intolerance which curtails sympathy and understanding. This no more equates with the Good News than a pro-war manifesto.

Lord, your gospel message is always a call to ever greater love. Help us to stay close to the truth of your words, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it”.

Exodus 1:8-14, 22 • Psalm 123(124)

Matthew 10:34–11:1

Tuesday 14 July
Matthew 11:20-24

In today's Gospel Matthew describes Jesus' lament over the lake towns: 'Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent' (v. 20 NIV). This is a passionate expression of his regret and sorrow. Jesus' words are harsh in this Gospel, which is an indication of how much he cares. He has come to save 'the lost sheep of Israel' (10:6). Of all the Jewish communities, it is those closest to his native Nazareth that Jesus has privileged with his presence and miracles: the northern Galilean towns. The flashes of anger in Jesus' reproach reveal and express hurt and a sense of loss. The people in these places had received the benefits of Christ's healing presence; Jesus wanted all to be saved. If we read 'lament' as a verb rather than a noun, then this Gospel reading becomes an expression of passionate grief. Jesus is grieving for the people of the lake towns. Why won't they listen?

There are times when we feel worried, frustrated and hurt because we so passionately want those we love to believe in what we believe. So many times, parents ask, 'What should I do about my son or daughter who has left the Catholic faith? How can I get them back? How can I make them listen?' The difficulty is, as is made clear in this Gospel, that there is no way of making people listen. Jesus couldn't make people listen. It is hard, but we have to try to accept whatever the situation is and take a long-term approach. This is where self-control comes in, while prayerfully hoping that loved ones will repent. There is a comfort in knowing that Jesus shares such pain with us, and understands how we feel when those we love turn away from the Gospel message. But as was made clear in our reading last Thursday, this is for him to worry about, not us.

'Do not look forward to the changes and chances of this life with fear. Rather, look to them with full confidence that, as they arise, God to whom you belong will in his love enable you to profit by them. He has guided you thus far in life. Do you but hold fast to his dear hand, and he will lead you safely through all trials. Whenever you cannot stand, he will carry you lovingly in his arms.' (St Francis de Sales)

Exodus 2:1-15 • Psalm 68(69):3, 14, 30-34
Matthew 11:20-24

Wednesday 15 July

Matthew 11:25-27 • St Bonaventure (Memorial)

There is much we can learn from children and their straightforward approach to life. Very young children are easy to understand: they cry when they are hungry or hurt or tired; they smile and laugh when they are happy and content; they love those who care for them. There is no pride or deceit. They are open to new ideas and learning. Pope Francis is welcoming of children at Mass and has said that the tears of children are ‘the best homily’: ‘children cry, they are noisy, they don’t stop moving. But it really irritates me when I see a child crying in church and someone says they must go out. God’s voice is in a child’s tears: they must never be kicked out of church.’

We are the children of God, and if we want to get to know our Father in Heaven better, we need to try and put aside intellectual pride and the notion that we know it all and are in control of our own lives. If we can submit to God’s Word with simple trust and humility, as our children submit to us, we can receive the wisdom and understanding of God. We can know God personally. Jesus makes it possible for all of us to see what God is like.

In Jesus we see the perfect love of God, who cares passionately for us and wants all to be saved, as we saw in yesterday’s reading. God is involved intimately in the lives of each and every person who repents and lets him into their life. We are loved completely, unconditionally and perfectly. God doesn’t require us to be intellectuals: all he wants us to do is answer his invitation and return his love. Jesus promises that God the Father will hear our prayers when we pray in his name. Which is why he taught those who followed him to pray confidently to the Father: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

‘Goodness is stronger than evil, Love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death;
Victory is ours, Victory is ours through God who loves us.’ (Desmond Tutu)

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

Matthew 11:25-27

Thursday 16 July

Matthew 11:28-30

The liturgy clearly warms to the promise held out in today's reading: 'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' (v.28). We know this is true because we read or listened to the same verses yesterday. When this happens we should take note: there are no mere coincidences in the cycle of the Church. It is as if God is underlining a point he wants us to be clear about. Life can be burdensome – mortgage repayments, the stress of modern living, family troubles or problems: the list is endless. It is part of the human condition to experience being weary and burdened by life at times. Jesus shows us the remedy, and we do well to digest each word he says carefully.

The key and central idea is: 'Come to me.' In this express command we see that he is the One to whom we are to go to be comforted, consoled and to find peace. Where are we to find the Lord? In truth we find him whenever we turn to him in prayer and whenever we read his Word. However, we come into the presence of Jesus himself in a unique and real way when we receive the Eucharist or kneel before the Eucharist in adoration. The peace of Christ is not a cheap, shallow or superficial peace, but is rooted in taking on the yoke of discipleship. A disciple is essentially someone who recognizes that they need to learn from a master. A disciple is someone who is under discipline.

What is it that we are to learn as disciples of Christ? We are to learn to walk in the way of the Holy Spirit. We are to learn to live the Beatitudes – the way of the Sermon of the Mount. We are to learn to understand, as St Augustine did, that, 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.' Peace, rest, solace and comfort are not found by refusing God's will but by embracing it. St Paul of the Cross put it well when he wrote: 'I desire rest, but I don't spurn toil. Your will be done.'

Lord Jesus, I turn to you because you are the only One who offers truth, freedom and lasting peace. You are the Lord and Master of my life, I throw myself upon your love and mercy.

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

Matthew 11:28-30

Friday 17 July
Matthew 12:1-8

How easy it is to become distracted by the regalia of religion. There are so many customs, rituals, readings and symbols in the practice of Christianity that they can lead our minds away from Christ! In today's Gospel, Jesus is scolded by the Pharisees because his disciples are seen eating corn on the holy day. They are meant to be fasting, insist the Pharisees! No, says Jesus, they are meant to be following him, which they are!

The Sabbath, he tells them, is not really about the rules enforced upon that day. The holy practices, such as fasting, are merely symbolic tools. For, says Christ, he is the Sabbath! His disciples do not need to fast because they have already found him. They are already with him. 'In this place is one greater than the temple', Christ points out to the Pharisees, referring to himself (v. 6 KJV). Had they understood that the Sabbath is about seeking the mercy of God, rather than practising sacrifices, they would not have condemned the disciples for eating corn, Jesus tells the Pharisees. His disciples are 'guiltless', he says (v. 7 KJV).

Are we so superior to those condemning Pharisees? Do we ever fall prey to thinking that those who do not adhere to spiritual practices are at fault? Do we believe that we are somehow 'holier' because we go to Mass, because we fast or because we do not shop on a Sunday? To believe so would be a mistake, Christ reminds us. Who are we to know what relationship the world and his wife have with God? It is impossible to tell what is taking place in another's heart and the actions of the heart are all that matter, Jesus insists.

We are wonderfully taught this by many of the great saints and contemplatives, such as the Carmelite friar Brother Lawrence who ignored the formal prayers he was supposed to carry out and instead went about focusing upon God, by way of what he referred to as 'the practice of the presence of God'. He set his heart upon God all day long, while he worked in the monastery kitchens: 'In the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.'

Exodus 11:10–12:14 • Psalm 115(116):12-18
Matthew 12:1-8

Saturday 18 July
Matthew 12:14-21

Instead of choosing to defend himself against the Pharisees with anger or preaching, Jesus adheres to the prophecy that spoke of him. The prophet Isaiah declared: 'Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope' (vv. 18-21, quoting Isa. 42:1-4). Jesus does not become enraged, or lecture the Pharisees, but instead leaves the scene and busies himself healing the sick.

Of course Our Lord did preach, but he also practised more. As Mahatma Gandhi said: 'An ounce of practice is worth more than tons of preaching.' Jesus spent much time at prayer, taking himself up into the hills to be with God, and he spent much time healing those who were ill or disabled.

It is very easy to put the world to rights in conversation, but do we all practise what we preach? 'Be the change you want to see in the world', said Gandhi. It's near impossible to change other people by telling them to change! But if people observe somebody behaving in a way that impresses them, they may follow suit. If a friend eats healthily and as a result they are always full of beans and in good spirits, we might follow their lead and ditch the processed, sugary food. And if a relative always sees the good in people and we observe that through this they manage to bring out the kindly, personable side of even the most haggard grump, then we might decide to be a little friendlier.

It's also true that what we say has minimal impact compared to our spiritual presence. Save for the most hardened of cavemen, everybody around us can easily pick up on what sort of person we are; they are able to tell if we are angry and anxious or peaceful and loving. 'What you are speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you are saying', joked the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Christ's holy presence must have been so great and so palpable that, to anyone with any sensitivity, he need only have stood near them to alter them profoundly.

Exodus 12:37-42 • Psalm 135(136):1, 10-15, 23-24
Matthew 12:14-21

Sunday 19 July

Mark 6:30-34 • Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

In today's Gospel we learn that Jesus decided to take his disciples into the desert to rest. They had been toiling and striving, with mealtimes as the only pause. Christ knew full well that although the compassionate deeds they were doing were important, it was also vital for them to rest and be with God. Unless we pause to engage with the silence, peace and mystery of the Divine, we cannot deeply relax, which is important for our health; we become exhausted and then have nothing to give.

Time for prayer and contemplation is essential, but it's not easy in this modern age of technology. As Sister Wendy Beckett remarked: 'This is the first age in which there's been very little silence unless it's sought for. Now nearly everybody can live their whole life being entertained, and that's very dangerous, because it means you're never in contact, except at night, with what you are. So although I think the longings and the needs are the same in all ages, and the greeds and the selfishnesses, this age has got this great obstacle to prayer – constant entertainment – and I think people really have to say I'm going to have a period in which I can just be silent.'

God is found in silent places. Most of us do not have a desert close by! We can retreat, if we live in a city and our home is noisy, to a quiet church or a park; and those lucky enough to live in the countryside can choose to switch off the mobile phone and the television and listen to the wind blowing and the owls hooting. God dwells in the sounds of nature and in the deep silence of the wild.

These moments of contemplative quiet not only nourish us, but they also enrich our relationships with others. As the Trappist monk Thomas Merton writes: 'If I love a person, I will love that which most makes him a person: the secrecy, the hiddenness, the solitude of his own individual being, which God alone can penetrate and understand...There is no true intimacy between souls who do not know how to respect one another's solitude...We cannot live for others until we have entered into solitude. If we try to live for them without first living entirely for God, we risk plunging with them into the abyss.' Time in the proverbial desert allows us to be who we truly are, with more to give.

Jeremiah 23:1-6 • Psalm 22(23)

Ephesians 2:13-18 • Mark 6:30-34

Monday 20 July
Matthew 12:38-42

The need to see physical proof of God is (understandably) one of an atheist's main desires. If the Divine doesn't make himself known by manifesting miracles and stopping wars, then why do all these barmy Christians believe in him? It's a pretty sane question!

Of course to the devout, God is known as a stirring in the heart. At times, this stirring can be so moving and profound that we know without a doubt that we are loved unconditionally by a very real, living God. Sister Wendy Beckett describes her first experience of God:

It was when I was either three or four, it was a Sunday and we'd come back from Mass, and I remember it so vividly! There was the smell of sausages cooking, and for some reason I was sitting under the table. And suddenly I became overwhelmed by the reality of God, the greatness and the power and the love and my own infinite smallness. And I knew that I was held in that greatness and protected and I would never ever have to feel anxious. I think God gave me that insight because I was such a frail, unstable sort of person. And I think that understanding of God's closeness and his love unconsciously influenced everything I did thereafter.

Wonderfully, the Carmelite friar Brother Lawrence reassures us that it is possible to sense that love all day, every day. For him, this was achieved by constantly lifting his heart up to God as he went about his day: 'I make it my business only to persevere in his holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention and a general fond regard to God, which I may call an actual presence of God; or, to speak better, an habitual silent and secret conversation of the soul with God, which often causes in me joys and raptures.'

Of course, without any experience of God's mysterious, loving presence, how or why would an atheist copy Brother Lawrence by inwardly turning to God? Sometimes we are given the grace of this showering of love when we suffer – perhaps we beg God for help and then experience that mercy. Or perhaps we are intuitively drawn into a church, once the lure of external things has proved unsatisfying – perhaps there we kneel and ask to feel that love. As Christ tells us: 'Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find' (Matt. 7:7).

Exodus 14:5-18 • Exodus 15:1-6
Matthew 12:38-42

Tuesday 21 July
Matthew 12:46-50

These words of Jesus about family are sometimes misunderstood. Jesus is not insulting his family or teaching that family is unimportant; nor is he seeking to abolish or even undermine the fourth commandment! On the contrary, Jesus made provision for his mother even as he hung on the cross (John 19:25-27).

Jesus was constantly alert for teachable moments, and he was creative in his use of material ‘on hand’ to drive home important spiritual truths. On one occasion, when his disciples urged him to eat, Jesus responded: ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me...’ (John 4:34). Jesus was not teaching that food was unimportant, but was emphasizing the importance of doing God’s will. In today’s passage, Jesus seizes the opportunity presented by a visit from his family to explain what is required of those who would belong to his spiritual family, the family of God.

In the ancient world, family relationships tended to be both hierarchical and patriarchal; the father was to be obeyed implicitly, by wife, children, extended family members, and servants or slaves in the household. We use the expression ‘one of the family’ to refer to someone who is not a member of our biological family, yet who is comfortable and at ease in our home, and enjoys a close relationship with our own family. Jesus teaches that those who do his Father’s will are ‘one of his family’ – true members of the household of God. In ancient society, a high value was placed on blood ties. But Jesus warned, ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father...’ (Matt 7:21). True adoration is clothed in action.

Someone related this story about a little boy who was poor and hungry. A lady took pity on the boy and bought him food, clothes and shoes. The boy thanked her and started to run home. Then he stopped. ‘Say, Lady,’ he demanded, ‘are you God’s wife?’ The lady laughed ‘No, I’m not,’ she said, ‘but I am one of his children!’ The boy nodded wisely. ‘I knew you must be related!’

Heavenly Father, you created me in your own image and likeness. Each day, mould and shape me more and more into the image and likeness of your Son, Jesus, who was born, lived, and died, in perfect submission to your will. Amen.

Exodus 14:21–15:1 • Exodus 15:8-12, 17
Matthew 12:46-50

Wednesday 22 July

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

Those who assume that the disciples of Jesus were all men should read the Gospels again – and read them closely and carefully! For instance take Luke 8:1, 2. Luke writes about ‘the twelve’ being with Jesus, but he also tells us that several women (including several who had had evil spirits cast out of them by Jesus) accompanied Jesus as he went through cities and villages teaching and preaching. Prominent among these was Mary Magdalene ‘from whom seven demons had gone out’ (Luke 8:2b).

‘Enthusiasm’ comes from the Greek word *enthousiasmos* which means ‘inspired’ or ‘possessed by a god’. Mary of Magdala was one of Jesus’ most devoted and enthusiastic followers. Not only did she accompany him and minister to him during his life, she kept vigil by the cross (John 19:25), was present at his burial (Matt 27:61), came early to the tomb that first Easter morn (v.1), and, even after Peter and John ‘went back to their homes’ (v.10), she remained at the tomb (v.11) and thus became the first to see the risen Lord (v.14).

Jesus often cast out evil spirits. He also warned that when a demon is cast out, the vacuum created in the person’s life needs to be filled; otherwise, the demon may return, even stronger than before (Matt 12:43-45). Mary Magdalene obviously followed this advice; Jesus had cast out of her not one but seven demons – and she filled the vacuum with single-minded and whole-hearted devotion to her Lord.

At first, blinded by grief, Mary did not recognize Jesus; yet when he spoke her name, she recognized him and was filled with joy. As Jesus said, his sheep ‘know his voice’ (John 10:4). Sometimes, anxiety or distress can blind us to the presence of God. Like Mary, we need to be alert for his voice which may come to us not as a loud shout, but as a gentle whisper.

Easter Sunday is long past, but the Easter message remains fresh and powerful, and as urgent today as it was two thousand years ago. Jesus commissioned Mary (v.17b) to go and spread the news that he was alive. Mary proclaimed, ‘I have seen the Lord’ (v.18).

Will you invite Jesus not only to drive out the demons of sin from your heart, but also to possess every nook and cranny of your being?

Exodus 16:1-5, 9-15 • Psalm 77(78):18-28

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

Thursday 23 July

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

St Bridget was born in Sweden in 1303. She married and gave birth to eight children to whom she was a devoted mother. After her husband's death she devoted herself to the ascetic life as a member of the Third Order of Saint Francis and later founded a religious order. She wrote many works in which she related her mystical experiences. She died in Rome in 1373. St Bridget was declared by Pope John Paul II to be a Patron of Europe.

St Bridget wrote beautifully and movingly of her love for Jesus:

Blessed are you, my Lord Jesus Christ. You foretold your death and at the Last Supper you marvellously consecrated bread which became your precious body. And then you gave it to your apostles out of love as a memorial of your most holy passion. By washing their feet with your holy hands, you gave them a supreme example of your deep humility.

Honour be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ. Fearing your passion and death, you poured forth blood from your innocent body like sweat...After you had been led to Caiaphas, you, the judge of all men, humbly allowed yourself to be handed over to the judgement of Pilate.

Glory be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ, for the mockery you endured when you stood clothed in purple and wearing a crown of sharp thorns. With utmost endurance you allowed vicious men to spit upon your glorious face, blindfold you and beat your cheek and neck with cruellest blows.

Blessed may you be, my Lord Jesus Christ. You redeemed our souls with your precious blood and most holy death, and in your mercy you led them from exile back to eternal life.

Glory be to you, my Lord Jesus Christ. You allowed your blessed body to be taken down from the cross by your friends and laid in the arms of your most sorrowing mother, and you let her wrap your body in a shroud and bury it in a tomb to be guarded by soldiers.

Blessed are you and praiseworthy and glorious for ever, my Lord Jesus Christ. You sit upon your throne in your kingdom of heaven, in the glory of your divinity, living in the most holy body you took from a virgin's flesh. So you will appear on that last day to judge the souls of all the living and the dead.

Galatians 2:19-20 • Psalm 33(34):2-11

John 15:1-8

Friday 24 July
Matthew 13:18-23

Every day a fierce battle is being waged for the heart and the mind of the Christian. As soon as we hear the word of God, the devil is intent on snatching it away (v. 19). A spiritual warfare is being waged over our lives and all those who are truly seeking to follow Jesus will experience it. Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower sheds light on the Christian's daily challenge to fight the good fight.

Readers of Bible Alive hear the message of the kingdom every day. God speaks to us through the Liturgy of the Word and we strive to put it into practice in our lives. The parable of the sower shows us that there are four possible 'soils' into which the 'seed' can fall. Only one of these is the 'good soil' in which the word can flourish and take root.

Jesus gives a clear explanation of the four soils in his parable. (1) The seed can fall on the path, where it is exposed and easily snatched away by the enemy. Perhaps, when we hear the word, we are not focused, or we are preoccupied, or we just don't take it seriously enough. (2) The seed can fall among the rocks, where it is unable to take root. The loss occurs here because, although the word is received joyfully, there are things in the way, preventing it from taking root. If we encounter trouble, persecution or suffering of any kind we quickly fall away. (3) The seed can land among thorns, where its very life is choked out of it. We can lose clarity simply because the troubles or pleasures of life consume our attention, causing us to discard what God is saying to us. (4) It falls into good soil where it takes root and is able to flourish

We have a responsibility to ensure that the word of God takes root in our lives. Do we really understand that the Scriptures are the Word of God? Do we really have an expectation that the word of God brings life? The one who is able to produce fruit for the kingdom is the one who receives, understands and acts on the word received.

Lord Jesus, grant me the grace to hear your word, take it to heart, ponder it, reflect on it and put it into action, and so bear fruit for the kingdom.

Exodus 20:1-17 • Psalm 18(19):8-11
Matthew 13:18-23

Saturday 25 July

Matthew 20:20-28 • St James (Feast)

At the height of his prowess the champion boxer Muhammad Ali adopted the slogan 'I am the greatest'. Although a likeable and decent man, as a professional boxer he used this phrase to intimidate and undermine his opponents. Whether he thought deep down that he was the greatest we don't know, but as a boxer fighting for the world championship a degree of self-belief is important.

Jesus turned the world's idea of greatness completely on its head. In his eyes the truly great and noble are not those who lord it over others, but those who serve. It was a concept that the disciples had to learn the hard way, as we see in today's reading.

The mother of James and John was like every ambitious mother since time immemorial. She believed in her sons and associated ambition and success with position and pride of place. She approached Jesus believing that a little bit of maternal pressure would secure privilege and position for them. Her understanding of Jesus was horizontal and limited. She could neither have envisaged what her request might entail (i.e. brutal death) nor have understood that Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. When the news of her approach got out to the other disciples, they were understandably indignant.

The Lord's teaching on humility changes everybody's understanding of what it means to be great. When God measures the greatness of an individual, he puts the tape measure around the heart not the head. The Christian vision is one which exalts the humble and humbles the exalted. This teaching has always been counter-cultural because human nature desires adulation, recognition and exaltation.

Underpinning this teaching is the philosophy that all we have comes from God. If we take hold of this philosophy we will understand the teaching. Our intelligence, our gifts, our talents, our wealth: everything we have is a gift from God. The truly great acknowledge this and give praise to God.

'God's servant is like a painting, a creature of God, through whom God is honoured because of his blessings. He must not lay claim to any more merit than the wood and colour do.' (St Francis of Assisi)

2 Corinthians 4:7-15 • Psalm 125(126)

Matthew 20:20-28

Sunday 26 July

(B) Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • John 6:1-15

Jesus gave various signs because they had the power to lead people to faith in him. The first sign he gave was the provision of abundant wine at the marriage feast of Cana. It 'manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him' (John 2:11). The feeding of the five thousand was also a sign to the people, intended to lead them to faith in Jesus. They should have understood that if Jesus had the power to provide them with abundant bread (physical), he also had the power to give them bread from heaven (spiritual): 'Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you' (John 6:27). Rather than putting their faith in him, the people, instead, wanted to 'take him by force to make him king' (v. 15), compelling him to escape into the hills. Signs must be read correctly if they are to bring us to saving faith in Jesus.

Peter and the Twelve correctly read the signs that Jesus gave and refused to leave him: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God' (John 6:68-69).

The Lord always works 'signs' in our lives. These should bring us to greater faith in him: 'he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name' (Luke 1:49). What are these 'signs'? Every day he cares for us, stays at our side, provides for our needs and keeps us safe under his protection. Through his Word and through his Church he teaches us and directs our lives. In the Eucharist he nourishes us with his life-giving Word and feeds us with his own body and blood. These 'signs' should lead us into abundant life: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10).

Do you see the 'signs' in your life? Ask the Lord to show you the countless ways that he cares for you and gives you his life in abundance – his gifts of peace, joy and love. Thank him for these 'signs' of his love. Declare your faith in him.

Lord, teach me to read correctly the 'signs' of your love for me so that I may grow in faith in you.

2 Kings 4:42-44 • Psalm 144(145):10-18

Ephesians 4:1-6 • John 6:1-15

Monday 27 July
Matthew 13:31-35

By his own admission Jesus fulfilled the words of the psalmist: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world' (v. 35, quoting Ps. 78:2). Whether you hear today's parables at church or read them for yourself in your own home, bear in mind that you are coming into contact with a wisdom which was hidden since the creation of the world but has been made known through Jesus. You are touching the very wisdom of God.

The two parables of the mustard seed and the yeast address the very important principle that the kingdom of heaven may begin small and may appear unobtrusive and of little significance, but over time the seed grows into a large shrub and the yeast works its way through the dough causing it to rise.

The story of our faith witnesses to this principle on numerous occasions. Take the early Church itself: a band of broken, confused and not especially sensational men after the Day of Pentecost transformed the world. Paul is not ashamed to point out that the first believers were not wise by human standards, not influential or of noble birth, but chosen by God to be witnesses (1 Cor. 1:26).

The gospel is like a seed which, when planted in our hearts or in our world, will bear amazing fruit and blessing, but this blessing and fruit is not always immediately visible or discernible. St Justin Martyr said, 'God postpones the collapse and dissolution of the universe (through which the bad angels, the demons, and men would cease to exist) because of the Christian seed, which he knows to be the cause in nature of the world's preservation.'

Our vocation is to sow the seed of the gospel in our lives and in the world around us. Our task is to allow the yeast of faith to permeate through our family, our workplace and any other spheres of influence we might have. The Catholic Church is represented in every country on earth and constitutes one sixth of the world's population (over one billion people are Catholic in our world today). The seed of the kingdom is at work and we have an immense privilege in playing our part in helping it to grow.

Every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.

Exodus 32:15-24, 30-34 • Psalm 105(106):19-23
Matthew 13:31-35

Tuesday 28 July
Matthew 13:36-43

Sometimes, and even often, the parables of Jesus are hard to understand. We need a certain attitude or inclination of heart to learn from them. Our tendency is to try to get there quickly and in our haste we can miss the wood for the trees or, in this case, the wheat for the tares.

The parable of the weeds, or tares as it is also known, is one of the parables on which Jesus offers a commentary so that we are left in no doubt as to its hidden meaning. In the agricultural society of Christ's time, an enemy sowing weeds among a farmer's good wheat would have sabotaged his business. The tares in the parable were likely dandelion because that weed, until mature, looks very similar to wheat. Without modern weed killers, what would a wise farmer have done when faced with such a dilemma? Rather than run the risk of pulling the wheat out with the tares, the landowner in this parable wisely waited until the harvest. After harvesting, the tares could be separated from the wheat and burned, while the wheat was safely stored in the barn.

In the explanation of the parable the Lord declares that he is the sower. He spreads his seed – believers – in the field of the world. Through his grace, we are called to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-24). As together we live out the life of the kingdom, we reveal God to the world. When Jesus said, 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15), he was referring to the spiritual realm which exists side by side with the realm of the evil one (1 John 5:19). When God's kingdom comes to its fruition, heaven will be a reality and there will no longer be any 'weeds' among the 'wheat'. But for now, both good and bad seeds mature in the world. The enemy is Satan who, in opposition to Jesus Christ, tries to destroy Christ's work in many ways, even by planting false disciples among the true. In Matthew 7:22, Jesus warned that many profess faith but do not know him. We are called to examine our own relationship with Christ (2 Cor. 13:5).

Lord, you planted the seed of your word in the good soil of my heart. Through baptism this word has taken root and by God's grace my faith will grow and bear fruit for God's kingdom.

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

Wednesday 29 July

Luke 10:38-42 • St Martha (Memorial)

Come on, let's put our cards on the table and cut to the chase: whom do you identify most with in this Gospel story, Martha or Mary? Are you more a Martha than a Mary, or more a Mary than a Martha?

Mary is warmly affirmed by the Lord for basically seeming to simply sit on her bottom whereas Martha, who is running round a bit like the proverbial headless chicken, appears to be rebuked, rather harshly in fact. Mary is told that, by choosing to sit at the Lord's feet rather than attending to domestic duties, she has chosen 'what is better' (v. 42 NIV). Truth be told, we all feel a little sorry for Martha and rather annoyed or frustrated with Mary, as Martha herself clearly was, judging by her complaint to the Lord: 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' (v. 40 NIV). We have all been there, haven't we – one person carrying the load while others are freeloading and getting off scot-free? It isn't fair, it isn't right, and it definitely causes resentment and annoyance.

But, as always with the Word of God, things are not necessarily as they seem – if we remain at the surface of things, we see only the superficial. So let's delve a little deeper and ask the Spirit to open up this sacred text for us. The key is to see that Mary adopted the position of a disciple – sitting at the Master's feet in order to learn from him (v. 39). Women in the ancient world were regarded as second-class citizens and were not expected to learn but to serve. Jesus, affirming Mary's dignity both as a woman and a disciple, encourages her to be the disciple she is called to be. The key to this Scripture are the words of Jesus: 'only one thing is needed' (v. 42 NIV). And what is needed is to sit at the Master's feet. In other words, to be a disciple is to be taught by the Lord in prayer, through reading his Word and in contemplating the mystery of Christ in us, the hope of glory, in the gift of love in the Eucharist.

Lord, teach me today to sit at your feet and root my life in prayer and contemplation so that it may lead to love and service of others.

Exodus 34:29-35 • Psalm 98(99):5-9

Proper of Saints: John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42

Thursday 30 July

Matthew 13:47-53

In Jesus' day the most common way of fishing was by casting a dragnet which was first thrown from the shore and then carried out further by boat until it spread out over a large area. Many men were required to haul in the huge net which would contain a wide assortment of fish. Jesus used this striking image, which he must have witnessed many times, to illustrate final judgement at the end of time.

Nowadays we don't tend to think much about judgement. There is a shying away of uncomfortable truths in general because, truth be told, they are hard to explain and unpack. We pray to be saved from eternal damnation, but in our hearts we ask ourselves how an all-loving God can allow some to be eternally damned? The problem with our reticence is that the Bible doesn't flinch from these sober truths, and neither should we.

From the very beginning of Scripture God pointed to his judgement: 'And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights' (Gen. 7:12). The prophets of old spoke of it often and warned of a time of judgement – for example, 'According to their way I will do to them, and according to their own judgments I will judge them' (Ezek. 7:27). Jesus himself did not hesitate to teach that God the Father had designated to the Son the task of judgement: 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son' (John 5:22). And Paul was also candid and clear on this topic: 'So each of us shall give account of himself to God' (Rom. 14:12; see also 2 Cor. 5:10).

Our imaginations can be rather lively when it comes to judgement. We tend to think the worst and imagine God to be harsh. But we will be judged by God according to our hearts. Perhaps we simply need to come to the realization that of ourselves we can do nothing, for we all fail and fall short of the glory of God, and that all we need to do is simply throw ourselves upon God's bountiful mercy.

'I am not sure exactly what heaven will be like, but I do know that when we die and it comes time for God to judge us, he will not ask, "How many good things have you done in your life?" Rather he will ask, "How much love did you put into what you did?"' (Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

Exodus 40:16-21, 34-37 • Psalm 83(84):3-11

Matthew 13:47-53

Friday 31 July

Matthew 13:54-58 • St Ignatius of Loyola (Memorial)

St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order, was a formidable and compelling saint. One of his sons in the faith is Pope Francis, who, interestingly for a Jesuit, chose the name 'Francis', the founder of the Franciscan order. Today we tend to identify the Jesuits with political action and the Franciscans with love for the poor. While this is probably a misleading caricature of these prophetic religious orders, perhaps in Pope Francis we have the best of both worlds!

To understand St Ignatius we need to grasp one simple truth about him: his focus was on the interior life, the spiritual life. He was a man completely and utterly intoxicated with Christ. Prior to his conversion he was a swashbuckling and hardy soldier; he was, if you like, an 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die' kind of man. His conversion, which took place as he was recovering from a wound to his femur inflicted by a stray cannon ball, came as the result of the interior realization of how joyful and happy he felt after reading the Gospels as opposed to the reading of Knights in shining armour rescuing the damsel! He had a number of powerful experiences of God which – let's not beat around the bush – blew both his mind and his heart.

St Ignatius constantly exhorted everyone to repentance and conversion. He devised what we know as 'the Ignatian retreat' which basically invites an interior conversion of the heart. He was also a very shrewd operator and understood what drove human beings. He was a natural leader who continues to inspire even today, many centuries after his death. However, the Jesuit order, rather like every facet of church life, is in constant need of reform and renewal. The Scripture scholar Daniel Harrington, himself a Jesuit, has commented that the modern equivalent of the scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day would be 'something like theologians and Jesuits'!

Being compared to modern-day Pharisees is not very flattering, but then again there is something of the Pharisee in us all. Deep down our old nature, our sinful nature, takes offence at the challenging message of Christ because it compels us to look into our own heart and repent and believe the gospel.

Lord, teach me to repent and turn back to God, and may everything I do and say be for the greater glory of God.

Leviticus 23:1, 4-11, 15-16, 27, 34-37 • Psalm 80(81):3-6, 10-11

Matthew 13:54-58