

St David (c. 500–589), whose feast day we celebrate today, was truly the salt of the earth and a light to the world. He lived the Beatitudes and practised in his daily life the Sermon on the Mount. On this his feast day we remind ourselves that we too are called to be saints.

We actually know a fair bit about the patron saint of Wales, and what we know is fascinating. St David was born into a wealthy, aristocratic family from West Wales. His mother, Non, has also been declared a saint. He was taught by St Paulinus and was responsible for spreading the faith among the Celtic tribes of western Britain. He became Archbishop of Wales and dedicated his life to suppressing the heresy of the English monk Pelagius. After his death, so great was the devotion to him that four visits to his shrine in St David's were considered the equivalent of two to Rome and one to Jerusalem. Perhaps, in this Year of Faith, when Pope Benedict is encouraging us to go on pilgrimages, we should make a pilgrimage to his shrine.

One of the most famous stories concerning St David recounts that once, when he was preaching to a large crowd, the ground beneath him rose up to form a new hill.

It is amusingly described as the most superfluous miracle in history because Wales did not need a new hill! St David was a reformer, and as the Church is always in need of reform he was not always popular. At one of his monasteries he became so unpopular with his monks, due to the austere life he made them live, that they tried to poison him. He believed that monks and clergy should live simply. As well as praying and celebrating Mass, the brothers had to work the fields.

St David was a prophet, a man of prayer and a miracle worker. He is often represented with a dove on his shoulder which symbolizes his reliance upon the Holy Spirit throughout his life. St David's message was simple and clear, as he taught that we are called to do the little things in our lives well, and as he taught so he lived. In his last sermon he said: 'Do the little things, the small things you've seen me doing.'

Lord, today on St David's feast day, may I do the little things in God's presence with conscientiousness and devotion.

Philippians 3:8-14 • Psalm 1:1-4

Wales: 2nd reading from Common of Pastors • Matthew 5:13-16

(Proper of Season: Gen 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28 • Ps 104(105):16-21 • Mt 21:33-46)

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is unique to Luke's Gospel. Luke was, it is recognized, a master storyteller but, as the Scripture scholar Jeremias noted, the parable comes from the original rock of tradition, directly from the mouth of Jesus himself. Scholars further recognize – and atheistic ones at that – that the Parable of the Prodigal Son comes from a unique mind, the like of which the world has never known and will never know again, since it comes from the mouth of the Son of God, the Word made flesh. The Parable of the Prodigal Son could equally and justifiably be called the Parable of the Father's Heart or the Parable of the Elder Brother. In this reflection we are going to focus our attention on the elder brother.

It is hard to vouch for everybody but most people who read this parable identify with the younger son – his destitution, his failure, his sinfulness, his wastrel nature and so on. We fully understand why the Father's heart went out to him when he decided to return home. Very few of us identify with the elder brother. But maybe we are more like him than we like to think – his moral indignation, his self-righteousness, his looking down on his lost brother, his refusal to

join in the celebration. Again what is interesting is that the father does not rebuke him harshly but rather affirms his love for him also.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost, and there are none so lost as those who don't understand that they are lost and walking in darkness. In the Church we have a serious public relations problem: the Christian faith can be perceived as being for those who are already righteous, upstanding and holy and only rather patronizingly held out to those who find themselves in dire straits. This is, however, an illusion: we are all lost, we are all morally weak and confused, but God is a God of grace, mercy and forgiveness. Every human being is loved by God – no matter who they are, no matter what they have done and no matter how far beyond redemption they may seem.

Lord, preserve and protect me from having a heart like the elder brother. Teach me to recognize profoundly that I am the worst of sinners, that I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 9-12

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

In an age without newspapers, TV or the Internet tragic news still got out there. Jesus comments on two hot topics of discussion – two tragic accidents that had recently occurred. The first of these otherwise unknown incidents concerned the killing of some Galileans while they were offering sacrifice, probably in the Jerusalem temple at Passover. Pilate was notorious for his brutal attitude towards the Jewish people and the practice of their faith. The second incident was probably a construction accident at the Siloam Reservoir at Jerusalem. Sadly, then as now, such random and tragic events were interpreted as divine retribution.

People of a religious fundamentalist persuasion often claim God's judgement in a way that is cold, callous and erroneous – be it the terrible outbreak of AIDS in the early 1980s or the attack on the World Trade Center Towers in New York in 2011. Terrible human tragedies are interpreted to suit people's poor theology. This has its roots in the Old Testament. In the book of Job, for example, Eliphaz, in a wonderful spirit of self-righteous condemnation, says to poor Job: 'Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?

Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed; at the blast of his anger they perish' (Job 4:7-8 NIV).

Jesus rejected this teaching and sought to correct it. On one occasion, on encountering a blind man he was asked by his disciples, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (John 9:1). But he immediately corrected this heresy: 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents...' (John 9:2). Jesus taught that good fortune or disaster, blessing or curse, success or failure is no indication of our spiritual state before God because God causes his sun to shine on all of us, the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). Today isn't the time to cast aspersions or accuse or make assumptions about how God thinks or acts because today is the time for repentance. God's mercy and kindness gives us time to repent and change, but one day we will be required to give an account of our lives to the living God.

Lord, grant me the gift of repentance. Help me to refrain from judging others and understand that your mercy shines on us all.

Exodus 3:1-8, 13-15 • Psalm 102(103):1-8, 11

1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12 • Luke 13:1-9

Jesus is the divine physician, sent by the Father to heal us and lead us to salvation. He follows in the Old Testament model of Elijah and Elisha who were healing prophets of old. Jesus reminds the townspeople of Nazareth that Elisha was sent to Israel as a healer and physician but only the Syrian, Naaman, was healed (v. 27). These words incensed the crowd who previously had heralded and applauded him (v. 22). How fickle and capricious we human beings are! From friend to enemy in the twinkling of an eye!

The human heart under the influence of sin rejects God and his work. At the dawn of history the power of sin was unleashed and since then has wreaked its havoc. Since the Fall the human race has been predisposed to rebelling against God and disobeying him. Rebellion is our natural state. We can liken our condition to the leprosy which was a scourge in Israel during the time of Elisha. Sin, rather like leprosy, disfigures and distorts, wounding and destroying. God sent the prophets Elijah and Elisha to heal his people – but instead of being warmly accepted they were met with suspicion, rejection and unbelief. In the same way Jesus is the divine physician,

sent to heal and restore. Yet he too was hated, rejected and despised. We have the choice of whether to accept or reject Jesus. In accepting him we avail ourselves of the grace of healing.

It is through the sacraments of the Church that Christ's healing is most often experienced today, supremely in the Eucharist but also, of course, in the sacraments of healing: the sacrament of anointing and the sacrament of reconciliation. God wants us to grow in confidence that his grace, power and love are available to heal and restore us. Take to heart today this observation by the great Scripture scholar Origen: 'Stronger than all the evils in the soul is the Word, and the healing power that dwells in him.' There is no sin or habit or pattern of destructive behaviour that God's mercy and love cannot reach and heal. But we need to co-operate with the Lord: we need to have faith and believe that his healing power is available to us today.

'The good Instructor, the Wisdom, the Word of the Father, who made man, cares for the whole of his creature. The all-sufficient Physician of humanity, the Saviour, heals both our body and soul.'
(St Clement of Alexandria)

2 Kings 5:1-15 • Psalm 41(42):2-3; 42(43):3-4

Luke 4:24-30

C.S. Lewis famously said: 'Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.' The issue of forgiveness is illustrated very starkly in today's parable – the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. To put the parable into perspective, the servant owed the king the equivalent of the entire US national debt. That is like one individual owing £700 billion. It is silly and ridiculous money – an impossible debt to owe and an equally impossible debt to repay. Clearly the debt Jesus is referring to in his parable is our debt of sin. Forgiveness and debt are closely related – in fact, so closely related that we cannot understand forgiveness unless we understand the debt we owe.

Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is radical and shocking. The poet William Blake said: 'There is not one moral virtue that Jesus inculcated but Plato and Cicero did inculcate before him. What then did Christ inculcate? Forgiveness of sins. This alone is the Gospel, and this is the life and immortality brought to life by Jesus.' The Hebrew mind set a limit on forgiveness – up to seven times was considered super-generous. Jesus opened up the idea of forgiveness being unlimited.

To go back to C.S. Lewis, how good are we really at forgiving others? Or do we easily nurse and hold onto resentment and anger? We often say, with typical self-delusion, 'I can forgive, but I cannot forget', which in fact is just another way of saying, 'I can't forgive.' The truth is that forgiveness is truly daunting and, for most of us, impossible. But the good news is that when it comes to God, this is precisely where we need to be in order to know his grace enabling us to forgive.

We should always try and get practical and real concerning forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't a theory or an idea: it is a necessity. Is there anybody in your life whom you find it nigh on impossible to forgive? Have they hurt, offended and, yes, sinned against you in such a way that not only do you find it hard to forgive but you actually refuse to? Well, praise God because you are in the right place to experience God giving you the grace, strength and help you need.

Lord, during this Year of Faith pour out your grace upon me so that I may understand the debt of my own sin and forgive my neighbour sincerely, deeply and from the heart.

Daniel 3:25, 34-43 • Psalm 24(25):4-9

Matthew 18:21-35

Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament. In him alone God's plan of salvation finds its perfect expression and completion. In fact, Jesus is God's plan.

For the devout Jew of Jesus' day the law was eternal, revered and unchanging. Nothing could be added to or subtracted from the Jewish law, the Torah. Even the slightest stroke of the scribe's pen in drawing a little 'tittle' (a small serif used to distinguish letters from each other) or a 'jot' (the yod, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet) had a vital value. Jesus proclaims that he shares this love and reverence for the law, but he goes on to expand this statement in an astounding way: he is, in his very person, the fulfilment of the law and the entire prophets. We read the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, to discover more about Jesus. As St Jerome taught, 'The Old Testament is pregnant with Christ.' He also said that 'Christ is latent in the Old Testament but patent in the new.'

It is important for modern Christians too to have a love and reverence for the Old Testament. These Scriptures were instrumental in preparing for the coming of the Lord, the Messiah. Jesus would

have known them like the back of his hand. He lived and breathed them. In this Year of Faith we can rediscover the gift which is the Old Testament.

Many people have a distorted understanding of the Old Testament, saying things like, 'There is too much brutality and violence in the Old Testament', or 'The Old Testament is too primitive and basic, I prefer to read about Jesus.' Well aware of this, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council wrote: 'These books [the Old Testament], even though they contain matters which are imperfect and provisional, nevertheless contain authentic divine teaching. Christians should accept with reverence these writings which express a lively sense of God, which are a storehouse of sublime teaching on God and of sound wisdom of human life, as well as a wonderful treasury of prayers; in them, too, the mystery of salvation is implicitly present' (Dei verbum 15).

We can ask the Holy Spirit to grant us a new love and respect for the Old Testament. In the past God spoke in many and varied ways both in the law and the prophets, but now finally he has spoken through and in his Son.

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9 • Psalm 147:12-16, 19-20

Matthew 5:17-19

When you hear the Scriptures read at Mass or when you read them in private and you come across references, as we do today, to the devil, how do you react and respond? Do you roll your eyes and think how primitive and unsophisticated it is to believe in personified evil? If you do, you are in good company. In the film *The Exorcist*, directed by William Friedkin, Fr Damien Karras, a trained psychiatrist, does not believe in evil or a personified devil but believes the symptoms attributed to the devil are due to psychiatric illness and personality disorder. His view is at odds with Fr Lankester Merrin who is a diocesan exorcist and has no doubts whatsoever that the devil and his realm are real, as is demonic possession. The *Exorcist* illustrates powerfully how the sacraments of the Church and the ministry of an exorcist are agents in overcoming evil when manifest in the form of possession and control over people's lives.

Thankfully the Church has never hesitated to teach that evil and the devil are real threats to the believer and to the Church. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews summed up the purpose of Jesus' entire

mission as to overcome the evil one: 'so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death' (2:14-15 NIV). James taught, 'Resist the devil and he will flee from you' (Jas. 4:7) Peter exhorted: 'Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith...' (1 Pet. 5:8-9). The greatest trick the devil ever played was to convince the world he doesn't exist. But Scripture and the Church, ever vigilant, have resisted this ruse from the beginning. St Augustine taught that 'the devil often transforms himself into an angel to tempt us', and that is why we must be as shrewd as serpents to resist him. We are engaged in a spiritual conflict, a spiritual war, and only the strong are able to subdue the strong man.

We pray with Peter, the rock of the Church, 'Get behind me, Satan. I resist you in the power of the name, the cross and the blood of Christ.'

Although it may not be very palatable, the truth is that it is far more challenging to be a journalist on a popular tabloid newspaper than the more erudite broadsheet newspapers. Tabloid journalists tend to be very sharp, very able and very canny. They have to write short, punchy narrative that grabs and holds the attention of people who don't necessarily enjoy reading. The readership of a newspaper like *The Sun* or the *Daily Mail* runs into millions whereas that of *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* hovers around the 700,000 mark. The vote of the populace is, therefore, for short, punchy, accessible syntax.

The ability to compress and reduce text so that the ordinary person can understand and grasp its essence is a time-honoured skill. In Jesus' day, summarizing the precepts of the Torah was a preoccupation of many of the rabbis. The Pharisee Hillel, for example, was asked to summarize the entire Torah while standing on one leg to ensure the answer would be brief. Brevity was as much a virtue in those days as it is today in our 'soundbite', 'short attention span' era. Jesus summed up the entire Law and Prophets in two short sentences: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart,

soul and mind' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. St Augustine echoed this when he taught: 'Love and do as you will.' Love, then, is the key. It is what could be called 'the bottom line', the 'when all is said and done' issue and the only thing that truly matters 'at the end of the day'.

There are, of course, different kinds of love. There is *eros*, the romantic love which binds a marriage together. There is *philia*, the love we have for our friends and those we care a lot about. Then there is *agape*, the kind of love we encounter in the Scriptures. This is the highest form of love because it involves sacrifice and a laying down of one's life, freely and unconditionally. The Holy Spirit is the one who, having poured out his love into our hearts, gives us the grace to love as God would have us love.

'An instant of pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more profitable to the church, than all other good works together, though it may seem as if nothing were done.' (St John of the Cross)

Today's parable is unique to St Luke's Gospel. It has many rich themes running through it but, as with so much of Jesus' teaching, the major one is humility. The tax collector humbles himself and is justified; the Pharisee exalts himself and is humbled.

The problem with the Pharisee is that, despite his religious devotions (he fasts and prays, etc.), he is overly confident of his own righteousness and this has the effect of making him look down on everybody else. The Pharisee lacks what the tax collector has in abundance, which is self-knowledge. The tax collector has received a revelation, an insight, an understanding into his state before God, which brings him to his knees in abject repentance. It is this gift of self-knowledge which makes it possible for him to be justified before God. The Pharisee, on the other hand, can only see his own righteousness – in effect he is blinded by himself. The truth is that we cannot justify ourselves before God. If we pray, this is because of God's grace. If we fast, this is because of God's grace. If we tithe and are generous, this too is because of God's grace.

Perhaps, however, a little bit of sympathy and understanding

for the Pharisee is in order. The problem with religious practice is that there is a temptation to think of ourselves as better than others and then to look down on them. We are fallen and weak, and we continually need God's grace to see, think and act clearly. The Pharisee in today's Gospel is less a hypocrite and more a figure to be pitied. His delusion is chronic and debilitating, and although before others he might appear holy and righteous, before God he is proud and arrogant.

We must guard against the temptation to which the Pharisee succumbed – the temptation to think our righteousness or devotion is precisely that, 'ours'. It is not. There but for the grace of God go we. We pray especially for our clergy in this regard because although they have received the gift of a vocation to the priesthood, this does not mean they are better than lay people or can look down on them. Rather they are called to a life of love and service – they are called to be like Christ himself.

Lord, teach me my true condition before God. Grant that I may understand with life-changing clarity that I am truly a sinner in need of your mercy.

More than anything else the Parable of the Prodigal Son reveals God's love for us. We can all, to some extent, have a wrong understanding of God. We can think of him as harsh, demanding, judgemental or condemnatory. But in today's parable Jesus reveals the fatherly heart of God. The parable is, in fact, less about the wastrel son and more about the loving father. It is the father who is the hero of the piece and he represents God our heavenly Father.

In the Christian life we can easily become preoccupied with many things: the liturgy, our prayer, our acts of charity, the politics in our parish, this or that or the other. However, what is more important in the Christian life than anything else is to know that God loves us. Without this knowledge we quickly lose our way. We quickly become harsh, demanding, judgemental and condemnatory towards others. The fundamental message of the gospel is the truth that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). Furthermore, God showed his love for us by sending his Son to die not for the righteous but sinners: 'While we were still

sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8 NIV). Jesus came, then, not to make God's love possible but rather to make it visible. God loves us not because of who we are but because of who he is.

God invites us to penetrate and plumb the depths of his love and mercy. This is the journey of discovery that St Augustine of Hippo made, eventually coming to know God as 'O Love ever burning and never extinguished'. He came to understand that God loves every single human being equally and with the same measure, declaring that 'God loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love.'

It is love which will win souls for Christ; it is love which witnesses to the amazing truth that God wants everyone to be saved and come to know his abundant life.

'Do you want to know what our Lord meant in all this? Learn it well; love was what he meant. Who showed it to you? Love. Why did he show it? Out of love. So I was taught that love was what our Lord meant.' (Julian of Norwich)



Today's Gospel is simple in its essence but profound in its meaning. A Galilean official, probably from Herod's court, approaches Jesus. He wants a miracle. His need is great, dire even: his son is sick and dying. Picture a world without the NHS, without penicillin, where life expectancy is low and death commonplace, expected and accepted. Picture a world where the sickness of a child means not a visit to a hospital but to a cemetery. When we begin to use our imagination in this way we can begin to understand the desperation of this poor man's plight.

The official's request is moving, to say the least: 'Sir, come down before my child dies.' Jesus' response is equally moving: 'Go; your son will live.' On discovering that his son is healed and realizing that the healing occurred at the exact time Jesus spoke the words, 'Your son will live', the man and his whole household become believers.

What are we to learn from this incident? What is the meaning of the sign, the miracle? What is striking is that it is a 'long distance cure' in that the Lord does not actually visit the sick boy. Furthermore, the Lord does not ask for faith or even encourage it:

he simply informs the man that his sick son will recover. The sign then is the power of Jesus' word. Jesus' word gives life. Jesus' word overcomes death.

How does Jesus speak to us today? Jesus' word is found in the Scriptures. It is in the Scriptures that we encounter directly the word and the promises of Christ, and it is in the Scriptures that we find life. The Holy Spirit is the One who teaches us to go to the Scriptures for this life, grace and power. The Spirit is also the One who changes the way we approach the Scriptures. St Bernard of Clairvaux said, 'The Word of God is not a sounding but a piercing word, not pronounceable by the tongue but efficacious in the mind, not sensible to the ear but fascinating to the affection.' In other words God's word reaches and touches us at the deepest possible level and transforms our lives.

'The Word of God as the Word made flesh and in the word of the Scriptures is the face, the countenance, the representation of God, in whom he is brought to life and made known.'
(St Clement of Alexandria)

Isaiah 65:17-21 • Psalm 29(30):2-6, 11-13

John 4:43-54



During the course of the year, all faithful male Jews were expected to attend at least one of the three pilgrimages feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Like every obedient son of Moses, Jesus attended these feasts. John does not indicate which feast Jesus was attending when today's healing miracle occurred, but what is important is that it occurred on the Sabbath.

The site of the Pool of Bethesda has been identified and located by modern archaeologists as having been next to where the Crusader Church of St Anne's stands today. Excavations have revealed that the pool was enclosed in a rectangle by four porticoes, with a fifth running across the pool and dividing it into two sections. The pool was considered to have healing properties, and the sick and disabled flocked to it. Jesus' healing of the man who had suffered from paralysis for most of his life (thirty-eight years) is, as we saw yesterday, a miracle of the word: Jesus speaks – 'Get up! Pick up your mat and walk' (v. 50 NIV) – and the man is cured.

How are we to interpret, understand and apply today's Gospel to our own lives? Well, while the invalid suffered from a

physical paralysis, we are paralysed by sin. It has kept us bound and imprisoned. We need to hear the gentle voice of the Spirit say to us: 'Do you want to get well?' We need to hear the Lord say to us, 'Get up and walk.' Jesus did not come to simply heal us physically or spiritually but to transform us into the new creation. We have Christ in us, the hope of glory. This means that we can live as children of God – not bound or paralysed by fear but liberated to live life to the full (John 10:10).

In this Year of Faith we can do two things, one for ourselves and one for others. For ourselves we can learn to have faith in the power of God's grace to change not just our own lives but the lives of those around us. For others, we can learn to be witnesses of the life that Jesus came to bring. Be courageous in telling others about the Christ who heals, changes and transforms.

Lord, bless all those who are sick and weary from suffering and pain. May all those who care for the sick reflect your love and compassion in their words and deeds.

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12 • Psalm 45(46):2-9

John 5:1-16

Jesus was utterly reliant on his heavenly Father. He was clear and unambiguous that without the Father he could do nothing: 'the Son can do nothing of his own accord but only what he sees the Father doing' (v. 19). Jesus sought throughout his entire life to be obedient to the Father's will. He never deviated from this course and did not succumb to the temptation to disobey. It is hard, if not impossible, for us to imagine or envision what this meant. We do know that during his life on earth the Lord offered up loud cries and tears to the Father, the One who could save him from death. He was heard because of his reverent submission to the Father's will (Heb. 5:7). Jesus did not sin in deed – we know this – he was the sinless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). However, he did not sin in thought either and this is where he truly showed himself to be the new Adam. Jesus knew that his mission on earth was to live moment by moment in the Father's presence.

All of this can seem rather daunting to us who are easily overwhelmed by sin, in word, in deed and in thought. However, with God's help and grace we too can learn to live life in obedience

to the Father. St Catherine of Siena wrote, 'Observing the law of obedience in this life they taste peace without any disturbance, they receive and clothe themselves in the most perfect peace for they possess every good without any evil, safety without fear, riches without poverty, satiety without disgust, hunger without pain, light without darkness.'

What would a life lived in obedience to the Father look like for us? What would it involve? The key is learning to hear the Father's voice – through Scripture, in prayer, on receiving the Eucharist and in our conscience. God wants us to know him in a deeply close and intimate way. By God's grace and the blessing of our baptism we can know the mind of God, learn to do his will and live life in the power of the Spirit.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the model of your Son who lived in humble obedience to your will. Grant me the grace to learn each day to submit my mind and will to your plan.

Isaiah 49:8-15 • Psalm 144(145):8-9, 13-14, 17-18
John 5:17-30

Enshrined within the Torah (the Jewish law) is the legal principle that an individual cannot bear witness to him or herself. The same is true of English law. We cannot be our own character witness – we need the confirmation and testimony of others. In one sense it is a self-evident legal principle. Under the Torah even one witness on a person's behalf was not enough in order to settle a dispute – two or three were needed.

Aware of this principle, Jesus looked to three witnesses to bear witness and testify about him. Jesus pointed to the witness of John the Baptist who declared him to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He pointed to the Scriptures and the prophets before him who spoke of his coming. And he pointed to his Father and the many signs and miracles he worked in his name. Despite these powerful and compelling witnesses Jesus met with unyielding and fierce opposition. In short, he encountered the hard and cold human heart.

Faith is a free and unmerited gift of God. We cannot generate the response of faith for ourselves – it is a work of the Holy Spirit deep within our hearts and minds, only

possible by grace and the interior help of the Spirit. This does not mean that believing or faith is not an authentic human act. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, 'Trusting in God and cleaving to the truths he has revealed is contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason' (para. 154). However, that said, we need the grace of revelation to penetrate our hearts and minds for us to accept and believe the truth of the gospel.

We do well to take to heart the wisdom of St Thomas Aquinas who described faith as 'an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace'. Our faith is our most precious gift, our most treasured blessing from God. We guard and protect this faith by striving to put into practice the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes of the Lord.

Lord, we look to the many witnesses of faith throughout human history: those men and women who, after the model of our Lord, gave their lives in love and service and often in martyrdom for their faith in Christ our Lord and his Bride, the Church.

Exodus 32:7-14 • Psalm 105(106):19-23
John 5:31-47

The feast of Tabernacles was the climax of the liturgical year. It was a joyous eight-day celebration of thanksgiving for the ingathering from the threshing floor and winepress (see Exod. 23:16; Deut. 16:13). The people of Israel built huts or booths from branches and foliage and placed them on roofs, in the courts of the Temple and in city squares, fulfilling the ritual requirements to 'dwell in booths' in commemoration of God's protection during the wilderness wanderings (Lev. 23:39-43; Neh. 8:13-18). As well as including public reading from the Torah and the dedication of Solomon's Temple this feast also looked forward to the time when people would be gathered from all nations to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel (Zech. 14:16).

It was against the backdrop of this Jewish festival that Jesus boldly proclaimed that he had been sent by the Father. He confidently claimed for himself a special and anointed relationship with God: 'I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me' (v. 29). We know and confirm this truth because we know Jesus – we know where he came from and we know who sent him. For us and countless other men and women, past, present and

future, he came down from heaven. We are blessed to know Jesus in this way. Those who heard Jesus speak and teach at the feast of Tabernacles were very confused about him and their perceptions were clouded by their own interpretation of what the Messiah should be (v. 27).

As baptized believers we are sent out to proclaim the good news of salvation to the whole world. To be effective and fruitful as evangelists we need to know the One who sends us, just as Jesus knew his Father. We can grow in our knowledge of the Father through prayer, through reading Scripture and through coming into his presence in the sacraments of the Church. From our loving knowledge of Jesus will spring the desire to proclaim him and to lead others to the 'yes' of faith in Jesus Christ (CCC 429).

Father, we praise and thank you that you sent your Son Jesus to bring us new life. Send us out at this time in the power of your Holy Spirit that we may be true witnesses to your saving love.

There are many important questions in life: What career will you follow? Whom will you marry? Where will you live? What will you believe? There is, however, one question which is far more crucial than any of these and it is: who is Jesus of Nazareth? This question is by far the most important one we will ever face in life.

Jesus is without doubt the most significant person in human history. We even measure time as occurring before his birth (BC) or after his birth (AD). One thing is for sure and that is it is hard to ignore Jesus, or be indifferent to him, or pretend that he didn't exist and has nothing to say. When you think about it, it is truly remarkable that a Jew who hung on a cross just outside the city of Jerusalem some two thousand years ago is today followed, worshipped and adored as God made man.

Jesus has always divided people – there are those who love him, those who hate him, those who are confused about him, those who are attracted to him, and so on. This is precisely what we encounter in today's Gospel. There are those who proclaim him as the Messiah, the Christ (v. 40); but there are also those who fail to

make the connection because on the surface the facts don't tie up and they believe he comes from Nazareth, not Bethlehem. But even temple guards sent to arrest him couldn't bring themselves to do it because they recognized there was something special about him, declaring: 'No man ever spoke like this man!' (v. 46). Interestingly, it is the Pharisees, the religious and cultural elite, who are proud of their rejection of Jesus.

Jesus still divides. Some people love him; others hate him. And then there is a whole raft of people who find him fascinating and intriguing, and feel attracted to him. The important truth to proclaim and present to others about Jesus is that he is not merely a historical figure, he is not simply the founder of the Christian faith, he does not simply rest in history: he is alive today. The gospel message is that we can know Jesus today! We can experience him as Lord of our lives. We can walk with him and talk with him.

Lord Jesus, we believe and joyfully proclaim that you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Saviour of the World.

Just as it takes two to tango, it takes two to commit adultery (or does it?). Jesus' teaching on adultery is so radical that it is rarely referred to, seldom spoken about and little understood. We shall come to this teaching in due course. What we encounter in today's Gospel is much more than a teaching about adultery: we meet the Lord's authority and mercy in action.

One of the most awkward things about the story is the fact that the woman was 'caught in the act' – how on earth did that happen and how did her accusers know what was going on? To be fair to the Jewish law of the day, circumstantial evidence was not admissible: hard evidence was needed, but being caught in the act was pretty irrefutable.

How strange, then, that only the woman should be hauled before Jesus. The suggestion is that it was a set up: she was framed, and then left to face the consequences. The law required the execution of both parties (Lev. 20:10). Jesus was being walked into a trap. Sanction of the legal requirement would bring him into conflict with the Romans who did not allow the Jews to authorize the death sentence. Failure to condemn the woman would bring

him into conflict with the Jewish religious leaders.

Seemingly backed into a corner, Jesus diffused the situation in two ways. First, he wrote in the sand – perhaps, as some of the Church fathers have suggested, he wrote down the sins of the woman's accusers. Second, he invited those without sin to throw the first stone. No stones were thrown. Jesus was left alone with the poor woman, to whom he held out the hand of mercy and forgiveness. An amazing and powerful incident in Jesus' life, to be sure.

Now back to Jesus' teaching on adultery: Jesus taught that adultery, like murder, is an easy sin to commit because we can commit it in our heart. To simply lust after a woman (or man for that matter) is to commit adultery: 'But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matt. 5:28).

Lord, grant me an interior purity of heart which upholds the dignity of those I meet and encounter during my day. Teach me always to be merciful, as you are merciful, and to refrain from throwing stones of judgement, condemnation and accusation.

Isaiah 43:16-21 • Psalm 125(126)

Philippians 3:8-14 • John 8:1-11

Today we celebrate the feast day of one of Ireland's greatest sons. St Patrick famously heard God say to him: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you; and I will make you the father of a great people.' For centuries the Irish Church sent out missionaries all over the world.

Today, not only in Ireland but in many countries in the western world, missionaries from Africa, Latin America and the East come to evangelize us. They come to give witness to the gospel in a powerful and dynamic way. They come to teach us about how meeting Jesus is the best thing that has ever happened to them. They are not afraid to be witnesses; they are not afraid to be mocked, ridiculed or held in contempt. In fact, they rejoice in being considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. Oh, how the times have changed.

Our western secular culture has worked hard over the last fifty years to drive faith and religion to the margins. Crucifixes are frowned upon, boy scouts cannot make a prayer of commitment to God and the celebration of Christian feasts (Christmas, Easter) is removed from public life. Recently, Peter

Thatchell, a well-known human rights and gay activist, went to court to support a Christian who had expressed his misgivings about gay marriage and was punished by having his salary reduced by 20 per cent. Peter Thatchell said that although he didn't agree with the man's position on gay marriage, he defended his right to express his view and did not think that he should be punished financially for it. The Christian won the case and was grateful for the support of Mr Thatchell.

Maybe we all need to recover the spirit of St Patrick. The key to his evangelism was his love for God. On this his feast day, we make his prayer our own:

'Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.

I sing as I arise today.

I call on my Creator's might.

The will of God to be my guide.

The eye of God to be my sight.

The word of God to be my speech.

The hand of God to be my stay.

The shield of God to be my strength.

The path of God to be my way.'

Daniel 13:1-9, 15-62 • Psalm 22(23) • John 8:12-20

(Proper of Saints: Jeremiah 1:4-9 • Psalm 116(117)

Acts 13:46-49 • Luke 10:1-12, 17-20)

Today we celebrate the feast-day of St Joseph of Nazareth, Mary's husband, Jesus' adopted earthly father. Very little is known about Joseph and what we do know comes mainly from the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke; he is referred to only twice in St John's Gospel). The Church has always venerated Joseph, recognizing the important role he played in Jesus' early formation and in providing a home for the Holy Family. St Bernardine of Siena wrote of him: 'He was chosen by the eternal Father as the trustworthy guardian and protector of his greatest treasures, namely his Son and Mary, Joseph's wife. He carried out his vocation with complete fidelity until at last God called him, saying, "Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord."'

Joseph's strength of character is revealed in the way he dealt with each crisis he met. Mary's unexpected pregnancy would have posed some obvious questions. Joseph was a human being after all. How could Mary's pregnancy be? Conception without human agency was surely impossible? (But for God.) Who was the man? Was Mary raped? There would also have been very strong social, cultural

and religious pressure to expose Mary to the humiliation of public disgrace. Joseph showed himself to be a man of outstanding character and integrity as he wrestled and struggled with his dilemma. He also showed himself to be a man of God, since the revelation he received from God in a dream was clearly enough for him to be able to embrace God's plan entirely.

We can learn so much from St Joseph, but perhaps in this Year of Faith it is fitting that we learn from him how to live by faith. He accepted God's plan of salvation as it unfolded before his very eyes. He lived perfectly the definition given in *Dei verbum* of what it means to live by faith: "The obedience of faith" must be given to God as he reveals himself. By this obedience of faith man freely commits himself entirely to God, making "the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals", and willingly assenting to the revelation given by him' (para. 5).

Heavenly Father, thank you for the model and example of St Joseph. Grant me, like him, the grace to create a home and environment in my own heart for your Son to dwell.

2 Samuel 7:4-5, 12-16 • Psalm 88(89):2-5, 27, 29

Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22 • Matthew 1:16-21, 24 or Luke 2:41-51

We live in an era when truth is relative. Jesus taught that truth wasn't an idea or a teaching but a person – he is truth. 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14:6). He also taught that truth liberates: 'you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (v. 32). Jesus sent the Holy Spirit with the express purpose of leading us into God's truth: 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth' (John 16:13). Pilate, the Roman Procurator, famously asked, 'What is truth?' And we too must explore what truth is in our lives. What does it mean for us to live by the truth? What is the truth in every situation I find myself? What does it mean that the truth can set you free?

Truth is a profound issue. In order to grasp and understand truth, we must first desire it. We have to want to know the truth and seek it with all our strength and energy. We need to pray for it, for truth comes to us in prayer. We also need to study it – and what better way to do this than by getting hold of a Bible concordance and looking up the verses where the word 'truth' appears? Finally – and this is the

hardest part – we need to practise it. We need to live truthful, upright and righteous lives. Of course, this is where we fall down because we constantly fail but this is where we come to know the reality of repentance and turning back to God.

We also need to learn and know the truths of our faith. How well do you know them? Here are some examples of the truths of our faith: God created us; we fell away from God's grace – the Fall of man; the incarnation, God becoming man; the cross; the resurrection; the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; the second coming. These truths of our faith can be proclaimed in our prayer and during our day. They are life-giving, they bring peace of heart and clarity of mind, and they root our lives in God's truth.

Lord, teach me the truths of my faith. Teach me to proclaim these truths first to myself and then to others for they contain the message of eternal life and set us free.

Daniel 3:14-20, 24-25, 28 • Daniel 3:52-56

John 8:31-42

The Jews accused Jesus of being 'a Samaritan and demon possessed' (v. 52). There is no doubt that Jesus was able to get under the skin of the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of the day – by their reaction it's obvious that they took him very seriously and did not just regard him as a lunatic.

The statement the Lord makes in today's Gospel is, to be fair, a pretty amazing one: 'Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death' (v. 51). If Jesus was a mad man, then the Jewish leaders should have taken this statement with a pinch of salt and ignored it, or even mocked and laughed at him. They clearly saw him as a major threat. It could not have occurred to them that Jesus could say these things because he was God made man. Had they understood this they would have fallen at his feet and listened to his life-giving word.

The hope of the resurrection of Jesus is truly that we will not see death. Jesus' accusers were perfectly right in their reasoning: Abraham had died and so had all the prophets of Israel. Indeed, everyone dies. No one escapes this ultimate reality.

The Pope, his cardinals, bishops, priests, deacons, the laity – we all have an appointment with death. So what did Jesus mean by this? He meant that in believing in him we would not know the finality of extinction or oblivion. He meant that there is life beyond the grave, that the soul lives on after death and that, at the Last Judgement, the soul and the body are reunited and we live with God forever.

By what authority could Jesus say these things? By the authority invested in him by the Father, for he and the Father are one. By speaking the words 'before Abraham was, I am' (v. 57), Jesus had uttered blasphemy. No wonder the Pharisees wanted to kill him! These words were literally unutterable for a Jew, and they made Jesus a marked man. In a way, his journey to the cross began with this statement – for the Jews could not accept that God had humbled himself and become a man.

Lord Jesus, the jaws of death could not hold you; the grave and its corruption could not hold you in their grip. You are the Way, the Truth and the Life. You are the Resurrection and the Life.

Sometimes in rather clever or sophisticated circles, if you enter into a conversation about who Jesus was, you can come across an argument which goes something like this: 'You know Jesus never really claimed to be God.' If you respond, 'Really? I thought that was the basic reason why the Jewish leaders wanted him to die, but since they could not exact the death penalty, the Romans executed him for insurrection, for claiming to be a king', they counter: 'Well, that may be true but the idea that Jesus was God was something the early Church put forward and not something that came from Jesus himself.' This is, of course, nonsense, and people who say such things reveal their lack of knowledge of the Scriptures. John is clear and explicit in today's passage that the Jews were in absolutely no doubt that Jesus claimed to be God: 'It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God' (v. 33).

Jesus was always deeply aware that he was God. This is a fundamental teaching of the Christian faith. It is at its very core and heart. The other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, find the idea of the incarnation deeply

offensive. For them God is so holy and transcendent that he could not humble himself and become a man. But as St Thomas Aquinas taught, 'The greatness of God was not cast off in the incarnation...[I]n order that the body of Christ might be shown to be a real body, he was born of a woman; but in order that his Godhead might be made clear he was born of a virgin.' And this human being is unlike all other human beings: he is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word made flesh, who came and dwelt among us. Jesus is God made man. Fully human, fully divine. His divinity did not overwhelm his humanity, and his humanity did not corrupt his divinity. This is the greatest mystery of our faith. St Clement of Alexandria taught, 'The Word of God became man that you also may learn from a man how to become God.'

Lord Jesus, I believe and bow down before you. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Shakespeare wrote that 'all the world is a stage and all its men and women are players.' We all play our part in the drama of life and today we meet the main players in the drama of salvation. Throughout the Gospels we see that the Pharisees were Jesus' main opponents. It is a sobering truth that Jesus' fiercest detractors and opponents were devout religious men. It is even more sobering to realize that these men who purported to be devoted to God's law were prepared to kill the Lord, thus breaking the fifth commandment. But in extreme times, even for men of religion, political expediency can take precedence over what is right and true.

The kind of moral reasoning we encounter in today's Gospel passage is a classic case of 'moral relativism'. Caiaphas, the high priest, the chief mover and shaker in Israel's premier religious circles, argues successfully that it would be better for one man to die than for the whole nation to suffer. The Sanhedrin want Jesus killed. We have reached the final act of this powerful and intense drama. The mystery of Jesus' Passion now unfolds. Events are set in motion which will lead to Jesus' arrest, trial and execution. Little did these men

realize that they were players in the greatest drama of human history. Little did they realize how prophetic in nature the reasoning of the chief priest actually was: it would, indeed, be far better for Jesus to die – not only for the nation of Israel but for the whole of humankind.

Powerful dark forces are arraigned against the Lord of Light. His human enemies are aided by the devil himself, blinded by rage and hatred and, one presumes, ignorant of the truth that by the cross humankind would be reconciled with God. As we prepare to enter Holy Week, we can resolve to glory and rejoice in Jesus' cross. What can seem folly to many is, in fact, the wisdom of God. We rejoice in Jesus' Passion; we celebrate the suffering he endured; we give thanks and praise to God for his intervention in human history. Jesus' entire life had been focused on this 'hour' and we prepare to enter the deepest mystery of our faith.

'In the cross is the highest virtue. In the cross is the perfection of sanctity. There is no health of the soul nor hope of eternal life but in the cross.'
(Thomas à Kempis)

When J.F. Kennedy, the President of the United States, was assassinated in 1963 his death so shocked the world that for many years the question was asked, 'Where were you when Kennedy was shot?' There is no doubt that his death was a tragedy. He was the most powerful man in the western world and yet he could be taken out by an assassin's bullet – truly shocking! Violent death always makes us sit up and think. As believers, perhaps this week we can ask, 'Were you there when they crucified the Lord?' or 'What does the death of Jesus mean for my life?' The death of Jesus was the most significant, momentous, important and wonderful death in human history. Yes, Jesus' death was wonderful because through it he redeemed the world.

When you listen to the story of the Passion being read at Mass today or, even better, read it quietly in the privacy of your own home, ask the Spirit to help you rejoice and glory in the events that are unfolding. There is no doubt that this kicks against the grain – the events surrounding Jesus' death are brutal and tragic. Far from wanting

to rejoice or glory in the cross we are often driven to tears of sorrow and anguish. The Spirit, however, leads us to see this instrument of torture, this sign of primitive brutality, as the sign of life.

The cross of Jesus is not merely an historic event: it is made real and present to us when we celebrate the Eucharist. But there is also a way in which the Spirit wants to make it real and present to us in our lives. In other words we can expect and hope to understand it more deeply, enter into its mystery in a new way, grasp its significance and appropriate its meaning more deeply in our own lives. The key is wanting this, desiring it and praying for it. In this way we come to understand that the cross is a message with power: 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor. 1:18).

Lord Jesus, you paid the price for our sin. Teach me this week to glory in the cross and bow down before you, the Crucified and Risen Lord.

Mary used pure spikenard oil to anoint the feet of Jesus. This expensive oil was commonly used to anoint recently deceased bodies for burial. As Judas illustrates by his indignation, it was really not the done thing to waste it on washing someone's feet. Jesus was quick to defend Mary, pointing out that she was preparing his body for burial. (And we know that after Jesus' death there was no opportunity for anyone to do so.) Judas decried Mary's act as a dreadful and terrible waste. Disingenuous and cunning, he feigned concern for the poor.

What does it mean to waste? Here is a definition as good as any: to use something unnecessarily, without appropriate consideration or recompense. To Judas Mary's act was a waste – to Jesus it was an act of love.

Some of the key activities in the Christian life could be considered wasteful. Take prayer, for example. We can see prayer as a complete waste of time as opposed to doing things, helping people and being apostolically proactive (as we might say). However, in fact, time given to the Lord in prayer, learning to hear his voice or even learning the

art of being still, is never wasted. Or take reading Scripture. How well do you know your Bible? Have you ever studied a book of the Bible or focused on an incident in Jesus' life? Have you ever done a study of a word, such as mercy or forgiveness or love? Time spent reading the Scriptures is never wasted or misspent.

During Holy Week we can discover in a new and fresh way the value of time. Out of all the valuable things in our lives time is the most valuable and it is constantly running out. To learn to value time we need to grieve at the way we waste it. As the poet Dante said, 'It is the wisest who grieve most at loss of time.' Take time out during this Holy Week with the specific purpose of wasting it on the Lord. This time will never be wasted: in fact, it is a way of storing up treasure for ourselves in heaven. We give God little – God gives to us abundantly. He gives us grace, blessing and revelation, but he also gives us peace, joy and a love which burns in our hearts.

'Do not walk through time without leaving worthy evidence of your passage.' (Pope John XXIII)

John the Evangelist, the holy author of the fourth Gospel, has a unique and special way of understanding Jesus' cross. For him the cross of Jesus means 'glory', for him the cross is Jesus' 'hour'. If we embrace this teaching and strive to understand it, we begin to enter the mystery of the cross in a new and exciting way; we begin to understand that the cross of Jesus is a truth which has power to change our lives.

There is a wonderful tension in the Scriptures leading up to Jesus' passion and death. It is a tension between suffering and glory. Jesus freely accepted his suffering because it would glorify God. The Hebrew word for glory is *kabod* which also suggests 'weight'. In the Hebrew mind the human being could possess glory or weight in many areas of human life: it could be in the number of our possessions (Gen. 13:2), or our professional status (Gen. 45:13), or even in having the characteristics of a king (1 Kgs. 3:13). The Scriptures are clear, however, that obedience to God excels all other types of glory. Obedience is, if you like, the supreme glory (Num. 22:17-18;

Ps. 73:24). Jesus' life witnesses to how suffering can be transformed into glory (1 Pet. 4:14). Jesus understood that it was by his passion and death that glory would be given to God (John 13:31-32).

In order to know God's life we have to go the way of death. We die in order to rise. We suffer in order to know glory. The way of self-sacrifice is the way of the gospel. Pray today, if you will, on these words of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta: 'Lord, help us to see, in your cross and resurrection, an example of how to endure and seemingly to die, in the agony of conflict of daily life, so that we may live more fully and creatively. Enable us, O Lord, to go through trials patiently and bravely, trusting that you will support us; for it is only by dying with you that we can rise with you. Amen.'

Lord Jesus, you carried the weight of the cross, which was the weight of the sin of the world. You who knew no sin became sin, so that we would be raised up with you and become partakers of the divine nature.

Do you believe in hell? Who do you think is in hell? Adolf Hitler? Joseph Stalin? Judas Iscariot? Thankfully, the Catholic Church has always resisted this kind of futile speculation about who is actually in hell, realizing that all judgement belongs to God and to God alone. There are many things we are not permitted to know, and this is certainly one of them. What we do know, however, is that the betrayal of the Lord by Judas, one of his disciples, is understood as one of the greatest acts of betrayal in history – perhaps the greatest – so that even today the name ‘Judas’ is a byword for ‘traitor’ or ‘spy’. The Wednesday of Holy Week is sometimes referred to as Spy Wednesday and in the Eastern Christian tradition it is known as Great Wednesday.

We can sometimes read the Scriptures in the wrong way – in too much of a human way, if we can put it like this. A man is being cruelly and brutally led to his death; the forces of evil are being unleashed upon him; he is being betrayed and let down by those closest to him... All of this is true but know this: Jesus was in complete control of the drama as it unfolded. Our natural instinct is

to feel sorry for Jesus or to grieve that no one was there to defend him. This is not the New Testament perspective. Jesus was fully aware of the suffering and death that lay ahead of him. He is the Lord of history, not subject to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

As we enter tomorrow into the solemn *Triduum*, walking with the Lord through his trial, death and resurrection, the Spirit wants to open up our hearts and minds to see something new, to understand something more deeply or to notice something we have not noticed before. We can only bow down low before the mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus came to undo the work of the devil – it is not surprising, therefore, that the devil and his minions would unleash the full forces of evil and darkness upon him. Judas was caught up in that but Jesus loved him, as he loves all his own, right until the end.

Lord Jesus, teach me to adore your cross, for through it you have redeemed the world. The cross is the height of virtue, the perfection of holiness.

Isaiah 50:4-9 • Psalm 68(69):8-10, 21-22, 31-34
Matthew 26:14-25

Jesus was always thinking of pleasing the Father and serving others. Even at his last supper, when he knew the ‘hour’ had come for him to depart from this world, he was not focused on himself but on others. His greatest concern was for those whom he would leave behind after he had returned to the Father.

Jesus, because he is the Servant-King, assumed the role of a servant – but not just any servant: he carried out the duties of a bondservant. Bondservants were the lowest of the low in the hierarchy of servants, and the most menial tasks, such as washing the dirty feet of their superiors, were reserved for them. This was the role that Jesus assumed. Make no mistake, the disciples would have been truly shocked at this and utterly indignant. In fact, Peter was clearly astonished and overwhelmed by his Master’s act of service. Jesus used this moment to teach his disciples about baptism and the need to be baptized into his death. Only through this baptism, this washing, could they participate in his divine life, the life of the eternal Son of God (v. 8).

We are, by God’s grace, washed in the waters of baptism and immersed into Jesus’ death and

resurrection. Having been baptized, we are called to imitate him and live a life of dedicated love and service. In fact, in Jesus, we see the principle being lived out that the greater you are, the more humbly you should behave. This is why priests and bishops at Masses all over the world today wash people’s feet. The ministry of the priest is above all a ministry of service. The washing of feet is to be a sign, a symbol, of their love for their people but also of their desire always to act humbly towards them. Of course, this is equally true for all ministry within the Church and within the family.

A message then of the Holy Thursday liturgy is: ‘Love one another as I have loved you. You have seen how I, Jesus, your Lord and Master have served others: now go and do likewise.’ We are called to a life of self-giving and self-sacrifice.

Lord Jesus, you are the model of how to live. Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies it bears no fruit. Teach me to die to myself so that I may live a life of love and service.

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 • Psalm 115(116):12-13, 15-18
1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-15

Today is a good and wonderful day. It is the day when good triumphed over evil; the day when darkness was overwhelmed by the light; the day on which our archenemy, death itself, was conquered and vanquished. This is a day on which to celebrate and rejoice, to give thanks and praise to God. Of course, today is also a solemn day, on which we are invited to reflect profoundly on the death of Jesus of Nazareth, God made man, the Word made flesh.

What happened on the cross? What did Jesus achieve? God proved his love on the cross. When Christ hung and bled and died, it was God saying to the world, 'I love you.' The cold hard nails used by the Roman soldiers could not have kept Jesus on the cross, had love not held him there. We tend to focus on the physical sufferings of Christ, for they are brutal beyond imagination. Historians, archaeologists and biblical scholars inform us that the Roman execution method was so barbaric that most prisoners, already weakened by hunger and thirst, would have been dead long before the act of crucifixion, due to the sheer loss of blood sustained as the result of the thirty-nine lashes.

But Jesus' real suffering, our faith teaches us, was not physical, but spiritual. He who knew no sin became as sin for us. As Paul, the theologian par excellence, reflected many years after the event, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on the tree"' (Gal. 3:13 NIV). On the cross Jesus experienced what it meant to be forsaken by God. His cry from the cross, the prophetic fulfilment of the psalmist's prayer, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Ps. 22:1), captures eloquently and powerfully Jesus' terrible anguish and suffering.

Today, the Holy Spirit leads us to glory in the cross. Let us rejoice in it, give praise for it and even boast in it (see Gal. 6:14). Ask the Spirit to open up your mind to understand the cross in a way which deepens your faith and gives you the confident assurance that, on the cross of Calvary, Jesus died for you.

*'When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.'
(Isaac Watts)*

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 • Psalm 30(31): 2, 6, 12-17, 25
Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 • John 18:1-19:42

Today we wait. Today we pray. Today we are silent. The Easter Vigil begins our journey to the joy of Easter Sunday. We light the Easter candle and remember Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, who descended into the bowels of hell to set the prisoners free. The jaws of death swallowed up the Lord but its grip could not hold the Lord of life, the King of glory.

Today, if we are blessed to go to the Easter Vigil, we immerse ourselves in the history of our salvation. The liturgy invites us to read from the Old Testament and ponder the fulfilment of the promises of new life it contains. One of these readings, from the book of Genesis, deals with Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac. This powerful account is a prefigurement of the Father sacrificing his One and Only Son. God told Abraham, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering' (Gen. 22:2). Abraham set out on a three-day journey to Moriah. Can you imagine the anguish of this journey? These three days of grief, trial and suffering were a severe test of Abraham's faith. How would we have responded, had we been in

Abraham's shoes? How do we react and respond when we suddenly find ourselves in challenging and difficult situations which test our faith?

Thankfully, God did not require Abraham to sacrifice his son: it was a test, and Abraham proved the depth of his faith. Against hope he believed. Jesus gave a new meaning to this ancient story and surpassed Abraham, our father in faith, by being obedient even unto death. Jesus became both priest and victim. Jesus carried the cross just as Isaac had carried the wood for his own sacrifice. Jesus is the new Isaac and gives us the courage to face the trials and sufferings of our own lives.

The mystery of this holy night is that we died with Christ on the cross. We are immersed, through baptism, in the Lord's death and resurrection. We are all partakers in Jesus' death and resurrection. Tonight and every time we receive the Lord in the Eucharist, we receive grace and strength to die to self but rise with Christ to new life.

Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, we praise you for Jesus who became our Paschal sacrifice. By dying he destroyed our death, by rising he restored our life.

Romans 6:3-11 • Psalm 117(118):1-2, 16-17, 22-23
Luke 24:1-12



March • Sunday

John 20:1-9 • Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord

Does today's Gospel strike you as a little flat? It seems to present only half the story – an empty tomb. The emphasis is on the Lord's absence, not his risen, glorified presence. Perhaps the key to this is to be found in the reaction of the disciple (John) who saw and believed (v. 8).

For John Jesus is a wonderful mystery which can be entered into and experienced by putting one's faith in the signs. The signs in John's Gospel are: the changing of water into wine (2:1-11); the healing of the royal official's son in Capernaum (4:46-54); the healing of the paralytic at Bethesda (5:1-18); Jesus walking on water (6:16-24); the healing of the blind man (9:1-7); and the raising of Lazarus (11:1-45). The final sign is that of the empty tomb, and it is a deeply mysterious one at that.

In one way it is a pity that the Gospel for Easter Sunday doesn't include the reading of John 20 and 21 because there is a way in which the empty tomb is the beginning of the process of faith. It is as if faith in the resurrection came progressively to the disciples, reaching its climax on the lake at Tiberius when John declares, 'It is the Lord!' (21:7). We too progress and develop in faith in the same

gradual way that the disciples did. It is the work of the Spirit in us which leads us to proclaim with more and more assurance that Jesus is risen.

Perhaps, as we journey together now towards Pentecost Sunday, in this special Year of Faith we will experience the truth of the resurrection penetrating and taking hold of us in a deeper and more life-changing way than ever before. Faith is not magic. Our faith is tested, sometimes sorely and severely. The disciples had come face to face with the risen Lord, and even Thomas, at first deeply sceptical, declared, 'My Lord, and my God!' (20:28). However, it was only when the Spirit came down upon the disciples at the feast of Pentecost that they were able to proclaim with heartfelt joy and confidence that Jesus, the crucified One, was risen from the dead. Many of these disciples later went on to lay down their lives for him.

Jesus Christ is risen today! Let us rejoice! Jesus Christ is the Lord of the living and the dead! Jesus Christ is our Lord and our God.

*Acts 10:34, 37-43 • Psalm 117(118):1-2, 16-17, 22-23
Colossians 3:1-4 or 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 • John 20:1-9*
