

Our journey through Ecclesiasticus, the book by the sage Sirach, draws to a close today. In essence Sirach dedicated his life to finding wisdom. He was wholehearted and committed in his search to find the pearl of great price and made, it appears, significant headway. As the writings of the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle also make clear, the pursuit of wisdom is one the greatest human endeavours.

In our search for wisdom there is, however, one problem against which we must guard and that is that the more we know and understand, the more superior we can feel. The learned often have a high opinion of themselves. Of course, those who are truly wise are also humble but this quality is rare. Whether expressed in words or just intimated, the attitude of many seems to be: 'Do you know who I am?' Sadly, this can be as true in the Church as in the world, especially when clergy are the proud possessors of a raft of academic qualifications. They often feel their superiority acutely and tend not to wear it lightly – in fact, many wear it so heavily that it clangs like a noisy gong (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1). Of course, all such talk and arrogance is folly.

So what is the key to wisdom? Well, if we look carefully, it is given to us in today's reading but we can only truly understand it fully in the light of Jesus of Nazareth. Sirach makes a very interesting observation. He says: 'My soul grappled with wisdom, and in my conduct I was strict; I spread out my hands to the heavens, and lamented my ignorance of her' (v. 19 NRSV). The key to gaining wisdom is the confession of our own ignorance and sin. For the more we learn and know, the less we truly understand and know. The closer we draw to God the more acutely we sense our own sin and become aware of our need to 'spread out our hands to the heavens'. True wisdom is, then, coming to understand this very simple truth: God is holy and we are sinners, and as sinners we grow in wisdom and holiness when we repent.

Lord, please help me to pray as the sage did, 'My heart was stirred to seek wisdom; therefore I have gained a prize possession.' (v. 21 NRSV)

Ecclesiasticus 51:12-20 • Psalm 18(19):8-11
Mark 11:27-33

Today we celebrate one of the greatest feast-days in the liturgical calendar. The feast of Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Christ, invites us to worship and adore and lift up our hearts in praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of the Eucharist.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council referred to the Eucharist as the 'source and summit of our faith'. In other words, everything we do as Catholics – all endeavour, all service, all mission, all communion – is focused on Christ made present to us in the Eucharist. For Catholics the Eucharist is not simply a memorial but something much more radical, shocking and miraculous. The host, through the prayers of the priest, becomes the Body and Blood of Christ, in what the Church fathers called 'transubstantiation'. Christ is made real and present to us. We eat and consume the actual body and blood of Christ.

On this holy day we can all grow and deepen in our love for the Mass and the Eucharist. Consider, if you will, the example of St Margaret Clithero, one of the English Martyrs put to death during the reign of Elizabeth I.

The mother of eight children was arrested for harbouring and hiding Catholic priests. Hauled up before the courts the judge offered to let her go free saying: 'Because you are a woman I will let you go free, but you must promise never to hide these priests again.' She was offered the Bible to swear her obedience to this but refused. 'I swear by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if you let me go free, I will hide priests again, because they are the only ones who can bring us the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.'

She was brought to St Michael's Bridge in York and given the punishment, worse than being hung, drawn and quartered. It was called in English law, 'the punishment most severe'. She was pressed to death under heavy weights. It was to take three days... The executioner was bribed and he put a stone under her head so that she died within an hour as her neck was broken. In the little chapel that is there to her memory in York today, there is an inscription over the door, which is a message for our times. It says 'She died for the Mass'.

Lord, deepen within me today a new love for Christ present in the Eucharist.

Genesis 14:18-20 • Psalm 109(110):1-4
1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • Luke 9:11-17

Today we begin a series of readings from the Book of Tobit, which belongs to a genre in the Old Testament called 'The Wisdom Literature'. Throughout history this classic and profound work has received a mixed reception: it is regarded as part of the Canon of Scripture by Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but not by our Jewish and Protestant brothers and sisters. While the great Scripture scholar Jerome argued that it should not be part of Sacred Scripture because it was not originally written in Hebrew but in Chaldean, among its supporters can be counted SS Augustine, Ambrose, Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius and Cyprian. It was quoted in the *Didache* (Teaching of the Apostles). Tobit was finally declared Canonical at the Council of Trent in 1549.

The story of Tobit is set against the backdrop of the conquest of Israel by Assyria in the seventh century BC, but many scholars believe it should be dated to around 200 BC when the entire Middle East was under the powerful domination of Greek culture. What is clear is that it was written for a scattered Jewish community and presents a robust and passionate defence of Jewish faith and culture

with its overarching exhortation to trust in God and to keep their traditional way of life.

Tobit's faith is less of the head and more of the heart. This is the kind of faith we see in Pope Francis – his is a passionate, tender, heartfelt faith. This is the kind of faith the Holy Spirit also desires to create in us because God always looks to our hearts. Tobit's faith is simple – he loves God and therefore is dedicated to his neighbour. Tobit respects God's laws and performs many acts of charity on behalf of his people, including burying those murdered by the cruel Assyrian king Shalmaneser. Tobit is a man of integrity, honesty and righteousness. He speaks to us today of the kind of life we are called to live. We are called to live a life in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit leads us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbour as we love ourselves. This fulfils the law and the prophets but is also the Golden Rule we are invited to follow.

Lord, over the coming days may I learn from your servant Tobit how to live a holy, righteous and pleasing life before God and my neighbour.

*Tobit 1:3; 2:1-8 • Psalm 111(112):1-6
Mark 12:1-12*

Tobit lived during an especially turbulent and difficult time for the Israelite people. Along with his brother Israelites, he was in exile in Nineveh, the capital of the great Assyrian empire, and the king had decreed that the Hebrews were not allowed to bury their dead (1:17). It is hard to imagine such cruelty and contempt, for burying the dead is both a civic duty, necessary for public health, and an act of profound mercy, pleasing to God.

How surprising then that Tobit, whose dedication to burying the dead and serving the poor could not be in question, was blinded by bird droppings of all things! Clearly, the Book of Tobit is highly parabolic in form, for although bird droppings are not especially pleasant and are very acidic, coming into contact with them is not life threatening nor will it cause blindness.

The now blind Tobit could be forgiven for giving in to the temptation to think that life is just not fair! Who can deny it? Terrible, horrible and utterly unjust things happen to the most holy and righteous people. Following God and obeying his teaching do not protect us from what life can sometimes throw at

us. Yet nowhere do we find Tobit complaining or blaming God. In fact, he interpreted everything that happened to him as coming from God and as part of his plan. He prayed, 'Righteous are thou, O Lord; all thy deeds and all thy ways are mercy and truth, and thou dost render true and righteous judgements for ever' (3:2). Despite the fact that his predicament seemed hopeless he did not for a moment lose his faith or trust in God's goodness and justice.

We can all recognize that this is a truly difficult thing to do and shows the work of God's grace in Tobit's life. We all know how easy it is to give way to bitterness, resentment and anger, especially towards God and his plan for our lives. God knows that we are all hurt and wounded in some way – we are all human and none of us is as strong or as resilient as we may think we are.

Like your servant Tobit, may I learn to accept in faith all that happens to me. May I learn to give you praise and glory for all the blessings in my life but also for all the pain and suffering – for you are close to the poor and broken-hearted.

*Tobit 2:9-14 • Psalm 111(112):1-2, 7-9
Mark 12:13-17*

It is one thing to be going to an event, dressed to the nines, suited, booted and ready to shine and to have one of our feathered friends randomly deposit a most unwelcome present upon us from on high and another to be physically blinded by such a deposit!

Accidents do happen but this one seems particularly cruel and haphazard, to say the least. Tobit could easily have been forgiven for giving way to a wide range of negative, but understandable emotions: rage, anger and utter disbelief. But not a bit of it. Tobit does what every truly spiritual person does when bad things happen – he gives glory and praise to God.

Now this may seem strange, and we may not even identify with it, but everything that happens to us is part of God's plan and under his control and dominion. This does not mean that Tobit did not experience a sense of bewilderment and despair – even admitting he wished he could die – but fundamentally he recognized God's hand on his life.

Against this backdrop we are told the story of a Jewess called Sarah, who lived in Ecbantana, one of the

great cities of the Persian empire. Poor Sarah has had to bear the pain and shame of having married seven men, only for each of them to be slain by a demon! Being blinded by bird droppings, husband-slaying demons – nothing should surprise us about the Book of Tobit! But remember it's a parable, a story, which grabs our attention and causes us to search out the deeper meaning. Like Tobit, Sarah just wanted to roll over and die! But again, like Tobit, her faith in God did not waver.

We can take great heart from Tobit and Sarah. God is close to us when we struggle, right beside us when we despair, and forever encouraging and giving us strength in all our trials and tribulations.

'Eternal God, the refuge and help of all your children, we praise you for all you have given us, for all you have done for us, for all that you are to us. In our weakness, you are strength, in our darkness, you are light, in our sorrow, you are comfort and peace. We cannot number your blessings, we cannot declare your love: for all your blessings we bless you. May we live as in your presence, and love the things that you love, and serve you in our daily lives.' (St Boniface)

Tobit 3:1-11, 16-17 • Psalm 24(25):2-9

Mark 12:18-27

Marriage is part of God's plan, although not everybody is called to marriage. God calls some to the priesthood or religious life and others to be single but consecrated; others simply do not feel called to the married state and remain single – often dedicating themselves to their chosen profession, such as teaching, nursing or social work. Today's story from the Book of Tobit is about how God leads Tobias to his future wife. His prayer of thanks, praise and thanksgiving captures movingly, beautifully and powerfully the gratitude of one who appreciates God's loving plan for his life and how precious it is to find the person God intends you to marry.

How richly profound is his prayer touching on the most wonderful truths of God's plan for marriage! As Tobias rightly says in his prayer, 'You it was who created Adam, you who created Eve his wife to be his help and support; and from these two the human race was born' (v. 6). Those who choose to marry these days are in a minority. It is much more common for couples to live together prior to marriage and then marry later or often not at all. Marriage as an institution has come under attack over many

years. The divorce rate is very high: almost one in every two marriages, in other words 50 per cent, end in separation or divorce.

It is hard to resist this onslaught, which is why we need to do the following two things. Firstly, we need to pray for all those who are separated or divorced as the break-up of a marriage inevitably causes untold grief. No matter how wonderful natural love is, it is often not enough to sustain a marriage.

This is why marriage is a sacrament: it is a human union which needs to receive an outpouring of God's grace and strength. Secondly, those who are married and have received the sacrament of matrimony, can witness to a quality of love that the world finds foreign and hard to understand. For at the heart of married love, according to the Catholic tradition, is a union and bond so deep, so mutually enriching that, even when separated by death, in Christ they are never separated, for the two become one.

'And now, O Lord, I am not taking this sister of mine because of lust, but with sincerity. Grant that I may find mercy and may grow old together with her.' (8:7)

Tobit 6:10-11; 7:1, 9-14; 8:4-9 • Psalm 127(128):1-5

Mark 12:28-34

Thank God for the mystics. Throughout the history of the Church we have been blessed with many men and women, but often women, who received from the Lord amazing and wonderful insights of revelation into the mystery of Christ. St Margaret Mary Alacoque, for example, was shown in a number of revelations or mystical experiences the immense depth of God's love for every human being. On one occasion she was shown Jesus' lacerated body hanging on the cross; on another she saw flames of divine love pouring out of his sacred heart. Her humble faith brought her into direct contact with God's love. Although we may not be granted such mystical experiences, we are no different from St Margaret Mary in being able to experience God's wonderful love. God loves us in the same way that he loved her, and he wants to give each of us the grace of revelation to know his love in even greater measure and even greater depth.

Scripture scholars acknowledge that there was something about the Christian community at Ephesus which meant that they were able to take hold of the deep truths of faith in such a wholehearted way that they were equipped to avoid

the kind of petty issues and infights which so afflicted, say, the Corinthian community. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews spoke of Christians who were so immature that they needed 'milk not solid food' (5:12). The Ephesian believers were, however, those who proved themselves worthy of the solid food of faith, which 'is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil' (Heb. 5:14).

So what is the solid food of faith? The answer to this is both easy and simple and at the same time, paradoxically, complex and difficult, because the solid food of faith is knowing God's love. And to know God's love we need a special grace of revelation, for which we need to pray with heartfelt conviction and sincerity. On this special and holy day we unite ourselves to Paul's prayer of love:

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us (Romans 5:5)

*Ezekiel 34:11-16 • Psalm 22(23)
Romans 5:5-11 • Luke 15:3-7*

On this special feast-day of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary we are reminded of the perfect and sinless nature of Mary, the Mother of God. Mary was created without sin, and remained in this perfect state throughout her life before being elevated to heaven. Consequently, the Church proclaimed the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary in support of these truths.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary is the precious pearl of the Father, the greatest of all his creations, far surpassing the greatness that is found in all the angels and the saints. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the new Eve (para. 411). According to the dogma of the Assumption, Mary, full of grace by the power of the Holy Spirit, was preserved from sin and the corruption of death (para. 2853). The Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is the culmination of all that has been progressively revealed to the Church regarding her beauty, her honour, her glories and her holiness.

In defining the meaning of the word 'heart', the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "The

spiritual tradition of the Church also emphasizes the heart, in the biblical sense of the depths of one's being, where the person decides for or against God' (para. 368). The Immaculate Heart of Mary is a symbol of human love that comes from the depth of her whole being, a love which cannot be classified as divine love but is the highest expression of human love for God. Immaculate in nature, it is a self-giving love that humbly seeks to obey and serve in accordance with the righteousness of God. Next to Jesus, the Immaculate Heart of Mary is the Father's greatest fountain of grace. From her heart flow countless physical and spiritual blessings and healings.

Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony and his Passion, and gave himself up for each one of us: "The Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me." He has loved us all with a human heart. For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, "is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that...love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings" without exception.' (CCC 478)

*Tobit 12:1, 5-15, 20 • Tobit 13:2, 6-7
Proper of Saints: Luke 2:41-51*

Pope Francis has urged us not to be afraid of tenderness. We meet this beautiful quality in today's reading from Luke's Gospel. What could be more heart-breaking than to witness the tears of a mother (a widow) mourning the loss of her only son! Luke does not make specific reference to her weeping but we can be assured that it was the grief of the widow (and how else is grief expressed if not through tears?) that moved him to record: 'when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep"' (v. 13). We learn from this, of course, that Jesus' heart goes out to all those who mourn and, as we know from the Beatitudes, those who mourn are among the blessed (Matt. 5:3).

In the course of his public ministry Jesus raised three people from the dead: the widow's son at Nain, Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:40-56) and Lazarus (John 11:38-44). Clearly these miracles were signs pointing to Jesus' authority and power over our ultimate enemy death and its corruption. C.S. Lewis, in his masterpiece *A Grief Observed*, suggests that Lazarus (and by implication so too the widow's son and Jairus' daughter) got a raw deal by dying and being brought back to life. Blessed as they were, their

miracle was one of resuscitation and not resurrection – they were returned to earthly life and would die again.

We don't tend to think about death very much. We are arguably too busy getting on with living to worry too much about what happens when we die. However, a mature faith is never afraid to contemplate death and, indeed, there is a way in which we are called to be always seeking to raise our hearts and minds in a heavenly direction, to life beyond this world. No other human being in history has addressed and faced death in the way that Jesus did. He proclaimed that he is the Resurrection and the Life. He proclaimed that those who believe in him will never die. Faith in Christ does not entirely remove a fear of death but it does help us understand this final frontier we must all face – whether pauper or prince, layman or pope. We face it, however, with Christ, in Christ and through Christ.

'The foolish fear death as the greatest of evils, the wise desire it as a rest after labours and the end of ills.' (St Ambrose)

1 Kings 17:17-24 • Psalm 29(30):2, 4-6, 11-13
Galatians 1:11-19 • Luke 7:11-17

Today we begin to explore Paul's truly wonderful and inspiring second letter to the church based in Corinth, which is full of his heart, full of his love. The letter is stamped with his style and contains more autobiographical material than any of his other writings. Scripture scholars identify that it was written around 55 AD when Paul was in Macedonia.

There can be little doubt that Paul is one of the greats of the Christian faith. He was a great theologian, a great pastor, a great leader. However, his second letter to the Christians in Corinth and those scattered throughout Achaia (the Roman province comprising the territory of Greece south of Macedonia) reveals a writer of outstanding and unique genius. Through our readings we will be introduced to a literary flair and command of language so beautiful, eloquent and clear that it could only be divinely inspired. This is truly wonderful literature as well as the sacred word of God.

Paul's purpose in writing was pastoral but also defensive. The Corinthian Church had been infiltrated by false teachers who were challenging both his personal integrity and his authority as an apostle. His enemies were

suggesting that he was not a genuine apostle but was lining his own pockets from money collected for the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem. Paul begins with an impassioned and moving call for all believers to look to God the Father, the good Creator, as the 'Father of mercies and God of all comfort' (v. 3).

The teaching and emphasis of Pope Francis is very much in the same vein as that of Paul. We meet in Paul and Pope Francis men of huge hearts, the fruit of the work of the Spirit in their lives. The Holy Spirit wants us, too, to be men and women of big hearts – kind, giving, always going the extra mile, always serving and loving until it hurts. This is the type of witness that ultimately changes lives and transforms the world. God is calling us to overflow with the comfort and consolation of God – to be, in short, like Paul, a giver not a receiver, a servant not one who is served, a beggar who can show others where the food is.

Lord, as I journey through the liturgy through Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, may my love, comfort and consolation flow over to others and may I seek first to serve before I am served.

2 Corinthians 1:1-7 • Psalm 33(34):2-9
Matthew 5:1-12

Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew who was a leading apostle in the life of the early Church and collaborated with Paul in the preaching of the gospel (Acts 14:14). His name means literally 'son of encouragement' or 'son of consolation'. He was a recognized teacher of the faith at Antioch (Acts 13:1) and was known for his generosity (see Acts 4:36, 37).

He and Paul worked together for a whole year to build the church in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26). After the year was over they travelled to Jerusalem (c. AD 44) with a financial contribution for the church there. The two men were appointed missionaries to Asia Minor, and in this capacity visited Cyprus and some of the principal cities of Pamphylia, Pisidia and Lycaonia (Acts 13:14). Barnabas was very much involved in the Council of Jerusalem.

Paul clearly valued working with Barnabas and invited him to join him on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:36). Barnabas wanted John Mark to join them but Paul had doubts because he had let them down before (Acts 15:37-38). Paul and Barnabas sadly fell into dispute over this – Paul took Silas with him through Syria and Cilicia while Barnabas took John Mark

with him on a return journey to Cyprus (Acts 15:36-41). We don't know what was at the heart of their altercation. Hippolytus of Rome refuted the suggestion that it was because John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, suggesting instead that it was because as a 'son of consolation' – someone who was very good at encouraging others – Barnabas probably wanted to give the errant disciple another chance. It is hard to believe that apostles of the stature of Paul and Barnabas were not reconciled as brothers – we hope and pray they were.

Barnabas does not appear again in the Acts of the Apostles but he does make an appearance in Galatians (Gal. 2:13), where it seems that he, rather like Peter, was unsure about eating with Gentiles. Tertullian, the second-century theologian, suggested Barnabas was the author of the Letter to the Hebrews but this has now been contested. Tradition has it that Barnabas was martyred for his faith. Today we celebrate the life of this great man of God and ask for his intercession.

God our Father, you filled St Barnabas with faith and the Holy Spirit and sent him to convert the nations. Help us to proclaim the gospel by word and deed.

*Acts 11:21-26; 13:1-3; • Psalm 97(98):1-6
Matthew 5:13-16*

One of the most groundbreaking and outstanding documents to come out of the Second Vatican Council was *Dei verbum*, which teaches on Scripture. It is the smallest of all the teaching documents but, like many things that are small, it boxes above its weight and delivers quite a punch (to extend the boxing analogy).

The central premise of *Dei verbum*, simply put, is that Scripture is God's Word and from it we feed and nourish our spiritual life. As Catholics we feed from the two tables of sacrament and Word. Bible Alive is a fruit of the Second Vatican Council. We are a magazine dedicated to the vision outlined in *Dei verbum* and our bottom line (to adopt business speak) is to encourage our readers to read their Bibles.

Today we encounter a crucial teaching in living out the Christian life. We meet Paul on the offensive, attacking his enemies and defending the faith from those who would seek to undermine it. The Corinthian church was being influenced by so-called 'super apostles' (2 Cor. 11:5), whom Paul described as simply 'peddlers of God's word' (2 Cor. 2:17). These 'super apostles' demanded that the

believers in Corinth adhere rigidly to the Jewish law. Paul understood that the gospel was a new covenant: it had established a new way of relating to God, a new relationship sealed in the blood of Christ. For him what mattered was not 'the letter' but 'the Spirit' for 'the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life' (v. 6). This is a key teaching of the letter. We are called to live in and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that the law is bad or wrong or evil; quite the contrary in fact. But against love, kindness, patience, generosity, goodness, for example, there is no law, no limit. The letter of the law kills the life in the Spirit because it limits and restricts it.

We are called to move through our day seeking out opportunities to live in the power of the Spirit. As we do this, we start to radiate the life of God because people see the beauty, glory and radiance of the gospel in our lives. Of course, this is simply holiness but holiness is what the world is eager to see in us.

Lord, by virtue of baptism I am a minister of the new covenant, the covenant of love, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.

*2 Corinthians 3:4-11 • Psalm 98(99):5-9
Matthew 5:17-19*

Do you mind if we ask you some questions today? Do you object if we probe and examine a little to test your faith? I guess if you do mind, then there is not a lot we can do, but if you agree, then this reflection on today's reading will have done its job – to get us all to think, pray and reflect on God's Word. So here are the questions: Do you believe in God? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is Lord? Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit? Do you believe that when you receive the host at Mass on Sunday, you are receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world?

If you answer 'yes' to these questions, and even more than 'yes' if you find yourself saying, 'Yes, Amen and Alleluia', then you are blessed and anointed and have received the grace of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, a veil has been lifted, you have received a grace of revelation because flesh and blood, the power of human reason, simply cannot know these things. God has enlightened our mind to the beauty, the truth and the goodness of Christ, and we bow down and acknowledge that 'Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father'. We have received

the precious gift of faith. To know and appreciate this mystery should make us leap for joy and dance with enthusiasm because the Father in his mercy has revealed it to us.

However, we all have friends, relatives, work colleagues and know of many public figures who have no faith, don't understand faith, some of whom are aggressive and militant while others are utterly cold and indifferent as to whether God exists or not. Now why is this? Why do some believe and others do not? For Paul the reason is spiritual. He argues that 'the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God' (v. 4). Strong words indeed.

Lord, we are involved in a battle for the mind. I pray that the veil will be lifted from those who do not see the glory of Christ. Protect me from being deceived and led astray by ways of thinking which undermine the gospel and its power in my life.

Paul was a brilliant man. God certainly chose the right man to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. He was not only supremely gifted but his heart burnt with love for Christ and the Church. Today, we encounter the sheer genius of his literary flair and his command of language to express his faith. Paul was many centuries before Shakespeare, but even Shakespeare sits at the feet of this great apostle.

Paul was acutely aware of his humanity and his frailty and of how precarious life is. How beautifully he expresses this: 'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' (v. 7 NIV). Our frail, corrupt and easily broken bodies are 'jars of clay' but each 'jar of clay' is also a temple of the Holy Spirit. So today keep in mind that you are a 'jar of clay'. It was customary in Paul's day to conceal treasures in clay jars which had little value or beauty and did not attract attention to themselves and their precious contents. The precious cargo we carry within us – the life of God, the gift of the Spirit, the grace of Christ – is our greatest treasure, our most cherished possession.

Paul is so inspiring to read, isn't he? It is as if his insight into the gospel puts life into its correct perspective and helps us to live our lives with joy and confidence. Could the following be written about you and the difficulties and trials you have to endure: I am 'hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed' (vv. 8-9 NIV)?

We never know what life may throw at us, and for many of us the challenges of our life truly push us to the limits. Paul was himself pushed to the very limit and he shows us how to cope and deal with the kind of pressures and difficulties that could, if we let them, crush and destroy us. What did Paul mean when he said that he carried in his body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might be revealed? He meant that he proclaimed every day that he no longer lived but Christ lived in him.

Lord, I believe and therefore I proclaim that I no longer live but Christ lives in me.

One of the major truths that the fathers of the Second Vatican Council wanted to drive home was the importance of baptism. They wanted to highlight the truth that by virtue of our baptism we are made priest, prophet and king. This sacrament is the most important truth of our faith, and we have to grasp it before we take hold of anything else.

Does that strike you as a bit odd? Don't you think that say, for example, if you are married, the truth of marriage is the most important thing you need to grasp? Or that if you are a priest, then the truths around ministry are the most important ones to grasp? Well, not according to the Second Vatican Council. To shed some light on this, consider the following true story about Pope John Paul II, a father of the Council no less: when asked by a journalist what was the most important day of his life (bear in mind he was asked this when he was Pope) he replied: 'The day of my baptism.' Wow! OMG! (Oh my God!) Was your baptism the most important day in your life?

When we grasp the importance of baptism, we begin to understand what drove Paul. Paul was utterly driven by the singular conviction that God loves us and proved his

love for us by dying on the cross. Paul had amazing insight into the reality of baptism. He understood that in baptism we were immersed into the death and resurrection of Jesus – we die with Christ, we rise with Christ. We are a new creation; a new humanity has been revealed.

We are often encouraged to pray for men and women to come forward to serve God as priests, deacons or religious. But this is the wrong prayer – it is the wrong emphasis and reflects an overly clerical view of what it means to be a believer. Our primary prayer should be that each of us might come to a deeper and firmer grasp of what happened to us when we were baptized. This revelation will then help us all to find our vocation, for we are baptized believers first, before we are priests, deacons or religious, and we enter the kingdom of God because of baptism not because of our role of service in God's kingdom.

Lord, today and every day, teach me to renew the promise and joy of my baptism.

2 Corinthians 5:14-21 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 8-9, 11-12
Matthew 5:33-37

Prostitutes appear a lot in the Gospels and in Jesus' life. That thought may offend you – it certainly offended a lot of people in Jesus' day, especially the Pharisees, teachers of the law and scribes, who didn't like prostitutes very much at all. Indeed, it is very clear that Simon the Pharisee, whom we meet in today's Gospel, was scandalized by Jesus consenting to be in the company of such a woman. We are privy to his inner thoughts: 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner' (v. 39). Bear in mind then today, if you will, that the entire Catholic world through the liturgy of the Word is taught how to love Jesus by a prostitute no less.

The contrast could not be more stark between a Pharisee and a prostitute, between respectability and scandal, between the righteous and the unrighteous. However, these judgements, which form part of the fabric of every culture, are merely external. There are those who are good and those who are bad; there are the sexually wanton and promiscuous and the morally upright and churchgoing. In our own day, as in Jesus', we are judged by the company we keep. Jesus

was remarkable in attracting to himself the very people despised and marginalized by the religious establishment of his day. They were drawn to him and felt accepted, forgiven and embraced with friendship and love.

So is that the message of today's reading from Luke? Well, it is for sure part of the message – rather than being repelled by sinners God's mercy reaches out and touches and embraces them. Those who are holy attract the sinful because the truly holy convey God's love, mercy and forgiveness, not harsh judgement and condemnation. There is, however, a depth of insight into today's reading which can give us an even greater understanding of the mystery of God's mercy. Towards the end of his life St John Vianney wanted God to show him his true state before him. However, when God answered him and in prayer he began to plumb this abyss, what he saw compelled him to beg the Lord to remove all memory of it.

Lord, you came to call sinners, not the righteous who have no need of the Physician. Help us to recognize our true need of your forgiveness.

2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13 • Psalm 31(32):1-2, 5, 7, 11
Galatians 2:16, 19-21 • Luke 7:36-8:3

Come on, admit it – join the club – you're just like everybody else and you too can easily give in to complaining about all manner of things. You may be a loud complainer so that everybody knows about it, or the silent type – you know, the type who keep their mutterings and resentments to themselves but nevertheless get eaten up by them. Of course, those of us who complain (and most of us do) always feel sorry for ourselves, think we are hard done by and are never at fault ourselves – it's always those others.

It is hard to be immune from this rather pernicious fault. We complain about the weather, our neighbour, our work colleagues, our lack of money, our lack of opportunity, the news – this, that and the other. You get the point, I am sure! As noble as the human spirit can be, we often make it ignoble through harbouring a complaining spirit. We could probably begin a major revolution if, rather like alcoholics who commit to being sober on a daily basis, we took a pledge every day not to complain but rather to praise God for all the blessings in our lives. Anyway it's good to dream and to have high ideals and to hope against hope that it is possible to

live a dynamic life in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit wants to make us irrepressibly and impossibly joyful and happy whatever the trials and challenges we face in life.

Sometimes, when preaching on holiness, priests like to say, 'It takes a saint to live with a saint.' This is, however, a rather misleading assertion because it suggests that holiness is irritating and annoying to us lesser mortals. In fact, holiness attracts, creates joy and happiness and leaves the distinctive fragrance of the aroma of Christ. And this is what Paul does as we come in touch with his amazing and incredible attitude to life: 'through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything' (vv. 8-10 NIV).

Lord Jesus, today may I put on Christ Jesus and be clothed with the garments of the Spirit. By your grace and the decision of my will drive out from my life all complaining, all moaning, all negativity and cynicism. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

Matthew 5:38-42

Since the very beginning of the Church the principle of charitable giving has been an essential part of belonging to a Christian community – be it giving to meet local needs or wider national and even international needs. In our own country some charities are huge: take CAFOD for example, which began, in effect, as a 'cottage charity' borne out of the generosity of a group of women who sat around a kitchen table and reached out to their brothers and sisters around the world. It is now an aid agency with an annual turnover of close to £50 million, employing hundreds of staff. Here at Bible Alive, we have for many years been experiencing that same generosity from our readers who have supported our International Prison and Faith initiatives which reach out to prisoners and missionaries.

These are, of course, only two examples among many. Perhaps, for most of us, our most intimate giving is to our parish, the Christian community of which we are a part week in and week out. For no parish could run without the generosity and kindness of its parishioners. Indeed, the harsh reality is that parishes are often shut down because there are simply not

the parishioners and therefore the money to sustain the upkeep costs. If the Catholic Church were an industry, then its parishioners would be responsible for the cash flow (so to speak). After all, everything – gas, electricity, heating bills, etc. – needs paying for.

When it comes to giving, a certain kind of compassion fatigue can set in and we can feel we just can't keep on giving as much as we would like to. In today's reading Paul draws our attention to the witness of the Macedonian church, which at that time was a kind of beacon of charitable giving. Why so? Because although these Christians were suffering themselves both from persecution and poverty they were desperate to relieve the sufferings of their brothers and sisters in the Jerusalem church. For them giving was a privilege and a great honour, and they wanted to bend over backwards to do all they could to help. They had giving and generous hearts, and God loves a cheerful giver. It is less an issue of how much we give and more that whatever we give, we give with grateful and generous hearts.

Lord, give me a generous heart, overflowing with love and generosity to those who suffer or are in need.

2 Corinthians 8:1-9 • Psalm 145(146):2, 5-9

Matthew 5:43-48

In countries such as Nigeria (northern) and Pakistan Muslims who convert to Christianity often undergo intense persecution. For example, in southern Pakistan converts to the Catholic faith are ostracized, can lose their jobs and be reduced to cleaning the streets. These converts are known as 'sweepers' for obvious reasons, but bear in mind that street cleaning in a country like Pakistan, which has been declared a failed state by the World Health Organization, without a working sewerage system, is a brutal and humiliating task.

Many of the first Christians also suffered for converting from Judaism to the Christian faith. They were expelled from their families, cut out of their inheritance, lost their jobs and were ostracized by their local community. The suffering of the Jerusalem church was a major source of concern for the wider Church and funds needed to be raised to help them. St John Vianney, that mighty saint, said once, 'I do not lend – I give. Hasn't the good Lord first been good to me?' He understood that generosity, kindness and charity are a given for a disciple of Christ. Freely we have received and so freely we give. God, we know, loves a cheerful

giver (v. 7). There can be no room in our lives for being mean-spirited or 'tight'. Perhaps we should see almsgiving not as a duty or even a virtue but as an overflow of our hearts. This does not mean that we are simple or naive or stupid: we give intelligently and after prayer and discernment, but our general attitude and mindset is one that is predisposed towards others. Again, it is not the amount we give but our hearts that count. Consider these words of Charles de Foucauld: 'If God allows some people to pile up riches instead of making themselves poor as Jesus did, it is so that they may use what he has entrusted to them as loyal servants, in accordance with the Master's will, to do spiritual and temporal good to others.'

We are living in an age of austerity and one of the most prolonged recessions in recent memory. Times are tough for many and we even have 'food banks' in the affluent and well-off areas where redundancy has bitten and many families are suffering. Bear in mind today these words of St Ambrose:

'The earth was made for all, rich and poor, in common. Why do you rich claim it as your exclusive right?'

2 Corinthians 9:6-11 • Psalm 111(112):1-4, 9
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Paul was not only a master evangelist but also a master pastor. He was gifted in so many ways and has left the Church an outstanding model of a church leader. In Church terms we think of leaders as bishops, priests, deacons and religious. Lay people, per se, don't have positions of leadership too often within the Church. Of course, they may lead charities or have a leadership role on a committee but by and large the leadership within the Catholic Church is primarily male and clerical. We recognize and revere the Church's leadership structure. We are, however, also aware that bad or poor leadership can cause great hurt and scandal, which is why we must pray for all those called to lead. One of the major ways in which lay people are leaders is as parents (the family unit is considered by the Church to be a mini church). So what lessons can we learn about leadership from today's reading?

The believers in Corinth were being led astray from the gospel message by the so-called 'super apostles'. Paul compares their message and approach to the serpent's cunning and stealth from the account of the Fall of Man (Gen. 3; see v. 3). They were

presenting a different from Jesus to the one Paul preached. Basically their Jesus was legalistic and harsh – they wanted to bind believers to the law not the Spirit. By insisting on all manner of dietary restrictions, circumcision and other legalistic burdens, they were threatening the life-giving and joy-filled message that we are justified through faith in the Lord Jesus.

Two things were under threat: the purity of the gospel message and apostolic authority. We (priest or parent) must lead everybody in our charge to the purity of the gospel message, and we look to the Church and its teaching for our apostolic authority (the Magisterium as it is often rather scarily known). We don't have 'super apostles' to face down but we do have ways of thinking and philosophies which erode and corrode the gospel message, including consumerism (money and buying things brings happiness), relativism (there is no absolute truth), secularism (a world view without God) and existentialism (life has no purpose).

Lord, teach me to be a shepherd of God's people and to strive always to lead people to the waters of the gospel and the life in the power of the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 11:1-11 • Psalm 110(111):1-4, 7-8
Matthew 6:7-15

To be fair, no one likes a boaster – whether it be in the playground, the sports ground or the boardroom. Boasters only serve to reveal their own insecurities and hang-ups, not to mention their conceit and arrogance. Humility and graciousness are so much more attractive. Truth be told, truly great people have no need to boast. John Steinbeck, the American author, was right, ‘The less we have the more we are required to boast.’

Paul was, without any shadow of any doubt, one of the greatest men who ever lived. His witness has stood the test of time stretching back over two thousand years of history. Yet today we find Paul boasting – a flurry of it, highlighting his social and religious pedigree, his ministry, his expertise but also his trials and sufferings. He was, as he himself says, out of his mind to write and speak in these terms, but clearly he had reached his breaking or tipping point.

We need, however, to read Paul’s boasting carefully because it has much to teach us about true humility and service of God’s people. His boasting was rooted in his passion, love and pastoral care for the Church. He would do

anything – even make a complete fool of himself – for Christ. Paul’s moral and spiritual authority was the result of both the anointing he had received from the Lord and also his willingness to suffer for his faith. Not many of us would survive the eight floggings he received. Five were at the hands of the Jews (who on occasions used steel rods – see Acts 16:37-39) and three at the hands of the Romans. Can you imagine the blood? Can you imagine the horror of being shipwrecked on the open sea?

Paul could boast because he was truly a servant among servants. We too must not lord it over those we are called to serve: we are called to outdo each other in the lengths and depths we will go to in order to serve our brothers and sisters. If we have to boast, then we are to be like Paul who boasted in the cross of Jesus and his own trials and sufferings.

Lord, grant me the same heart and devotion as Paul who proved his love for you, the Church and the early believers through the trial of his suffering and the blood he spilt.

2 Corinthians 11:18, 21-30 • Psalm 33(34):2-7
Matthew 6:19-23

How logical are you? Are you a right or left brainer? According to modern psychological theory, those who rely on the left side of the brain have enhanced skills in numeracy, reasoning and logic. Those who rely on the right tend to be more emotionally sensitive, intuitive and ‘people persons’ as it were.

Whatever category we are in – and, to be fair life, is often more complex than any theory – we think and act logically in many areas of our lives – not to do so would be folly. So, for example, it’s logical that if we want to get on we need to be ambitious; it is logical that we need an income in order to secure the basics of life – a home, a car and so on. We get this kind of logic and it makes sense.

However, there is another logic – what we could call ‘kingdom logic’ – and that is a totally different affair. Paul introduces us to ‘kingdom logic’ today. Basically he discovered that paradoxically (or to put it another way, illogically) the weaker he was physically, mentally and spiritually the stronger he was in Christ. There was something that was bringing Paul down (he calls it his ‘thorn’) and he literally begged God to take it away. The Lord replied, ‘My grace is sufficient for

you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (v. 9). Here we have it – ‘kingdom logic’ in the raw. God’s power is perfected in us through human weakness and frailty.

The story of St John Fisher, whose feast-day we celebrate today, illustrates this truth. St John Fisher was beheaded at Tower Hill on 22 June 1535, a few weeks before St Thomas More. He refused to acknowledge King Henry VIII as head of the Catholic Church and for this treason paid with his life. Brought low and weakened through his incarceration in the Tower, he nevertheless refused to recant. He was, we know, a man of deep prayer and spirituality. But it was in his weakness when facing death that St John Fisher found the strength and power to be martyred for his faith. On the morning of his execution he was awakened by his guard at 5 am and told that his execution was to be at 10 am. So at peace with God and himself was he that he requested a few more hours’ sleep.

Lord, we give thanks and praise for the witness of St John Fisher.

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 • Psalm 33(34):8-13 • Matthew 6:24-34
(In England only: 2 Maccabees 6:18, 21, 24-31 • Psalm 30 (31) • Matthew 24:4-13)

Luke's version of Peter's confession of Christ is in essence the same as Matthew's (Matt. 16:13) but different in detail. Luke records Peter's affirmation that Jesus is the Christ but not the Lord's response that this revelation came from the Father, which we learn from Matthew's account. We know, however, and our faith confirms that there are many truths that cannot be grasped by reason alone. Certainly reason can take us so far on the journey but we need grace to, as it were, take us by the hand towards an experience of 'revelation'. It is this grace of revelation, this anointing or insight, that fuels and nourishes our Christian life. How right the sage was when he said: 'Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint' (Prov. 29:18 NIV).

Jesus often asked direct, upfront and personal questions. 'Who do the people say I am?' was just such a question (v. 18). It invited the disciples to focus not on others but on themselves. Others had their views and opinions on who they thought Jesus was: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. The grace that Peter received gave him the courage and conviction to proclaim what faith had taught him in his inner being, that Jesus of

Nazareth is the Christ. The truths of our faith, unless ignited by grace and light, can remain dry and lifeless in our hearts. This is because we have lost clarity regarding seeking the Lord's face and wanting to receive more and more of the grace of revelation.

This condition can overwhelm our priests and deacons, who need to be constantly renewed and refreshed in order to feed us with God's Word. However, lay people can also lose their enthusiasm for the things of the Spirit. How do we recover this? The key to recovery is repentance and acknowledging that our hearts have become hardened through our own fault, our own negligence and lack of focus. It happens to us all: we are all guilty as charged. God is rich in mercy and there is rejoicing in heaven when we repent. God pours out his grace and mercy so we can see the truths of our faith, the light of Scripture and be refreshed in our spirits.

Lord, pour out the grace of revelation that I may plumb and mine the depths of faith and enter ever more deeply into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity.

*Zechariah 12:10-11; 13:1 • Psalm 62(63):2-9
Galatians 3:26-29 • Luke 9:18-24*

Today we celebrate the feast of one of the Church's greatest sons – St John the Baptist. In John's birth God was doing a new and wonderful thing in the history of salvation. A new order was unfolding; old assumptions were turned on their head as the Holy Spirit ushered in the time of our redemption. Elizabeth, a woman advanced in years, gave birth, a man struck dumb spoke and a centuries-old family tradition concerning the naming of a child was in a moment replaced. No wonder there was such a sense of awe, wonder and expectancy surrounding the birth of John the Baptist. It caused quite a stir and it was clearly recognized that 'the hand of the Lord was with him' (v. 66). As people rightly asked, 'What then will this child be?' The Baptist would become a herald of the gospel, a forerunner of the Lord.

Who is the Lord's herald today? Who is the forerunner? There is a way in which the Second Vatican Council can be understood as a forerunner and herald because God was doing something new among us, but building on what had gone before. This is the way with God: the 'new' and the 'old' are united together. The Council did not imitate the sternness of John the

Baptist who called for repentance and conversion on the banks of the Jordan (Luke 3:1-7), but it did nevertheless show something of the prophet of old in pointing believers and men and women of good will to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The Council's mandate, like the mandate of every prophet, was to proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the Redeemer of humanity and the Lord of history.

The fruits of the Second Vatican Council, in many ways, are still to burst forth. One of the most important emphases of this great gathering of the bishops of the Church was the universal call to holiness which is at the heart of our vocation. We are called to be holy as God is holy. In short, the Council called us to 'repent and believe the gospel'. Today we commit ourselves to reflect and pray on ways that we can turn back to God and rededicate our lives.

Lord, today I heed the word of St John the Baptist and return to you with all my heart and in so doing discover the joy of the gospel.

*Isaiah 49:1-6 • Psalm 138(139):1-3, 13-15
Acts 13:22-26 • Luke 1:57-66, 80*

Today's Gospel, from the Sermon on the Mount, is jam-packed with wisdom and life. In these four verses we discover a wide range of teaching, and so the priest or deacon who chooses to preach on today's Gospel, or indeed the Bible Alive writer of this meditation, is spoilt for choice. Do we focus on Jesus' teaching on not giving dogs what is sacred or pearls to pigs? Or on the Golden Rule of doing to others as you would have them do to you? (Not as the young boy in primary school understood it, 'Do one to others before they do one to you'!) Or do we explore the narrow gate which leads to life?

Although, of course, each verse is very rich and profound, perhaps a different approach is needed with a singular focus on the passage as a whole. Because the Scriptures are God's Word there is always a unity, cohesion and connection. The Word of God is, in this sense, like a finely woven tapestry. The thread which joins each of these verses together is the call to be holy, and it builds on what we learnt yesterday of the Second Vatican Council's fresh emphasis on holiness. The wonderful truth about holiness is that everyone can be holy by virtue of their baptism.

But what is holiness? We often identify holiness with a denial and restraint which has a certain harshness, sternness and joylessness about it. We don't tend to associate holiness with being happy, joyful, full of life and zest and enthusiasm both for God and loving others. We also do not tend to associate holiness with being full of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the secret of holiness is surely to be filled and overflowing with the Spirit. It is the Spirit who makes us holy and it is the Spirit who teaches us wisdom to discern and walk in the Spirit.

This way of living and acting enables us to know who we can share our faith with and who to be careful with to avoid giving dogs what is sacred or throwing pearls before pigs. The more we grow in holiness, the more we understand that, at the end of the day, the Golden Rule is the litmus test and the narrow gate through which we enter the kingdom of heaven.

Lord, teach me today to embark on the exciting adventure of putting into practice the Golden Rule.

Genesis 13:2, 5-18 • Psalm 14(15):2-5

Matthew 7:6, 12-14

Fruit is an important word in the Bible. In the New Testament alone it and its derivatives 'fruitful' and 'fruits' occur sixty-six times. The Greek word most frequently used is *karpōs*, which can be used literally or figuratively. Most often (41 times), it is used figuratively. *Karpōs*, in the figurative sense, is defined as 'being the visible expression of power working inwardly and invisibly; the character of the "fruit" being evidence of the character of the power producing it'. Spiritual fruit is an expression (or overflow) of what is happening in our spirits which then translates to our hearts, affections and motivations, producing external actions, words and attitudes. There are five categories of fruit in the New Testament, relating to conduct, salvation, evangelism, reward and literal fruit (i.e. fruit of the vine, etc.).

Jesus certainly understood fruit in terms of winning souls for the kingdom. In John 4:35-36 he says, 'Do you not say, "There are yet four months, then comes the harvest"? I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest. He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower

and reaper may rejoice together.' Just as in heaven when we repent, there is joy and rejoicing, so too when we evangelize, heaven rejoices – and of course we do too. Wouldn't it be wonderful if after the Easter Sunday rededication we committed ourselves to encouraging as many people as we can to become members of our local parish community during the coming year? Surely we want this – our parish priests most certainly do. Surely we want next year's Easter Vigil to be overflowing with those eager to be received into the Church!

Our vocation calls us to think in this way. Our vocation calls us to take up Paul's words in Romans 1:13, 'I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.' Interestingly the word 'harvest' is the same word ('fruit') that Jesus uses in John 4. As the Second Vatican Council taught, the *raison d'être* of the Catholic Church is to evangelize, to win souls.

Lord, teach me to produce fruit that will last – the fruit of the Spirit and the fruit of new followers of Jesus.

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 • Psalm 104(105):1-9

Matthew 7:15-20

Never let it be said that at *Bible Alive* we don't try and provide our readers with new and interesting facts about the world! Today's interesting fact is about structural engineering and specifically the engineering of building foundations. It will help to throw new light on today's parable from the Sermon on the Mount, which provides us with the most important moral and ethical teaching there has ever been in the history of the world.

In engineering speak a foundation is the lowest supporting layer of a structure. Foundations are generally divided into two categories: shallow foundations and deep foundations. Shallow foundations, often called footings, are typically embedded about a metre or so into soil. A deep foundation is used to transfer the load of a structure down through the upper weak layer of topsoil to the stronger layer of subsoil below. There are different types of deep footings including impact-driven piles, drilled shafts and earth-stabilized columns. You get the picture: the bigger and more substantial the building, the deeper and more substantial the foundation needs to be. In Jesus' day foundations were made of wood, stone or rock but today, of

course, steel, specially reinforced concrete and pre-tensioned concrete are used. In earthquake zones where buildings often collapse, killing many, investigations reveal time and time again that builders and construction companies are negligent and skimp on the quality of foundation. There is a simple rule: strong foundation, strong building; weak foundation, weak building. You can see where we are going with this!

The punch line or moral of the parable of the wise and foolish builder is easy enough to grasp. But there is a subtle nuance which we need to ponder and heed carefully: the wise builder is not the one who only hears Jesus' teaching but the one who puts it into practice. The foolish builder hears the teaching as well but he doesn't put it into practice. But what teaching is Jesus talking about? His teaching in the Sermon the Mount. This is the teaching Christians are called to put into practice.

Blessed are we when we take Jesus' teaching to heart, pray on it, assimilate it and appropriate it by putting it into practice in our daily lives.

Genesis 16:1-12, 15-16 • Psalm 105(106):1-5
Matthew 7:21-29

St Irenaeus, whose feast-day we celebrate today, is often attributed with saying, 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.' Well, it is true that he did say this, but it is only half the story, so to speak. The full quote is: 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God.' According to this great theologian, to be fully human and alive we need to be on a journey to 'behold God'.

St Irenaeus (130–202 AD) was one of the Church's greatest theologians. He travelled to Lyons in France and settled there, serving the city's first bishop, St Pothinus. After St Pothinus was martyred he became the new bishop and much of his ministry was spent refuting error and defending the faith. He defended the Church against the Gnostic heresies which sprang up around that time. His masterpiece *Against the Heresies* is largely credited with defending the Catholic faith against such attacks and with demolishing the Gnostic position once and for all. Irenaeus was the first biblical scholar to identify the four Gospels as Canonical. His numerous writings make him stand out among the early church fathers but his faith was nothing if not practical –

perhaps due to the influence of his mentor St Polycarp. Scholars think he died in 202 and was buried in the crypt of the Church of St John in Lyons, which was later named St Irenaeus in his honour. Tragically, his tomb and remains were destroyed in 1562 by the Huguenots.

Today on his feast-day we pray for the Church's theologians that they would be men and women of prayer and dedication to the teaching of the Church but adventurous and pioneering in plumbing the full extent of that teaching through prayer, research and holiness of life. St Irenaeus had a great devotion to Mary, the Mother of God: we seek her intercession for all those who study theology and catechesis and who train our clergy, that they may be like Irenaeus – a faithful guardian of the truth.

'Even though Eve had Adam for a husband, she was still a virgin...By disobeying, Eve became the cause of death for herself and for the whole human race. In the same way Mary, though she had a husband, was still a virgin, and by obeying, she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race.' (St Irenaeus)

Genesis 17:1, 9-10, 15-22 • Psalm 127(128):1-5
Matthew 8:1-4

The centurion is no stranger to authority. As the commander of a hundred soldiers he would have demanded that those under him obeyed his orders without hesitation or question. Military men understand the importance of the verbal command. They are trained to obey and not question. Our centurion is faced with a terrible and heart-wrenching problem – his servant is sick and almost certainly dying. Matthew uses the Greek pais for ‘servant’ which could also mean ‘son’ or ‘boy’. Either way the sick child is someone very close and dear to this tough soldier.

Sickness has a terrible way of confronting us with our need and helplessness. When illness or disease strikes, in our distress we often don’t know where to turn. The centurion, however, knows exactly to whom he should turn. His approach to Jesus is very revealing. His heart is open and receptive. He wants God to work powerfully in his life. Unusually for a Gentile he addresses Jesus as Lord, shows a remarkable sensitivity to Jewish religious custom (it was forbidden for a Jew to enter the home of a Gentile and risk ritual defilement) and, to top it all, displays an outstanding confidence

in the power of Jesus’ word. He is rewarded not only by having his servant restored, but receives from the Lord an endorsement of his faith that speaks to the church in every generation. We are reminded of his faith every time we celebrate the Eucharist and speak those beautiful words: ‘Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.’

The centurion’s example speaks to us today. His humble heart and confident assurance provide us with a perfect example of faith in action. Jesus is the Lord of the universe and, as we humbly submit our lives to his authority and government, we too shall know his presence and healing. Charles de Foucauld, himself a former soldier and military man, spoke movingly of such abandonment into God’s hands, and we can use his words in our prayer today.

Father, I put myself into your hands; Father, I abandon myself to you, I entrust myself to you. Father, do with me as it pleases you. Whatever you do with me, I will thank you for it. Giving thanks for anything, I am ready for anything, I accept anything and I give thanks for anything. (Charles de Foucauld)

Genesis 18:1-15 • Luke 1:46-50, 53-55 • Matthew 8:5-17
(In Ireland: Acts 12:1-11 • Ps 33(34): 2-9 • 2 Tim 4:6-8, 17-18 • Mt 16:13-19)

We are a Church of St Peter and a Church of St Paul. We are both Petrine and Pauline. A clear and visible sign of this is that in front of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome stand two imposing statues of the saints. St Peter has the keys of the kingdom in his hand and St Paul the sword of truth. Likewise, not too far from St Peter’s Basilica, on the walls of the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, there are scenes from the life and martyrdom of these two pillars of the Church.

Tradition has always held that Peter and Paul are inseparable as together they represent the whole gospel message. Indeed, the early Christian community in Rome considered them to be a kind of counterbalance to the mythical Romulus and Remus, the two brothers credited with founding Rome. We perhaps find another biblical parallel on the theme of brothers in Cain and Abel. Their relationship was rent asunder by murder and sin whereas Peter and Paul, although very different in character and personality, revealed a new way of relating to each other by living out the gospel values. They learnt through the Spirit to love each other and respect each other’s gifts, talents and calling.

We know that both men were weak and frail in their human nature. Peter was a coward, and was emotional and impulsive. Paul led a brutal persecution against the early believers and was a murderer in all but name. Peter was transformed by the outpouring at Pentecost; Paul was transformed by meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. In today’s Gospel Jesus gives Simon Peter the keys to the kingdom with the promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church.

And they haven’t – although, by God, over the last two thousand years they have tried. The Church is a community of sinners: we are weak and fallen and, truth be told, our leaders are often also flawed and prone to succumb to all manner of temptation. However, it is God’s grace which brings healing and restoration, and ultimately it is God’s grace which will continue to protect the Church.

Lord, you gave St Peter the keys to the kingdom and St Paul, though martyred by the sword, wielded the sword of the truth of the gospel. Today we ask for their prayers and intercession.

Acts 12:1-11 • Ps 33(34): 2-9 • 2 Tim 4:6-8, 17-18 • Mt 16:13-19
(In Ireland: 1 Kings 19:16, 19-21 • Ps 15:1-11 • Gal 5:1, 13-18 • Lk 9:51-62)