

Do you like rollercoasters? Well, whether you do or you don't, it feels at the moment as if the liturgy is taking us on a rollercoaster ride! After the lows of Good Friday and Easter Saturday, from Easter Sunday onwards the liturgy brings us the highs of joy and enthusiasm, of victory and conquest. Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead: from the beginning the apostles witnessed to the truth that Jesus of Nazareth shattered the chains of death and overcame its sting. Death could not hold down the Lord of Life. This is our faith – in fact, our faith rests on this very truth, which we celebrate today on the feast of the Ascension.

Christian revelation makes clear that death is not the end but the beginning of a new life in Christ. In Romans Paul affirms, 'Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living' (14:9). Jesus Christ is the Lord of history and the fulfilment of history. He is the One who has gone before us: 'Jesus Christ... precedes us into the Father's glorious kingdom so that we, the members of his Body, may live in the hope of one day being with him for ever'

(CCC 666). The Ascension of Jesus is a mystery of faith but this does not mean that we cannot grasp it, enter into it and understand it anew and afresh each year. Faith invites this deeper journeying into the deeper truths of our faith.

The Ascension points to a further mystery: the return of the King in glory. Since the Ascension we have been living in the age of the Church, the last times. The Catholic Church teaches that the return of the King is imminent (see CCC 673). We don't know when it will happen – it could be tomorrow, it could be in ten thousand years' time. What we do know, however, is that the Spirit of God creates in us a deep longing for his return. We do not always appreciate it but at the heart of every Eucharistic celebration is the prayer: 'Marana tha! Our Lord, come.'

Lord Jesus, your kingdom is already present in mystery and is implanted as a seed in the Church and in all of creation. This seed will come to full life when the sons and daughters of God are revealed and the King of glory returns. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Acts 1:1-11 • Psalm 46(47):2-3, 6-9
Ephesians 1:17-23 • Matthew 28:16-20

When were you last asked, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' (v. 2)? It just isn't the kind of question we ask, is it? But it's the question Paul put to the believers in Ephesus when he first arrived there. What was it about the believers in Ephesus that caused Paul to ask them this question?

We don't, in fact, know the answer to this question, but what we do know is that his letter to the Ephesian Church reveals a believing community really seeking to get to grips with the profound truths of the Christian faith. Paul knew that this question is vital because how it is answered reveals a key of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit can be the best-kept secret of the Christian life! Christian theology teaches us that God the Father and God the Son sent the Spirit. The Spirit was sent so that we would not be orphans when Jesus returned to his Father; the Spirit was sent so that we would not be without the strength, grace and power we need in order to live the Christian life.

Without the Spirit, the Christian life might be seen to be barren and harsh, reduced merely to duty,

obligation and tradition. The truth is, thank God, that we have received the Spirit in all his rich and wonderful fullness: first in baptism and then again at our Confirmation we are strengthened and renewed by the Spirit of the living God, who breathes his breath into us so that we can bear witness and testify to Christ with courage, conviction and joy. We need to recover an awareness that the Spirit of God lives in us, that we are temples of the Holy Spirit and possess, therefore, an inalienable and profound dignity and vocation.

How do we do this? There is no magic formula, but we can fall to our knees and ask God to send his Holy Spirit to us. We know that God cannot resist the humble and contrite. We know that God pours out his grace and blessing upon those who cry out to him day and night. Jesus cried out to his Father, the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission (see Heb. 5:7). The same is true of us – and so we pray:

Come, Holy Spirit: fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire and power of your love.

Acts 19:1-8 • Psalm 67(68):2-7
John 16:29-33

God knows we need heroes. We live in a celebrity-obsessed culture, where wealth and money are worshipped and fleeting fame or, indeed, infamy is desired as a kind of epitome of success and achievement. The saints, however, forsook the desires of this world in order to follow Christ. They are the true heroes, the beacons of light which illuminate the path of history and our own lives as we strive to follow also in the way of holiness.

St Paul ranks as one of the Church's greatest sons. If you ever get a chance to visit Rome, try and get to see the Church of St Paul Outside the Walls, which celebrates the life of this giant of the Christian life. We are a Church built on St Peter but also on St Paul. For sure, St Peter is the Rock, the foundation stone, but St Paul is the one who brought the gospel to the Gentiles – to us – and to the ends of the earth.

What was it about Paul that made him such an outstanding witness of the Christian faith? We encounter two of his many qualities in our reading today and we invite you to reflect upon them. The first is humility. Paul, unusually for

a humble man, draws attention to his humility: 'You yourselves know how I lived among you... serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which befell me' (vv. 18-19). Paul wasn't boasting but simply stating the truth – he did not have time for false humility or modesty. He spent his life in service of Christ and others. As St Augustine said, 'Unless humility precede, accompany and follow up all the good we accomplish, unless we keep our eyes fixed on it, pride will snatch everything right out of our hand.'

Secondly, Paul cultivated a profound sensitivity and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit. He could hear the Spirit speak to him, guide him, lead him, warn him, counsel him, rebuke him, affirm him and love him. For Paul, the Spirit was the evangelizer; he was the principal agent and mover behind his outreach and ministry. Paul was rooted, grounded and anchored in the Spirit.

Lord, just as the Spirit was at work in Paul's life, may I too know his work in my own life, leading and guiding me in my service of Christ and of others.

Acts 20:17-27 • Psalm 67(68):10-11, 20-21
John 17:1-11

Which are you: a realist, an optimist or a pessimist? Is the glass half empty or half full? Or maybe there isn't even a glass! Knowing the Lord and the gospel should make us realists and optimists. The pessimist will always protest that they are simply being a realist but, deep down, they know this isn't true. There is a vein of cynicism and negativity in us all, which we must strive to resist and overcome.

Paul was both a realist and an optimist. As an outstanding leader and shepherd of God's people he knew that every believer needs to be alert, awake and self-controlled because we have an enemy, and this enemy comes in many forms and may wear many disguises. Sometimes our enemy is closer to home than we realize – and sometimes our own worst enemy is ourselves!

Paul was under no illusion that he had his enemies and so did the Church at Ephesus. He warns the Ephesian leaders that their enemies are like 'fierce wolves'. The power of the grace of the daily liturgy is that these words spoken many centuries ago by Paul still speak to us today. In essence his message is this: 'Be on your guard against those who distort the truth and

who lead others astray.' We are called to be grounded in our faith so that we can stand firm and resist every attack.

For example, many question the teaching that Jesus is true God and true man; many question the teaching that God is three persons in One; many question the Virgin Birth or the Second Coming. Certainly, the sexual and ethical teaching of the Church is ridiculed and mocked in relation to contraception, abortion, euthanasia and so on. These are all tough issues but if we devote ourselves to becoming familiar with them, praying for those who resist the gospel, we need not be afraid or intimidated by opposition or ridicule. We will be given wisdom by God our Father to engage with those who oppose our message.

Remember, though, that God does not need defending – he is God. And, actually, the Pope himself does not need defending – he is the Pope. Let us devote our energies to gaining such a clear understanding of our faith that we can always stand firm, assured of the promises and the teaching of Christ.

'We cannot always be defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it.' (C.S. Lewis)

Acts 20:28-38 • Psalm 67(68):29-30, 33-36
John 17:11-19

It can be a little overwhelming to read the Acts of the Apostles as Paul was just such an incredible example of a Christian evangelist. How can anyone live up to his amazingly courageous witness? But the truth is that God is calling us to live like Paul, because Paul strove to live like Jesus. Paul was like a rubber ball – he simply kept bouncing back. He was irrepressible. He was, if you like, a true revolutionary. His presence could literally cause a riot – which is precisely what happens in our reading today.

Paul was a man of bold proclamation and firm resolve. He was more than prepared to get into the fray, argue his point and share Christ whatever the cost, whatever the threat to his wellbeing or personal security. His opponents in Jerusalem were so furious with him that the Sanhedrin commander was clearly concerned that Paul would be literally ‘torn in pieces’ (23:10). He had to intervene to prevent this from happening – Paul was a Roman citizen and because of this had many privileges, not least the right to protection.

What do you think God thought about Paul’s approach? Do you think God might have wanted to

take him to one side and say, ‘Now listen, Paul. Go easy, will you? You can’t go around upsetting people left, right and centre. The gospel is about love and peace after all.’ It is true that if any of us were to get too enthusiastic about our faith, we might well be taken to one side and counselled along these lines. However, God was having none of it. This is what God said to Paul: ‘Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome’ (23:11). In other words God said: ‘Keep going, keep witnessing, keep testifying.’

Evangelization can be a tricky subject in Church circles. We often say things like, ‘We don’t like to ram our faith down people’s throats’ or ‘We believe that the best way to witness to our faith is by acts of love, service and kindness.’ The problem with these mindsets is that they do not reflect the open-heartedness of the gospel message. Sooner or later we have to hold out the gospel of life and the gospel of joy to others.

Lord, give me courage, grace and clarity to be bold and confident in bearing witness to my faith, regardless of the cost.

Acts 22:30; 23:6-11 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5, 7-11

John 17:20-26

The Acts of the Apostles is an action-packed, nail-biting thriller of the highest order. If you can, and you should try it at least once, read it in one sitting. It can be done and it is a lot of fun because we are taken on an adventure as the master storyteller Luke, co-operating with his heavenly co-author, the Holy Spirit, brings us the incredible eyewitness account of the formation of the early Church. The text has the power, literally, to take our breath away. J.K. Rowling’s 230 million copies of the Harry Potter series look tame when we consider how many Bibles or New Testaments or even simply Acts of the Apostles have been sold over the past two thousand years. Actually, as an aside, the Bible sells more than any other book year in, year out and has done so for over two thousand years!

Having said that, today’s reading brings all this dynamism and excitement to a sudden, shuddering halt as we encounter not faith but doubt, not belief but cynicism, not acceptance of the gospel but its rejection. King Agrippa heard the gospel proclaimed by Paul – surely

one of the greatest evangelists who has ever lived – but even the supreme evangelist could not persuade him or win him over. This last king in the Herodian line had a hard and callous heart. Little is known about the life of King Agrippa apart from that he was only seventeen when his father died in around AD 44, he assumed the throne when he was twenty-five and died in AD 100. In today’s passage it is evident that he displayed a hard and cynical attitude towards the gospel message, saying, ‘In a short time you think to make me a Christian’ (26:28). He was closed to the grace of conversion.

The Holy Spirit does not force himself upon us but gently leads us by light and truth. We can be sure that Paul prayed for the king, as we pray for those we meet in the course of our lives who resist God’s grace. We all know people who are disdainful or indifferent or cynical towards the message of the gospel; their hearts are hard and they need our prayer and intercession.

Father, inflame within me the fire of your love, so that I may bring to others the love of Christ Jesus.

Acts 25:13-21 • Psalm 102(103):1-2, 11-12, 19-20

John 21:15-19

Today our journey through the Acts of the Apostles draws to a close. The liturgy has helped us traverse the twenty-eight chapters of this Lucan masterpiece. In our age of modern media, the ending of a film or a long-running TV show requires great skill and intelligence. Get it wrong and that is all that will be remembered – and the public are scathing when something which showed great promise does not live up to its potential. Many have commented that the ending of Acts is rather frustrating because we do not find out what happened to our hero Paul – we do not discover what happened to him after his house arrest or how he died. Well, sometimes what the Bible does not say is as important as what it does say. The last verses of each of the books of the Bible would make an interesting study because they reveal so much about the central message the writer was hoping to convey. For example, Matthew's Gospel ends with the memorable verse, 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age' (28:20 NIV).

The final verse of Acts is no less compelling: 'Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom

of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 31 NIV). This statement beautifully and powerfully sums up Paul's life: the reason Paul existed was to proclaim the gospel, and this is truly the heart of our own vocation and mission, whoever we are, clergy or lay. The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea recorded that Paul was beheaded under the brutal reign of the Emperor Nero, which would date his death between 64 and 67 AD.

Paul was not a super-apostle, he was not even a superman: he was, however, a saint, a man on fire with the love of God. He was flawed and human but he was also holy and set apart for Christ. His life is a testament to the power of God's grace. This same grace and power is available to us all: by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us we can walk the path of holiness, we can be perfect (Matt. 5:48).

Paul, our brother in Christ, you were a courageous martyr, a faithful warrior, a true soldier of Christ. By your witness and example may we too lay down our lives in love and service of our mother, the Church, and our brothers and sisters.

Acts 28:16-20, 30-31 • Psalm 10(11):4-5, 7
John 21:20-25

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit totally transformed the apostles. Cowardly, confused and lacking in confidence, they became convinced, certain and clear after receiving the Holy Spirit. The old reaction gave way to the new. The coming of the Spirit changed everything: life could never be the same, either for them or for us.

Just as a lover delights in showering gifts upon the beloved, so God blesses his people with his Spirit. The Spirit is given so we can live out our vocation. The essence of our call is to live a life in the Spirit. At the dawn of creation God breathed life into creation, and at the birth of the new creation the Lord breathed his life into his disciples, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (v. 22).

It is truly better to give than to receive, but none of us can give the Holy Spirit. Our role is simply to receive humbly and graciously. Our capacity to receive the Spirit is determined by our attitude. The Spirit retreats from self-reliance, self-confidence and self-assurance, but is quick to comfort the broken-hearted, the poor in spirit, the needy and the humble.

The disciples were filled with the Spirit because they were empty in themselves: they had discovered the secret of receiving the Spirit.

The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost is a recurring event in the life of the Church. Today we can receive and enjoy the Spirit in a new and exciting way. Don't be afraid to cry out, 'Come, Holy Spirit, and fill the hearts of your faithful.' What can prevent us from being filled with the Spirit is that we rely too heavily on our own ability, not necessarily realizing that even this is given to us by God. Our confidence in ourselves is often greater than our confidence in God! We need to be humbled by our own limitations and overwhelmed by our own weakness, so that we can pray with heartfelt conviction:

'Renew your wonders in this our day, as by a new Pentecost. Grant to your Church that, being of one mind and steadfast in prayer with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and following the lead of blessed St Peter, it may advance the reign of our Divine Saviour, the reign of truth and justice, the reign of love and peace.'
(Pope John XXIII)

Acts 2:1-11 • Psalm 103(104):1, 24, 29-31, 34
1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13 • John 20:19-23

Biblical scholars are divided as to whether this passage, the Sermon on the Mount, relates to a specific event, or whether Matthew has juxtaposed several of Jesus' teachings and presented them as one episode. Either way, Matthew invites us to sit peacefully with the crowd at the feet of Jesus and receive the life-changing message which he gives. Matthew introduces the section with a subtle implication that Jesus sat down to teach as an impromptu response when he saw the crowds – that he felt compelled to give the people spiritual food when he saw them. Elsewhere in the Gospels we are told that Jesus could look at someone, through the external appearances, and discern their spiritual state. In this episode Matthew is perhaps implying that he was doing a similar thing, but with a multitude, seeing beyond the exterior and discerning the afflictions which burden people (then as now).

Despite the intervening centuries, people then were almost certainly weighed down with similar problems to ours – anxiety, fears for the future, guilt, the woundedness of broken relationships, and so on. Jesus could see it all. He still can.

Jesus starts his message with the astounding statements that those who carry various spiritual burdens are, in fact, 'blessed'. The word means more than just happiness – which is often affected by circumstances – but rather a deeper, more permanent sense of real wellbeing and security.

Though we are not told so specifically, his words would have been a rich source of comfort to the people, just as they are to us who, in our imagination, are sitting amongst them. For he is saying that, bruised and burdened as we are, fearful and imperfect as we are, if our inner orientation is to try to find God, then we can be assured that he claims us and loves us as his children. It is, in fact, a neat encapsulation of the whole gospel message. In the final analysis, nothing else really matters.

Lord, help me to hear your voice, and to allow your words to penetrate deep within my soul, healing the hurts and resentments which I have buried over the years, and bringing your love and peace into my inner being. Help me to see your love as my true security, rather than possessions or relationships, and help me to transmit your love to the world.

1 Kings 17:1-6 • Psalm 120(121):1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

Jesus used the images of salt and light to express what it means to be a disciple. In an age without fridges or deep-freezers salt was added to meat and fish as a preservative. In comparing his disciples to salt he is in effect saying that we improve the quality of human existence and preserve it from destruction. In Jesus' time, the only light available was derived from small dishes in which oil was burnt. Compared to the illumination of a modern lamp, for example, such an ancient contraption would have been, by our standards, very weak, but in those days it would have been a God-send. Jesus' disciples bring light into the darkest situation.

How can we who seek to follow Jesus today live as salt and light? We can literally light up the world and improve life's flavour by striving every day to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. A life overflowing with the Holy Spirit bears witness to both the fruits of the Spirit (see Gal. 5:22-23) and the gifts of the Spirit (see Isa. 11:2).

The challenge is that it is much easier to love in the general than it

is in the particular. Nevertheless, our call is to love both in the particular and in general.

What this means is that the life in the Spirit, being light and salt, is lived out in the daily tussle of everyday life. To be a disciple is to be led by God; but if we want God to lead, we must be willing to follow. God leads us to love and serve both those nearest and dearest to us and those we rub up against, who push us, test us and at times may drive us to distraction.

It is precisely in these situations that we are called to be salt and light. The invitation to follow Christ is always an invitation to come and die with him in order to rise with him. In dying with him we become salt, in rising with him we become light.

'When Christ calls us he bids us to come and die. It may not be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and family and were martyred for Christ. But it is the same death every time – death in Christ, the death of the old man and the rising of the new.'
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

1 Kings 17:7-16 • Psalm 4:2-5, 7-8

Matthew 5:13-16

Today the liturgy invites us to celebrate the life and witness of St Barnabas. All we know about St Barnabas is to be found in the New Testament. A Jew, born in Cyprus and named Joseph or Joses, he was renamed Barnabas ('son of encouragement') by the apostles after he had sold all his land and laid the proceeds from the sale at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:36).

When the newly converted Saul arrived in Jerusalem it was Barnabas who went and fetched him and introduced him to the apostles (Acts 9:27). Some time later Barnabas was sent down to Antioch to investigate reports of conversions there and, discovering the reports to be true, he stayed on, using his gifts as prophet and teacher to build up the Church. In Acts 11:24 we read, 'he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith', and he was clearly held in high esteem by his fellow believers. Perhaps finding the leadership of the Church at Antioch a huge responsibility, he went to Tarsus in search of Saul to assist him and for the next year they built up the Church together (Acts 11:25-26).

Barnabas and Saul were then sent out by the Holy Spirit as missionaries (Acts 13:4). The

conversion of Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:12) seems to have been a turning point in their missionary activity, for after that time Saul seems to come to prominence over Barnabas, the name 'Saul' being replaced with the name 'Paul' (Acts 13:9) and instead of 'Barnabas and Saul' (Acts 11:30; 12:25) Luke records 'Paul and Barnabas' (Acts 13:43).

When the two men were about to embark on a second missionary journey a rupture occurred in their relationship. Barnabas wanted to take his cousin John Mark along with them, but Paul, having been disappointed by the young man's desertion of them on their first journey, refused. A sharp dispute followed with both men going their separate ways (Acts 15:36-41). Luke does not refer to Barnabas again, but Paul refers to him in Galatians as being briefly led astray (2:13) and again in 1 Corinthians 9:6. It is believed that his rift with Paul was ultimately healed. Tradition has it that Barnabas was martyred in Salamis in Cyprus by stoning. He is the patron saint of Cyprus.

Lord God, we thank you for the witness of St Barnabas. St Barnabas, pray for us.

*Acts 11:21-26; 13:1-3 • Psalm 97(98):1-6
Matthew 5:17-19*

Imagine the reaction of the crowd when they heard Jesus say that, if they wanted to enter the kingdom of God, their righteousness must surpass even that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (v. 20). Knowing that these religious leaders were fastidious in their observance of the law, they must have wondered if there was any hope for them! Jesus was, however, pointing to the fact that the Pharisees put great stock on the external practice of the law whilst neglecting the spirit of the law.

What Jesus has to say next, when he tackles the subject of anger, makes it very clear that our love for God must affect the attitudes of our heart. No one would disagree that murder is wrong, but now Jesus ups the ante and says that it is equally displeasing to God when we are angry with another person. He even says that whenever we find ourselves exclaiming to another person in annoyance or frustration, 'You idiot!' or 'You stupid fool!', or worse, we are actually sinning quite seriously because we are robbing them of their dignity and questioning their intellectual capacity. Now before you throw up

your hands and say, 'Oh, don't be daft! You're misinterpreting Jesus' teaching', listen carefully to Jesus' words: 'whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" shall be liable to the hell of fire' (v. 22). *Raca* is an Aramaic word which meant 'empty' and in the context of abuse meant literally 'empty headed'. In an age in which anger erupts very publicly in rage (e.g. road rage, air rage), we need to take Jesus' words to heart.

Speaking about anger in his masterpiece *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* St John Climacus said: 'If the Holy Spirit is peace of soul, as he is said to be and is in reality, and if anger is disturbance of heart, as it actually is and as it is said to be, then nothing prevents the Holy Spirit's presence in us than anger. The first step toward freedom from anger is to keep the lips silent when the heart is stirred: the next, to keep thoughts silent when the soul is upset: the last to be totally still when unclean winds are blowing.'

Lord Jesus, set me free from all forms of anger. Create in me a peaceful heart and a calm spirit, and grant me your grace.

*1 Kings 18:41-46 • Psalm 64(65):10-13
Matthew 5:20-26*

Subjects like divorce and adultery are tricky in any culture and in every generation. Adultery is specifically forbidden by the sixth commandment, although Jewish law was much harsher on the woman than on the man, as the woman was considered the man's property. Only with the coming of Jesus is the equal obligation of the man to marital fidelity underlined. Jesus is full of compassion for the adulterous woman about to be stoned in John 8, forgiving her but acknowledging that she has sinned. Remarriage after divorce was considered adultery, as was the mere desire to be in relationship with someone other than one's legal spouse. In today's passage from the Sermon on the Mount, the principle behind Jesus' teaching – and an extension of the thinking behind yesterday's Gospel – is that, where broken marriages are concerned, prevention is preferable to cure.

It is always easy to present counsels of perfection. They have their uses, but sometimes these are limited. Some relationships break down irreparably as spite can become the order of the day and real communication is no longer possible. We are all human and it is so easy and natural for married couples to despair and consider

separating, or even to pin their hopes for a happy future on other partners. Jesus understands all this, but reminds us of the ideal blueprint for healthy living, which involves an all-out commitment to fidelity and a willingness to weather the storm.

We may well experience desire when looking at an attractive person. That is natural. What is abnormal and unhealthy is entertaining any lustful fantasies which may well follow. 'If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out...', says Jesus (v. 29). It is not that Jesus wants our lives to be difficult and prohibitive. His real desire for us is inner peace and fulfilment, and he knows we cannot build these on another person's misery.

Obviously, we are not empowered to act as judge and jury on another's marital situation. It is wrong to do so, as there are always many factors of which we are unaware. However, the point about today's Gospel is that in our own situation we need to be attuned to the danger signals, so that we may take preventative action to salvage the relationship if at all possible. Not only is this sound common sense, but our relationship with God and our lifelong spiritual growth depend on it.

1 Kings 19:9, 11-16 • Psalm 26(27):7-9, 13-14

Matthew 5:27-32

It is not often that we hear about oaths in today's world, although they are still sworn, both formally and informally. An oath is a solemn declaration, often invoking the name of God, testifying to the truth of a statement being made. Thus, in a court of law a person may be required to swear on oath. Likewise, someone being initiated solemnly into membership of a particular movement or organization, or an individual holding responsibility within a large organization and committing themselves to discretion or secrecy, may well be asked to take an oath. All these are formal conventions which have to be followed if we are to be part of those structures.

Then there are the oaths which people take upon themselves: informal oaths intended to convince others of their sincerity. The trouble with such oaths is that they can quickly become manipulative. If something has been sworn on oath, it can be thought more authentic or true, whilst in reality this may not be the case. Is there not also something rather pessimistic about the mentality which assumes that a simple and sincere declaration

of intent is somehow not enough? Whatever happened to the principle of one's word being one's bond?

Oaths were very much a part of Jewish culture in the time of Jesus. God's name would be invoked and divine retribution anticipated in the event of any failure to keep it, as such distortion was seen as profaning God's name (Exod. 20:7). Jesus taught that oaths – far from underlining the truth – were in fact obstacles to truth and love. That is why he said, 'Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool' (vv. 34-35). Jesus wants us to know who we are and what we think about things, and to have the confidence to say 'Yes' if we agree with something and 'No' if we disagree. For Jesus, simple replies are better than a complicated oath, which, as he goes on to say, 'comes from the evil one' (v. 37 NIV).

'Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.' (Eccles. 5:2 NIV)

1 Kings 19:19-21 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5, 7-10

Matthew 5:33-37

It is common today for commentators to point out that the three major world faiths are very similar in that they all share a belief in one God. While it is true that Christians believe in one God, Christian faith departs radically from Islam and Judaism in its belief that in the one God there are three Persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Furthermore – and this is an even more scandalous idea as far as the other two faiths are concerned – we believe that Jesus of Nazareth, the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, entered time and space and lived as one of us.

Belief in the Trinity is a central mystery of Christian faith. We are baptized 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19), and we are invited to develop a relationship with each Person of the Blessed Trinity. Jesus' life, work, ministry, preaching and teaching all testify to this fundamental truth of Christian revelation.

In fact, the doctrine of the Most Holy Trinity could be described

as the central mystery of the Christian faith and life, and it is this mystery that we are celebrating and rejoicing in today, Trinity Sunday.

For many Christians, the 'mystery' of the Trinity remains just that: a mystery. But the word in this sense is not used to mean a conundrum, puzzle or riddle that is impossible to solve, but a holy and sacred truth which we will only be able to penetrate more deeply if we ask the Holy Spirit to shed his light and truth into our minds and spirits. Instead of saying, 'I can't get my head around the Trinity', we need to say, 'I need God's help to get my head into the Trinity.' In other words, we need to pray, 'Lord, teach me, show me, guide me, lead me into the beauty, glory and majesty of the mystery of your Blessed Trinity.' Try praying the following prayer today:

*'O my God, Trinity whom I adore,
help me to forget myself entirely
so as to establish myself in you,
unmovable and peaceful as if my
soul were already in eternity.'
(Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity)*

Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9 • Daniel 3:52-56

2 Corinthians 13:11-13 • John 3:16-18

Worldly wisdom says, 'Don't get mad – just get even!' Jesus teaches otherwise. For the fifth time in just nineteen verses, we find Old Testament teaching ('You have heard that it was said...') placed alongside the words of Jesus ('But I say to you...'). Jesus' teaching must be understood in the light of his own words: 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law...' (5:17). Jesus is not nullifying the Mosaic law; rather, he is unpacking for his listeners God's original intent and purpose in giving these laws.

The 'eye for an eye' principle is not some kind of sanctified 'tit for tat'. It was intended as a limitation or restriction to ensure that strict justice was meted out. It was a guideline for judges, to make sure the punishment fitted the crime, not a licence for individuals to embark on vindictive vendettas. As Paul reminds us, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord' (Rom. 12:19).

The 'eye for an eye' principle was God's expression of justice. Jesus stresses the other side of the coin, namely, God's expression of mercy. He urges his followers to lay down their rights under the law, to break the cycle of violence and

vengeance and set in motion a new law of love. 'It is useless for a man to flaunt his knowledge of the law if he undermines its teaching by his actions', wrote St Anthony of Padua, whose feast we celebrated three days ago.

Let's consider some ways in which we can practise Jesus' radical law of love. Instead of striking back or lashing out when someone harms us, we can practise non-resistance as Jesus did. In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the bishop gifts his silver candlesticks to a thief, thereby becoming the catalyst that transformed the thief into a man of integrity. Rather than jealously guarding our possessions, let's provide for those in need. Instead of rendering grudging service to hard taskmasters, let us cheerfully work overtime to complete our tasks. Perhaps Paul had this teaching in mind when he wrote his instructions to slaves (see Col. 3:22-25). Let's be proactive in our giving, rather than waiting for the needy to come to us to beg or borrow. We may not 'get even' but we shall surely be blessed.

Lord, in every situation I face today, help me to check my instinctive reactions, and let your law of love guide my responses.

1 Kings 21:1-16 • Psalm 5:2-3, 5-7

Matthew 5:38-42

During the Second World War a Dutch Christian named Corrie ten Boom endured unthinkable suffering at the Ravensbruck concentration camp. In her book *Tramp for the Lord*, she writes of her struggle to forgive a former Ravensbruck guard. She had just been preaching about the love and mercy of God and knew she had to forgive him, but as she recalled how her sister Betsy had died at that camp, Corrie just could not bring herself to forgive her 'enemy'. As her former captor stood before her, hand outstretched, asking for forgiveness, Corrie prayed; she told the Lord that she would stretch out her hand, but that he would have to do the rest. And he did! Corrie writes: 'woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"' A hated and feared enemy was transformed into a beloved brother.

It's easy to love those who love us. It's even easier to hate those who hate us! Jesus not only asks us to check our natural reactions, he commands us to respond in a manner that is not so much unnatural as supernatural. For he challenges us to imitate the Heavenly Father, who does not discriminate between the 'good' and the 'evil' but loves everyone regardless. But how can we, who are so flawed, be 'perfect' like the Father? A man called Carl Schurz said, 'Ideals are like the stars. We never reach them but, like the mariners on the sea, we chart our course by them.' We are to chart our course through life guided and directed by the Father's perfect love.

This level of maturity, however, cannot be achieved by gritting our teeth in a 'do-or-die' kind of determination. But we need not despair, for, as Corrie ten Boom discovered, 'when God tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself.'

Perfect Father, pour out your love into my heart by your Holy Spirit, so that I might be empowered to love my enemies as Jesus commanded.

1 Kings 21:17-29 • Psalm 50(51):3-6, 11, 16

Matthew 5:43-48

Jesus reserves his harshest criticism for 'hypocrites'. The word is taken from the Greek (*hypocrites*), which signifies an actor who wears a mask. The hypocrite's problem is that, in acting out a part, he deceives and blinds himself because he cannot see the light.

Professional actors cannot always relinquish their theatrical gestures in daily life. This is also true of 'hypocrites' who are trying to cut a dash and make a good impression. They are in bondage to the opinions of others. They are performing. Thus, their good deeds may be done for attention or promotion rather than out of genuine social concern.

Jesus applies this 'wearing of masks' to the three pillars of contemporary Jewish religious practice: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. In his day a practising Jew was bound by law to tithe his income and a devout one would give voluntarily in addition. It was not uncommon for Jews to give one-sixth of their total earnings. Paul tells us that 'God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Cor. 9:7). Jesus too is intent that our giving should emanate from a warm, loving response to others. Giving can be life-enhancing, liberating, joyful, transforming, challenging us from within to become more like Jesus, our model.

The same holds true for prayer. We were made for relationship with God, and part of that relationship is prayer. It is natural. But, as Jesus teaches, it is something that should be done without show or ostentation. We are communicating with God, not trying to impress anyone else.

Then there is fasting. Fasting is more to do with discipleship than triumphalistic self-discipline. If we cannot fast without devouring everyone in sight, we have not drawn closer to God by steadying our hearts and wills and reminding ourselves of our dependence on him.

Jesus teaches that giving, praying and fasting should be surreptitious. Often we find this hard as we secretly crave recognition and approval. However, we should not despair, but pray for self-esteem and self-knowledge. God loves us and appreciates our efforts but he can do without the trumpet-blowing. If we view our lives through rose-tinted spectacles, we stunt our spiritual growth. The good news is that we can turn to God, who will remove our masks and set us free to be real.

Lord, help me to be true to myself. Teach me not to seek the approval of others, but to do everything for your glory alone.

2 Kings 2:1, 6-14 • Psalm 30(31):20-24

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

We read today the Our Father, so familiar that there is a danger that we fail to meditate on its riches. Tertullian called it 'the summary of the whole gospel' and St Thomas Aquinas 'the most perfect of prayers'. The warning against heaping up 'empty phrases' should remind us that God wants genuine prayer offered in sincerity, not prayers said to impress other people. Our prayer should be brief: God already knows what we need.

We should always remember that this prayer came from 'the master and model of our prayer' (CCC 2775). It was Jesus who taught us to pray 'Our Father'. He almost certainly spoke Aramaic when he taught it, using the word 'Abba' for 'Father' – a word that has the intimacy of 'daddy'. This reveals something of the attitude we should have in prayer. St Augustine makes a helpful comment: 'Our Father: at this name love is aroused in us...What would he not give to his children who ask, since he has already granted them the gift of being his children?'

It may seem strange that we are told to pray in secret (6:6) and yet pray to 'our Father', rather than to 'my Father': this reminds us

that even when we pray alone we are still part of the family of the Church, praying along with all other Christians. In fact this prayer even crosses the many divisions among Christians. These are words we all have in common. We are all uniting our prayers to our Father, who is God. Stop and think of this wonderful privilege. Our Father is God Almighty. This should lift our hearts to praise and thanksgiving, and give us confidence that he can provide more than we can ask for or even think of.

As we pray in Jesus' words, our prayer has a universal and eternal significance: 'The baptized cannot pray to "our" Father without bringing before him all those for whom he gave his beloved Son. God's love has no bounds, neither should our prayer. Praying "our" Father opens to us the dimensions of his love revealed in Christ: praying with and for all who do not yet know him, so that Christ may "gather into one the children of God"' (CCC 2793).

God our Father, we thank you for our wonderful relationship with you. May your kingdom come, that all people may come to worship you and know your loving care and forgiveness.

Ecclesiasticus 48:1-14 • Psalm 96(97):1-7

Matthew 6:7-15

Like a Jack-of-many-trades, Jesus adopts many roles: He is the good Shepherd, the Door, the Vine, the Lamb of God...and, in today's reading, an Investment Advisor! I spoke to a group of youngsters recently. In the course of my talk, I read out a series of statements and they had to say whether or not these were taken from the Bible. When I said, 'Money is the root of all evil', most of the hands shot up, most of the heads nodded vigorously. But what the Bible actually says is: 'For the love of money is the root of all evils...' (1 Tim. 6:10, emphasis added). It is not money that is evil, but according to money – or to anything or anyone else for that matter – the place and priority in our hearts that we should reserve for God.

Our Investment Advisor does not tell us not to invest; rather he proffers sound investment advice regarding our investment options (vv. 19, 20). Too often too many believe that Jesus is anti-money, anti-profits or anti-riches, but Jesus is merely concerned that our primary focus should be treasure in heaven, the kind of treasure that outlives life itself. As Bishop Fulton J. Sheen put it, 'Our Lord did not ask us to give up the things of the

earth, but to exchange them for better things.'

Have you noticed how kids may throw themselves frantically into a 'treasure hunt', fight tooth and nail over the 'treasure', jealously guard their treasure between clenched fists and talk of little else for the next twenty-four hours? But check on those same kids in a week and you find their 'treasure' relegated to the back of a closet or lying crumpled in a waste bin. In a different yet similar sense, we are often no wiser in our own attitudes and perspectives on treasure!

Spiritual vision is of supreme importance (vv. 22, 23). If we are spiritually short-sighted, limited by a purely earthly perspective, then we will strive and stress in vain over purely transient treasures. But if we share God's vision and his divine perspective, then we will set our hearts and minds on an inheritance that will never perish and invest in the gilt-edged securities of God's kingdom.

'Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise: Be Thou mine inheritance now and always; Be Thou and Thou only the first in my heart: O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure Thou art.'

2 Kings 11:1-4, 9-18, 20 • Psalm 131(132):11-14, 17-18

Matthew 6:19-23

Jesus' words in this passage are familiar to most people, and most would claim to admire them, whether they are Christians or not. Yet how seriously do we take them? When we really think about them, they seem to go against prudence and common sense. We have responsibilities in this world, bills to pay and families to look after. It is all very well to talk about God feeding the birds and clothing the flowers, yet we know that money does not grow on trees, and if we want anything we have to go out and earn it. So it is probably not possible to take Jesus' commands literally.

What matters is the attitude that we have. Are we worried and anxious about where we are to find money for food and clothes, about how we are to pay the next bill? Are these the things that fill our mind during the day?

Jesus is telling us that we have an almighty Father who loves and cares for us. If we believe this and really trust in him, then we will not worry about such things. This does not mean we can sit back and do nothing: it means that we can

be sure that our Father will not abandon those who trust in him. And, as Jesus points out, worrying does nothing to help with any of our problems.

Jesus challenges us to ask where our heart is. What motivates us during the day? Are we preoccupied with our worldly concerns, or are we always trying to please God and trust in him? Of course we need to do our jobs properly, but we must remember that our real treasure is in heaven. The world most of us live in is busier and more complex than it has ever been and there are many things to distract us from God. Material goods are abundant, so the lure of Mammon is strong. In this situation we need to pray every day and offer up all we do to God. Let us truly try to seek him and his kingdom first, trusting that as we do so he will help us in all the needs and problems of our lives.

Heavenly Father, we know that you love us and care for us more than we can imagine. May we find our security in your loving providence, and always seek your kingdom above everything else.

2 Chronicles 24:17-25 • Psalm 88(89):4-5, 29-34

Matthew 6:24-34

Be amazed, be astounded and be incredulous at the gift of the Eucharist. Our problem all too often is that we are not amazed or astounded enough; we fail to be moved by this incredible gift. We fail to grasp the holiness, sacredness and wonder of what it is we are receiving. Jesus meant us to be in awe. He wanted us to grasp the full import and impact of his teaching. When we receive Holy Communion we are receiving Christ himself; when we celebrate the Eucharist, Jesus' passion, death and resurrection are actually made present in our midst. Through the action of the priest and the promises of Christ the power of Jesus' saving death and resurrection is made available to us. Our role is simple: we enjoy, revere and worship the God-Man who came down as Living Bread from heaven, and we can resolve to approach the sacrament with a new appreciation and a fresh ardour. Food is for the body, the Eucharist for the soul.

St John Vianney prayed and contemplated in front of the Blessed Sacrament for hours on end. This was where he was at his happiest and most content. This was where

he gained his sublime wisdom and insight on what is really the 'source and summit' of the Christian life: 'Without the Holy Eucharist there would be no happiness in this world, and life wouldn't be bearable. When we communicate with God in the prayer before the Eucharist we lose ourselves in God like a drop in the ocean; in these vast depths of love, there's enough to lose yourself for eternity. There is nothing as great as the Eucharist. If you were to put all the good actions in the world against a Communion well made, it would be like a grain of dust against a mountain.'

Let us dedicate ourselves to the Eucharist and growing in wonder and amazement at this most precious of all gifts. To do this, we need only take some simple, practical steps: spend a few more minutes in prayer after Mass; come to Mass a few minutes earlier so we can pray and be still. Simple steps, rich reward.

'O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment thine.'

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16 • Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 • John 6:51-58

Unfortunately it is part of human nature that we often take pleasure in condemning others and gossiping about them. We can see this every day in the pages of tabloid newspapers. We like to feel superior to someone else and look down on them. But usually we need very little evidence before we pass judgement on people: we are quick to condemn, even when we do not know the full circumstances of their actions. Jesus warns against judging others. We are not in a position to do this, because we are sinners ourselves, and we may well do the very same things we condemn in others, or even worse. 'Therefore you have no excuse...whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgement upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things' (Rom. 2:1).

The other reason why we should not judge is that we can never know the full story of another person's life, or what exactly is going on in their hearts. Only God can know this, and we should leave judgement up to him. This ought to make us cautious, but in fact

we are quick to condemn others, though remarkably good at making excuses for our own bad behaviour.

Jesus says that if we judge others harshly, God will also judge us harshly. It is only fair that the standards we use in judging others should be applied in turn to us. Rather than condemning others and excusing ourselves, we ought to do the reverse. It would be better if we were critical of our sins, but lenient in judging others. This does not mean we pretend wrong actions are right: it means we try to follow the famous principle of hating the sin but loving the sinner. After all, this is what we do in our own case. If we truly hate sin, we will begin by hating our own sins and rooting them out with the Lord's help. As Jesus teaches us, it is only when we have done this that we will be in a position to tell others how to deal with their own faults.

Lord Jesus, we ask your forgiveness for our hypocrisy in judging others and excusing ourselves. Teach us to be merciful and to attack the sins in our own lives before we pass judgement on others.

Today the Church celebrates the birth of one of the most powerful figures in the whole of Scripture. John the Baptist was the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He was, as Jesus witnessed, the 'Elijah' whose coming was foretold. John was more than a prophet: he was the bridge between the Old and New Covenants. To him was given the momentous task of being the herald and precursor of the Messiah, who announced to Israel the wonderful news that at last the longed-for Saviour was at hand.

The events surrounding John's birth clearly testified that he was especially chosen by God for a mission of unparalleled importance. They revealed that God's hand was powerfully upon him. For as only God could enable a virgin to give birth, so only God could create life in the barren womb of a woman past the age of childbearing. With good reason did the people wonder, 'What then will this child be?' (v. 66).

When he grew to maturity, John began his ministry in the Judean wilderness with two clear aims. His first aim was to prepare the people for their Saviour by a call to radical repentance. It was a summons

to a genuine change of heart, to turn away completely from sin and produce 'fruit that befits repentance' (Matt. 3:8). His second and equally essential aim was to be the prophetic witness who testified to Jesus. He pointed him out as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

Like John we are called to be prophetic witnesses. At baptism we receive the calling to be prophets and the power of God's Holy Spirit dwells within us. John spent much time in prayer and fasting and lived a life of asceticism so that he could clearly hear God's word. When the time came, prompted by the Spirit, John boldly declared the wonderful saving plan of God.

To be a prophet in our busy, hectic world we have to retreat into our own desert to pray and meditate on the Scriptures. We have to learn to be still and hear God's voice. Only then can we proclaim with sensitivity and love the great things God has done for us, but also point to the greater things he wants to do for all humanity.

Father, fill us with your Holy Spirit so that our hearts long to witness boldly to Jesus.

All of creation declares the glory of God because ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature and power have been perceived in all that he has made. In nature we find the mind of God revealed to us and, as Jesus teaches us in his parables, nature reveals for us many of the characteristics of the Christian life. In today's Gospel Jesus draws on the image of a tree bearing fruit to teach us about the need to live fruitful and productive lives.

Our lives are compared to trees that produce either good or evil fruit. Whether our lives bear fruit is not being brought into question, as everyone's life bears fruit in some way: the question is whether it is good fruit. We need to ask the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us to know the quality of the fruit we bear.

What is it that we can call fruit? Jesus tells us that people will recognize us because of our love: love of God and love of our neighbour. On our own we are unable to love in the way that Jesus loves and calls us to love. We need

God's help. It is God who pours love into our hearts. We need to ask ourselves in what ways our lives measure up to Jesus' call to love, to bear fruit. It's in our actions and the quality of our loving service that what is at the heart of our lives is revealed. Our fruit is for all to see: it is our works, which can neither be good when the will is evil nor be evil when the will is good.

The fruits of the Spirit are what we should be seeking in our lives: 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal. 5:22-23). It is the Spirit who gently leads us, so that our hearts give rise to words and actions that bear the hallmark of Christ. It is as we let him direct our lives that we begin to bear his fruit. The deeper our humility, knowing that the Lord truly is our source of life, hope and strength, the deeper our service will be. Our lives will then bear fruit that reflects the love of God.

Lord, deepen my roots in your love. May all that I say and all that I do bring forth the fruits of your Holy Spirit.

2 Kings 22:8-13; 23:1-3 • Psalm 118(119):33-37, 40
Matthew 7:15-20

We all know that a house needs a firm foundation, yet in our spiritual lives we can very easily be foolish enough to build on sand. We do this when we base our lives on anything other than Jesus Christ. There are many sorts of foundation people create for their lives: money, possessions, a successful career, family and friends. All these may be good things, but they are vulnerable and do not last forever. What are we left with when people close to us die, we lose our job or our house burns down? If the heart of our life is our relationship with Christ, then nothing can take it from us, in this life or the next.

It is certain that we will face storms and troubles in this life, and if we stay close to Jesus we will be much better equipped to deal with them. It is also in Jesus Christ that we will be able to face God's judgement with confidence. It will not be enough then that we paid lip-service to Christ in our lives – this may deceive men, but not God. It is easy to make pious statements and say we love God, but much

harder to carry out his will. We know from everyday experience that what people say and what they do often fail to match up.

Jesus' words challenge us to examine ourselves. Do we call him 'Lord' and pray to him, but then continue to please ourselves in how we live? Is our repentance for sins shallow or do we truly hate our sins and want to be free of them? The will of the Father is that we should forsake our sins, trust in his Son and follow him. When Jesus says that to enter the kingdom we must follow his commands, he does not mean we have to be perfect to be saved. What matters is that we truly surrender our will to his and truly desire his reign in our lives, always trying to please and honour him in all we do and sincerely aiming to be more like him every day.

Lord Jesus, we want to build our lives on you and make pleasing you our goal in life. Grant us grace to do your will more and more, so that one day you will call us into the fullness of your kingdom.

2 Kings 24:8-17 • Psalm 78(79):1-9
Matthew 7:21-29

Jesus rejoices and praises God for revealing to the simple and uneducated what had been hidden from scholars and religious experts. Then he discloses that the Father has delivered 'all things' to him and it is he alone who knows the Father. Thus Jesus is the only one who can pass on to others a real knowledge of God; he is the Wisdom and the Word of God and is the very heart of God's plan for salvation.

St Margaret Mary Alacoque's vision of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1673 brought to the Church the devotion that we celebrate today. In later life she wrote: 'After that the divine heart was shown to me, as it were on a burning throne, more shining than the sun and transparent like crystal, with that worshipful wound; it was girt about with a crown of thorns, signifying how it is hurt by our sins, and above it was a cross.' The heart of Jesus burns with love for all humankind and the cross is the victorious evidence of that love. Despite our sinful apathy and indifference, our hard-hearted self-concern and frequent rebellion, the heart of Jesus remains the constant

source of all forgiveness, grace, blessing, comfort and consolation.

In biblical terms, the renewed human heart (Ezek. 36:26) is the centre of conscious and free personality, the place of decisive choices; it is the place where God is writing his law (Jer. 31:33), the place where we seek and can meet God, and where God wishes to be found. It is in our hearts that he will broaden and expand our insight and understanding of the truths of our faith.

But we are not left to our own feeble devices in our search. Jesus invites us to come to him and take up the yoke of his teaching, of which he is the personification. It is only through his teaching that we come to know and experience God's profound and eternal love for each of us, which we need so desperately if we are to grow and mature in that love.

Lord Jesus, in my heart I yearn to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God. Let my heart be touched by your Sacred Heart today so that I may rest always in you.

Deuteronomy 7:6-11 • Psalm 102(103):1-10
1 John 4:7-16 • Matthew 11:25-30

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 that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul 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.'

Lamentations 2:2, 10-14, 18-19 • Psalm 73(74):1-7, 20-21
Matthew 8:5-17

Those who are loyal and staunch members of anything – school, organization or church – are referred to as ‘pillars’. Scholars suggest that this refers back to a time when the figures and images of saints were carved into the main columns supporting the Church building. We all know who the ‘pillars’ are of our school, organization or parish!!

Today the liturgy and universal Church celebrate the feast of two of our greatest ‘pillars’: St Peter and St Paul. In one sense, Peter and Paul were much more than pillars: they are more like foundation stones – Jesus is the cornerstone but they are foundation stones. The Church was built on their witness, understanding and preaching. They both paid the ultimate price for their commitment to Christ – shedding their blood and laying down their lives. We can have no better role models, no better example of what it means to be a Christian leader.

Matthew’s account of Peter’s acknowledgement that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, is a key moment both for him and for us. Jesus affirms that he could not have reached this insight without the help of the Father. In fact,

the Lord says this understanding is pure and direct revelation. For Peter and Paul Jesus was God. Their conviction was not the result of some kind of intellectual assent (although this must have played a part), but a profound interior experience that Jesus is true God and true man and worthy of utter devotion and dedication. They both knew that they had discovered the meaning of human existence. They believed with every fibre of their being that their mission in life was to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

We are called to live just as these two great men of God lived. We can receive the same kind of interior revelation about Jesus’ Lordship, divinity and glory. Resist the tendency to think that interior revelation is only for the very holy, the mystics or the saints. It is a gift we can all receive by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Pope John Paul II urged us to receive this grace of revelation so that we too can penetrate ever more deeply the mystery which is Christ. How do we receive this revelation? We pray, reflect and ponder on the Word of God and ask the Holy Spirit for light, wisdom and revelation.

St Peter, pray for us. St Paul, pray for us.

*Acts 12:1-11 • Psalm 33(34):2-9
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18 • Matthew 16:13-19*

G.K. Chesterton noted with typical wit, ‘Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.’ The evangelist David Watson in similar vein wrote: ‘If we were willing to learn the meaning of real discipleship and actually to become disciples, the church in the west would be transformed, and the resultant impact on society would be staggering.’

Jesus demanded a single-minded commitment from his followers. He did not indulge would-be disciples. He was always clear and direct about what was involved. In today’s Gospel Jesus is approached by a scribe who is enthusiastic; his dedication is convincing and his sincerity beyond reproach: ‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go’, he confidently proclaims (v. 19). Jesus knows that his enthusiasm, laudable as it is, is insufficient; it would quickly wane and burn out. The Lord does not beat around the bush. To follow him means sacrifice. A second disciple, out of faithfulness to the Jewish burial rites and the custom of the day, simply wants first to bury his father. The Lord appears to treat him brusquely, saying, ‘leave the dead to bury their own dead’ (v. 22).

At some level we struggle with this rather harsh response. We are uncomfortable with radical and uncompromising zeal (perhaps because it unveils our paler convictions). Jesus’ mission was urgent and demanding. He came to bring life to the world and could not dally or vacillate. Following him requires the same focus.

A dedicated Marxist, having left home, income and security to further his cause, observed: ‘The gospel is a much more powerful weapon for the renewal of society than is our Marxist philosophy. We communists [however] do not play with words. We are realists and are determined to achieve our object, we know how to obtain the means. How can anyone believe in the supreme value of the gospel if you do not practise it, if you do not spread it and if you sacrifice neither time nor money for it? We believe in our Communist message and we are ready to sacrifice everything, even our life. But you people are afraid to soil your hands.’

Lord Jesus, give me clarity and understanding that the gospel is life for the world. Pour out your Holy Spirit and renew within me my call to win the world for Christ.

*Amos 2:6-10, 13-16 • Psalm 49(50):16-23
Matthew 8:18-22*