



From our earliest childhood, we are taught, rightly, not to boast about good things that we do. Jesus teaches that we should not parade our good deeds before men as the Pharisees did. And when giving alms, he teaches, 'do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing' (Matt. 6:3). At first sight, therefore, today's Scripture would seem to contradict this principle, because Jesus is teaching his followers to 'let your light shine before men'. How can these two teachings both be true?

In this passage, Jesus charges his disciples with the mission of bringing his presence to the world. It is significant that Matthew places the teaching just after the Beatitudes, in which Jesus has taught his followers that in their lives they will face suffering, and maybe persecution, but that perseverance in the truth will ultimately lead to blessing. So the word-picture of the Christian life which he paints is scarcely an easy or a glamorous option. Fulfilling, yes, challenging, certainly, but resulting in adulation or kudos, not even remotely. So Jesus never taught that being his follower would result in praise from other people. Indeed, despite whatever illusion we may be under, praise

from other people is often insincere or grudging. If we trumpet our good deeds in order to seek the approval of others, then we are clearly not living the life of a disciple as Jesus defines it.

Maybe it is the very last line in today's Gospel which is the key to the true meaning of the teaching: that people would see the good deeds of the followers of Jesus and, as a result, would praise God. Jesus is clearly not encouraging his followers to ever more heroic or expansive conduct, but merely to live the Christian life as he wants us to do – literally to take up our cross daily. By this definition, simple everyday events – quiet faithfulness in looking after a sick loved one, or the refusal to speak ill of others, for example – could be the kind of behaviour which causes others to see, even in a small way, the love of God. Thus, when Jesus says that we should let our good deeds shine out before others, he is not necessarily putting demands of laudable performance upon us – quite the reverse.

Lord, help me to live my life as your disciple right now, in the circumstances and challenges in which I find myself today.

Philippians 3:8-14 • Psalm 1:4, 6 • Matthew 5:13-16
(Proper of Season: James 5:13-20 • Ps 140(141): 1-3, 8 • Mk 10:13-16)



Today we are faced with a choice between God and a rival master. To serve God, we need to love him above all things. The rival master can be anyone or anything. The example Jesus gives is mammon, a Semitic word for money or riches, which according to St Gregory of Nyssa derived from the ancient Canaanite god of riches. We can see the challenge as worship either of God or of some other god. Our ultimate loyalty should be to God, and this is impossible if we serve money in the way that a slave serves his master. It is this service of money, not the possession of it, that is wrong. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian sentenced to death for opposing the Nazis, put the choice well: 'Our hearts have room for only one all-embracing devotion, and we can only cleave to one Lord.'

In the rest of today's Gospel, the theme is worry and anxiety. The Greek verb in 'do not be anxious' (v. 25) is *merimnate*, used also in Philippians 4:6, 'Have no anxiety about anything'. God gave us life and our body, so he will give us the lesser gifts of food and clothing, and therefore anxiety is unnecessary.

We are all prone to worry, to a greater or lesser extent, but it robs us of the peace of Christ. The basis of our anxiety is that we lack faith. Jesus' teaching here gives us several reasons why we should not worry: it is to miss the point of life, which is far more important than things such as food, drink and clothing; it makes little sense for if God feeds the birds, surely he will not let us go hungry; and it is a waste of time because it will never lengthen our lives. Indeed, worry can make us ill, shortening our lives. There are enough problems today without worrying about tomorrow!

The answer to worry is to 'seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness' (v. 33). We need to change our priorities and seek to uphold God's standards. Through God's grace we can grow in our understanding of his love and become more conscious that he cares for us.

Lord, I am so often busy and worry about all sorts of things. Help me to remember that if you feed the birds and cover the fields with beautiful flowers, you are certainly always going to take care of me.

Isaiah 49:14-15 • Psalm 61(62):2-9
1 Corinthians 4:1-5 • Matthew 6:24-34



A man comes to Jesus seeking wisdom. In the enquirer we recognize everyone who (consciously or not) comes to Jesus asking about the meaning of life. The man is a seeker – he is searching for the full meaning, purpose and direction of life. ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ (v. 17). His searching question is as sincere as it is probing. The mystery of our eternal destiny strikes at the very heart of our existence.

The man is clearly attracted to Jesus. He sees in him one who can satisfy his deepest needs and answer his most testing questions. Jesus’ response may appear to us to be abrupt and curt. Its purpose is to establish that only God can shed light upon what is good; only the One who is good can grant eternal life. Jesus shows that eternal life is connected to our obedience to the commandments. At their heart is our call to uphold the dignity of every human person. Jesus’ teaching brings the Ten Commandments to fulfilment.

The questioner remains unsatisfied. He feels that there must be more to it than that. We cannot but assume that he is genuine when he says: ‘Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth’ (v. 20).

Even though he has lived a morally exemplary life he knows deep inside that he is far from his goal – he realizes that he is still lacking. Jesus is conscious that he is thirsting for something greater and challenges him to enter upon the path of perfection. How? By giving away his possessions and following Jesus. Sadly the man turns away from this challenge – he is incapable of taking this next step on his own. The realization crushes him and he departs sorrowful and dejected.

The demands of discipleship can seem hard and the call to be obedient is not always easy. However, what is impossible for us is possible for God (v. 27). In understanding our own powerlessness and inability not only to keep the commandments but to live the beatitudes, we become open to receiving the gift of God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s as we come to rely on the grace and power of God rather than on our own strength that we are enabled truly to follow Jesus.

Lord, I want to be your disciple. I want to follow your way, to know your truth and to be filled with your life.

1 Peter 1:3-9 • Psalm 110(111):1-10

Mark 10:17-27



‘What’s in it for me?’ How often do we ask ourselves this question? In so many things we do there is an element of self-interest. We may cloak it, but the question lurks in the background. In effect this is what Peter is saying to the Lord when he states: ‘Lo, we have left everything and followed you’ (v. 28). It is reassuringly human that the one who was to be the rock upon which the Church was built should display such a sentiment. It is even more reassuring that the Lord doesn’t rebuke him, but affirms that many benefits and blessings will be conferred upon his followers, both in this age and in the age to come. It is sobering too that contained within the litany of blessings there is also the warning of persecution.

Jesus knew that Peter’s question echoed the complex desires of the heart. In many ways Peter’s words are both question and complaint. The idea that dedication, sacrifice and labour can go unrewarded is abhorrent. It offends our sense of natural justice. Still, we may say with varying degrees of humility that in our service of others we

want nothing for ourselves. We protest that what we do is done out of love. But the truth is that even when this is the case our service brings its own reward.

We should not be embarrassed by the idea of reward. It is a godly principle and God is eager to shower his blessings upon all those who serve him. He is lavish and generous beyond our wildest dreams. To understand this we’ve got to get into the logic of the kingdom. God’s reasoning is so completely different from our own – for example, in God’s kingdom the first will be last and the last first (v. 31). In God’s kingdom the humble are exalted and the exalted humbled. In God’s kingdom the rich become poor and the poor rich. If God gives us so many gifts in this world, what treasure will be ours in the age to come! Rest assured that God wants to reward and bless us. If we are suffering for God’s sake and we find ourselves giving way to bitterness or complaint, we can take to heart the words of Thomas à Kempis: ‘With God it is impossible that anything, however small, that is suffered for God’s sake, should fail to meet with its reward.’

1 Peter 1:10-16 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

Mark 10:28-31

Lent can be understood as a season of divine therapy – a time to detoxify our souls, renew our energy and be refreshed in spirit. Lent is like a long ‘retreat’, during which we can turn into ourselves and listen to the voice of God in order to defeat the temptations of the Evil One. It is a period of spiritual ‘combat’, which we must experience alongside Jesus, not with pride and presumption, but using the arms of faith: prayer, listening to the Word of God and penance. In this way we will be able to celebrate Easter in truth, ready to renew the promises of our baptism.

During Lent we are invited to fast and deny ourselves; we receive the call to pray more and give to those who are in need (almsgiving). In all these ways we give of ourselves, but it is also a season to receive. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta said: ‘As Lent is the time for greater love, listen to Jesus’ thirst... “Repent and believe” Jesus tells us. What are we to repent of? Our indifference, our hardness of heart. What are we to believe? Jesus thirsts even now, in your heart and in the poor – he knows your weakness. He wants only your love, wants only the chance to love you.’

Lent then is a time of conversion, of change, of repentance, of turning back to God. The problem is that we often find it much easier to identify and point out how others may need to repent and change than to focus on ourselves and our own shortcomings. Self-knowledge is a gift of the Spirit which we can ask the Lord to give us. As we grow in spiritual insight into our own behaviour and attitudes, we become aware of our need to seek out what the Church calls ‘the second conversion’, which the Catechism of the Catholic Church unreservedly teaches is an ongoing process in the Christian life: ‘Christ’s call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. This second conversion is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church who, ‘clasping sinners to her bosom, [is] at once holy and always in need of purification [and] follows constantly the path of penance and renewal’ (para. 1428).

Lord Jesus, during Lent may your Spirit so work in me that my heart may be drawn and moved by the merciful love of God. Help me to recognize my need to return to you.

Joel 2:12-18 • Psalm 50(51):3-6, 12-14, 17
2 Corinthians 5:20–6:2 • Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Do you know where you are going? Do you know where you came from? Do you know what God’s plan is for your life? Of course, the answer to these questions can never be easy or straightforward. We all, truth be told, live with a certain darkness or mystery to our lives as they are lived out in human history. Yet there is a way in which to have some notion or idea of the answer to such questions gives our lives meaning and direction, and helps to shape our identity. Of course, we live our lives against a backdrop of shadow and confusion which can really only be truly enlightened by the light of faith. We are fallen and imperfect human beings.

Jesus, however, was not fallen: as the One who did not sin, he was truly perfect. He had a clear understanding of where he came from, where he was going and what God’s plan for his life was. He had a clear and perfect grasp of his origin and destiny. He knew that he was from the Father and was returning to the Father. He knew that he was the promised Messiah, the anointed and chosen One for whom the Jewish nation had prayed and longed. Jesus’ own understanding

of his mission differed sharply from the understanding of the Jewish people, who believed the Messiah would come in a show of power and glory, ushering in God’s kingdom and crushing his enemies. Jesus revealed a different kind of Messiah: he revealed a Messiah who was a scandal, one from whom men hid their faces, one who suffered and was rejected. Jesus was not the Messiah of glory but the Messiah of the cross. Jesus was despised, rejected and finally executed in possibly the most brutal way ever devised by humanity.

Jesus’ life gives witness to the ‘death to life’ principle: from death comes life; from self-sacrifice comes fullness of life and true human dignity. During Lent we embrace this ‘death to life’ principle: in order to find life we must first lose it. For sure this kicks against our human nature. We resist and fight it but by God’s grace we can put on Christ and live a life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

*‘I beg you, Lord, to stamp everything I do with the seal of love, for nothing else will last.’
(Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity)*

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 • Psalm 1:1-6
Luke 9:22-25

It is a harsh yet observable fact that those who practise their faith with a certain intensity are often critical of those who do not. It as if their devotion and commitment cloud their charity and compassion, causing them to become rather harsh and judgemental towards others. We should not be surprised that John the Baptist's disciples were set in this mould, asking Jesus why his disciples did not fast. They were clearly scandalized. The Lord cleverly deflected their question with another question, asking, 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?' (v. 15).

The image of God as the Bridegroom is deeply rooted in the Jewish faith. Many scriptures express God's love for his people Israel in terms of a bridegroom's love for the bride he has chosen: 'For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name' (Isa. 54:5); 'I delight greatly in the Lord...For he has...arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest' (Isa. 61:10 NIV); 'For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall

your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you' (Isa. 62:5); 'I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord' (Hos. 2:19-20). God is our lover and we are his beloved.

The disciples were blessed because they lived during the time of the Bridegroom. We live during a different era – an era when we await his coming again among us. We are called to fast and to prepare for the coming again to earth of Christ the Bridegroom. We should fast, though, not because we are required to or because it is the right thing to do, but because we love the Bridegroom. We fast, pray and give alms because of love, not because of duty. This is a work of the Spirit in us. These disciplines are meant to bring us closer to God and our neighbour – not drive us further apart.

'O Love ever burning and never extinguished, my God set me on fire.'
(St Augustine of Hippo)

Isaiah 58:1-9 • Psalm 50(51):3-6, 18-19

Matthew 9:14-15

Jesus was born a Jew and lived his life immersed in Jewish culture and traditions.

However, he did not think entirely like the majority of Jews: he thought like a child of God; he thought like the Son of God. The Jews of Jesus' day absolutely loathed and despised their fellow countrymen who collaborated with their Roman oppressors as tax collectors. Levi was very likely one of the many tax collectors who set up booths on one of the major international routes that went from Damascus through Capernaum to Egypt and the Mediterranean coast. We know little of the detail of what transpired between Jesus and Levi but we do know one very simple fact: Jesus invited Levi to follow him. There was something so powerful, so compelling and so life-changing about their encounter that this tax collector left everything to follow the Lord.

What then made a manipulative, cunning and greedy traitor like Levi turn so radically from a corrupt life to become a disciple of Christ? Was it a look from Jesus? Or perhaps a word? Or was it simply his presence? Luke summarizes their encounter in two brief verses but there must have been a

deep and powerful exchange – a meeting of hearts, a look of love, an understanding that Jesus had the message of eternal life, that he, in fact, was the message of eternal life. What is beyond doubt is that a dramatic transformation occurred which resulted in Levi ceasing to be a collector of taxes and becoming a fisher of men.

Each of us is called to a life of repentance and conversion, but what does this mean? We tend to think that it is people in serious difficulty or embroiled in destructive lifestyles who are in need of conversion. Not us! It's the ones who commit serious sins, such as murder, adultery and fornication. Those of us who commit lesser sins such as greed, gluttony, avarice or gossip just need to seek forgiveness through a visit to the sacrament of reconciliation. Yes, indeed, but the sacrament of reconciliation is in fact a sacrament of conversion, pointing up the truth, salutary as it may be, that we are all in need of conversion.

Lord, teach me that your sun shines on both the righteous and the unrighteous because all are in need of your great mercy and forgiveness, and all are in need of conversion.

Isaiah 58:9-14 • Psalm 85(86):1-6

Luke 5:27-32

The playwright Oscar Wilde famously said, 'I can resist everything except temptation.' He also said: 'A man who moralizes is invariably a hypocrite; a woman, a prude.' Oscar Wilde certainly knew a thing or two about temptation. How tragic it was that this great man of letters, with such insight into human nature, was destroyed by the experience of being sentenced to two years' hard labour.

The truth is that we are all tempted. No one can escape the allure of temptation. But what is temptation? We could say that temptation is a state experienced when a person entertains thoughts, intentions or desires which are contrary to the thoughts, intentions and desires of Almighty God. When those thoughts, intentions or desires are entertained, then sin is committed. Sin unrepented of by the sinner and not forgiven by the Father leads to death. Temptation is, then, a link in the chain of circumstances that leads to death (Jas. 1:14, 15). It is important to remember, however, that there is a distinction between being tempted and consenting to it. It is the latter that is sinful.

But how do we resist temptation and how do we overcome it? A key step in the process lies in having a change of attitude towards those things which tempt us. Rather than being fearful of temptation we can regard it as part and parcel of human nature. The truth is that in resisting temptation we are made stronger in faith and in our spirits, and for this reason temptation can be seen as an aid in our spiritual growth. The great Scripture scholar Origen said: 'God does not want to impose the good, but wants free beings. There is a certain usefulness to temptation. No one but God knows what our soul has received from him, not even we ourselves. But temptation reveals it in order to teach us to know ourselves, and in this way we discover our evil inclinations and are obliged to give thanks for the good that temptation has revealed to us.'

Lord, thank you for testing me and putting me through the trials of life and the trials of faith. Jesus was tempted as we are but he resisted. Teach me to follow his example and overcome temptation in the name and by the cross and the blood of Jesus.

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7 • Psalm 50(51):3-6, 12-14, 17
Romans 5:12-19 • Matthew 4:1-11

The holy season of Lent leads us towards the period in Jesus' life which he refers to as 'his hour'. Jesus is on the way to the cross, and we follow him on that journey. It is the hour of Jesus' suffering and death, which we commemorate on Good Friday. A grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die if it is to produce fruit. Jesus will enter the ground, like a grain of wheat, but his death on the cross will yield much fruit.

This is one of the profound themes of the New Testament: from death comes life. Life is offered to the world through the death of Jesus on the cross. If he is buried like the seed, if he is lifted up (v. 32), then much fruit will come and he will draw all people to himself. There was no other way for salvation to come to men and women except by the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was the ultimate revelation of the love of God. Many centuries before, the prophet Isaiah had foretold: 'Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high' (Isa. 52:13). The cross was the hour when Jesus was glorified.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel mirror something of the interior struggle he would endure in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, for this purpose I have come to this hour' (vv. 27-28; cf. Mark 14:34). Although in his humanity Jesus recoiled at the suffering of the cross, he brought his natural feelings in subjection to his desire to bring glory to his Father.

The heart and centre of the Christian message will always be the cross of Jesus. Just as Jesus' mission was to go to the cross, so too it is our mission. If we wish to be servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, he asks us to 'follow' him in this particular way. We – like him – are to be a grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies. Only by being willing to die to ourselves, to our ambitions, our longings, our aspirations, will we discover the life energized by God himself, the life of true love, joy and peace, the life that is a foretaste of heaven.

Lord, teach me during Lent to glory in your cross.

Proper of Saints: Isa 50:5-9 • Ps 76(77):12-16, 21 • Jn 12:24-26
(Proper of Season: Lev 19:1-2, 11-8 • Ps 18(19):8-10, 15 • Mt 25:31-46)



The Catechism of the Catholic Church, rather like the Bible, is a big book and can appear rather daunting, but if you can, do look at its final section which deals with prayer and especially its exposition of the Lord's Prayer. It is frankly life-changing. In its unpacking of the Our Father, it is as if this monumental volume of dogma and doctrine bows humbly before this simple prayer's wisdom and clarity.

In so doing, its authors are following in the footsteps of many saints of old. For example, St Augustine was so taken by the Our Father that he wrote, 'Run through all the words of the holy prayers in Scripture, and I do not think you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer.' Several centuries later St Thomas Aquinas, a Doctor of the Church, wrote: 'The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers. In it, we ask not only for things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. The prayer teaches us not only to ask for things but also in what order we should desire them.'

As believers we frequently protest, 'I don't know how to pray!' We find it hard to find time to pray and we wish we prayed more. The simplest and most effective way to begin to pray is by saying the Our Father, the prayer that Jesus taught us. As we pray it slowly and mindfully, we will grow in our prayer.

As well as teaching us how to pray, the Our Father contains a central truth of our faith, for in it Jesus teaches us to call God 'Father', thus revealing that the Almighty God, the Lord of heaven and earth, loves every single human being he has created as his child. We can easily lose sight of God's love for us. Most unhappy Christians are unhappy because they have lost sight of this vital truth. God our Father loves us and wants to give us good things. Pre-eminent among these good things is the gift of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who made it possible for us to know God as our Father and to come to him in prayer.

'It is called the Lord's Prayer because it comes to us from the Lord Jesus, the master and model of our prayer.' (CCC 2775)

Isaiah 55:10-11 • Psalm 33(34):4-7, 16-19

Matthew 6:7-15



What did Jesus mean by the phrase the 'sign of Jonah'? For him the sign of Jonah was his resurrection from the dead. Just as Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so the Lord would spend three days and three nights in the belly of the earth. As his Jewish listeners would have known, the reluctant prophet Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites that they should repent. They heeded the sign and repented before the Lord in sackcloth and ashes. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is also a sign to the people of the earth that they need to repent and turn back to God. This is because the resurrection is the definitive revelation that Jesus of Nazareth is Lord, the Victor and Conqueror over life and death. Jesus is greater than Abraham, greater than Moses, greater than the Queen of the South and greater than Solomon because Jesus is God made man, the Eternal Word made flesh, the only One who could overcome death because he is Life.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the goal of Lent. Day by day we move steadily towards our

celebration of the greatest event in the history of humankind. Jesus of Nazareth is the only person who has ever been able to rise above the corruption of death. In his risen state he revealed a new humanity – the new creation; he revealed a new, resplendent and glorious humanity, which death and the devil could not extinguish. The fact that Jesus rose again changed everything for humankind. Through his resurrection we became children of the light, sons and daughters of God who gives life to the dead.

We are children of the resurrection and because of this we are called to live contrite, repentant and holy lives. We are called to walk humbly with our God (Mic. 6:8). It is a repentant heart that truly marks out the Christian for such a disposition means that the grace of the Spirit is able to shine through us and point others to the sign of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Lord God, repentance is the key that unlocks the door into living by the power and grace of the Spirit. Teach me to lead a humble, contrite and repentant life.

Jonah 3:1-10 • Psalm 50(51):3-4, 12-13, 18-19

Luke 11:29-32

The five verses on which we are reflecting today are from the Sermon on the Mount. The first four (vv. 7-11) are to do with prayer and the final one (v. 12) is on love of our neighbour or the Golden Rule. The Spirit leads us, therefore, to see that prayer and love are intimately linked.

If you pray, you love; if you do not pray, it is harder to love. At the end of the day, when the evening sun comes down on our lives, what will we have to show but two things: our prayer and our love? For prayer and love are at the heart of the Christian life. The Jewish teacher Hillel said, 'What you do not like, do not do to your neighbour.' The rest, we could say, is commentary.

If we are to love as God calls us to love we need to master the art of prayer – although, of course, none of us will ever truly master prayer. However, there is one area of prayer in which we all need particular help and it is this: we are all, to a man or woman, not bold enough in our prayer and we minimize or limit what God can do in our lives. We need to allow Jesus' teaching to challenge our small thinking.

The key to prayer is understanding or receiving a revelation that God is our Father. Which truly loving father does not want to give his children good things? If this is true of an earthly father, how much more true is it of our heavenly Father? But what are the good things that God wants to give us? His greatest gift, beyond dispute, is the Holy Spirit. For only by the power of the Spirit are we able to fulfil our vocation of living a life that reflects him. 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal. 5:22). Let our daily prayer be that we receive and know more of the Spirit because this prayer will lead us to love.

The Christian life in a nutshell is prayer expressing itself through love. We will win the world over to the beauty and grandeur of Christ only by our love, and we come to know God's love through prayer. This is why prayer and the Golden Rule are intimately and profoundly linked.

'Not where I breathe, but where I love, I live.' (St Robert Southwell)

Esther 4:17 • Psalm 137(138):1-3, 7-8

Matthew 7:7-12

At the heart of much of our anger is fear. An angry person is a fearful person. When you find yourself in the grip of an anger attack, bear in mind that your anger is an overflow (and an ugly one at that) of your deep-seated fear. The question then is: what is it we are afraid of? The list of possible causes of our fear is endless: we fear that people don't respect or esteem us; we fear failure; we fear others because we get intimidated; we fear being exposed for one thing or another. Fear can be rampant in our lives but we may not identify or recognize it.

Of course, we like to persuade and convince ourselves that the anger we are experiencing is righteous anger and therefore justified, but this is simply a delusion, a self-deception. Very few of us, if any, can do righteous anger; most of our anger is unjustified and sinful. As Aristotle once said: 'Anybody can become angry – that is easy – but to be angry with the right person, and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not within everybody's power and is not easy.'

Sadly many Christians are prone to anger. It can be especially shocking when a deacon, priest or bishop has an anger problem and becomes irate because something isn't done as he wants or a rubric isn't followed in the right way – all hell breaks loose, causing great offence to the faithful who have to live with such outbursts. Jesus had very strong words to say about anger, comparing it not simply metaphorically but literally to murder.

Lent is a good opportunity for us to examine our conscience and repent for the times we have succumbed to anger. The only way to overcome anger is by repenting of it. St Jerome was prone to the sin of anger and he wept bitter tears for the damage he had inflicted on those who lived and worked alongside him. Let us also come before the Lord in humble repentance, for none of us is without sin. As we do so, the Spirit will give us the grace to face the fear in our lives that fuels our anger.

Lord, teach me to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow also to be angry.

Ezekiel 18:21-28 • Psalm 129(130)

Matthew 5:20-26

Love is an over-used word nowadays. We love our parents and friends, we love food, we love our sports team, we love a holiday destination, and so on. Our English word 'love' encompasses a wide range of human emotions. The great Christian writer and apologist C.S. Lewis differentiated four kinds of love: 'Charity means love. It is called *agape* in the New Testament to distinguish it from *eros* (sexual love), *storge* (family affection) and *philia* (friendship). There are in fact then four kinds of love, all good in their proper place, but *agape* is the highest or best form of love, because it is the love that God has for us and it is the love to which we are called to witness.'

God wants us to love in the same way that he loves us. How does God love? Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel gives us a number of clues: God loves his enemies; God loves everybody, whether they are righteous or unrighteous; God loves those who refuse to love him back. And ultimately, of course, God loved the world by sending his Son to pay the price for sin.

Faith Today, our sister publication, recently carried a feature about

Peter Tatchell, the human rights activist, because the editor wanted to draw attention to his selfless and tireless work, without fear or favour, for the human rights of all men and women and his passion for freedom of speech. In response, he received a volley of emails and letters about how misguided it was to carry such a piece in a Catholic periodical. Did he not realize that this man had protested against Pope Benedict's visit to the UK in 2010? Did he not realize that Peter is a homosexual and promotes homosexuality? The editor indeed realized these things but, over and above our human response, he believes that Christ calls us to bless those who persecute us, love our enemies and pray for those who resist the teaching of the Church.

At the eve of our lives we will not be asked, 'How faithful were you to the teaching of the Church?' (for we all fall and stumble in many ways) but 'Have you loved and served others in a spirit of mercy and compassion?'

'For I created your soul with a capacity for loving – so much so that you cannot live without love. Indeed, love is your food.'
(St Catherine of Siena)

Deuteronomy 26:16-19 • Psalm 118(119):1-8
Matthew 5:43-48

Today we are given a glimpse into another world – a heavenly, eternal world, far beyond this world but mysteriously right at the heart of it. Jesus was transfigured before the three chosen disciples – Peter, James and John. Jesus' face and clothes became dazzling white and we are told, by these reliable witnesses, that Elijah and Moses appeared among them. The two Old Testament prophets spoke with the Lord about his forthcoming 'departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem' (see Luke 9:31). God the Father also spoke as a voice from heaven saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him' (v. 5).

What do you make of this incident in Jesus' life? What is its meaning, its significance? Well, in that holy moment Jesus discloses his divine glory. He also reveals that this glory was achieved first and foremost by embracing the shame of the cross. Jesus kissed the cross in order to enter the glory of heaven. It also presents us, as St Thomas Aquinas explained, with a revelation of God as Trinity: 'The whole Trinity appeared: the Father in the voice; the Son in the man; the Spirit in the shining cloud.' This revelation of God as Trinity also occurs on

the threshold of other significant moments in Jesus' life, such as his baptism and his passion.

Jesus' transfiguration can be understood as the sacrament of our future resurrection from the dead. Through the grace of baptism we somehow share in the resurrection of Jesus. The Transfiguration is a foretaste of the life to come, when our lowly bodies will be changed to be like his glorious, heavenly body. However, we too must embrace the shame of the cross in our lives for, as Paul taught, 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22 NIV). We like Peter prefer the mountain-top experiences, but St Augustine exhorts us: 'Peter did not yet understand this when he wanted to remain with Christ on the mountain. It has been reserved for you, Peter, but for after death. For now Jesus says, 'Go down to toil on earth, to serve on earth, to be scorned and crucified on earth. Life goes down to be killed; Bread goes down to suffer hunger; the Way goes down to be exhausted on his journey; the Spring goes down to suffer thirst; and you refuse to suffer.'

Lord, teach me to embrace the cross of suffering.

Genesis 12:1-4 • Psalm 32(33):4-5, 18-22
2 Timothy 1:8-10 • Matthew 17:1-9

Christians should be the most merciful people on earth. Why? Because God is merciful and we are the recipients of his forgiveness, kindness and compassion. Sadly, there is a perception that Christians are, in fact, the opposite, that they are judgemental, harsh, critical and easily offended. This is, to be fair, a caricature, but there is an element of truth in it.

Jesus' teaching is a radical call to live lives which witness to the love, mercy, kindness and forgiveness of God. We tend to associate being a believer with more, shall we say, muscular qualities, such as defending the faith and upholding the moral life. Pope Francis appears to be showing us a different way – a way which resonates with the Lucan narrative, for Luke places great emphasis on mercy, kindness and compassion (e.g. the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son). The life in the Spirit is a call to give living witness to God's mercy. We are not to use our faith, our orthodoxy or our righteous living as a weapon with which to beat and condemn people. On the contrary, since we have received God's mercy and grace, we should be characterized by mercy.

Would we pass the mercy test? What is the mercy test? It is a simple way of examining our own lives and conscience before we put the spotlight on others. In fact, we could say that we focus the spotlight of the Spirit so firmly on ourselves that we simply do not have time to judge or condemn others – a practice Jesus forbids in no uncertain terms: 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven' (v. 37 NIV).

The mercy test also relates to how we react or respond to those caught up in a public scandal or who live a lifestyle that we find offensive and repellent – the drug addicts, benefit cheats, adulterers, homosexuals or those caught up in promiscuous lifestyles, for example. Do you find yourself hardening towards such people and quick to judge them? Towards these and all people God calls us to hold out the hand of kindness, mercy and compassion. 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (v. 36 NIV).

Lord, grant me a generous heart which understands clearly that my sins have been forgiven and desires to reach out to others with the kindness and mercy of God.

No one likes a hypocrite. In the New Testament, the term is applied by Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees. His public criticism was a devastating indictment, for the very status and social position of this elite group was based on their scrupulous religious observance. So it is hardly surprising that the religious establishment of the day was hostile to Jesus and sought a way to silence his censure.

We may ponder the reasons for Jesus' vehemence in his condemnation of false religious observance. After all, the Scriptures tell us of Jesus' unconditional forgiveness of even the most flagrant sins. Tax collectors, prostitutes, outcasts – it was as if no sin was so outrageous that it was beyond the reach of the pardon and reconciliation that Jesus offered so freely. Yet the large tassels and phylacteries of the social and religious elite – these were angrily selected for condemnation by the Lord.

The judgement of hypocrisy is one that only God can make, for in its essence it is a secret sin. Only God knows the inner workings of our hearts and minds. As the poet John Milton said, 'neither man nor angels can discern hypocrisy, the

only evil that walks invisible, except to God alone.'

Jesus is recorded as displaying anger only when the sovereignty, holiness and love of God were denied. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees – clearly visible to Jesus – was surely a display of such behaviour. Impressive though their scrupulous public displays must have been, the intention was glorification of self rather than of God. Yet there is a deeper and more sinister implication of the Pharisees' deceit – that it is through the act of religious observance itself that one gains acceptance by God. They paraded their observances as if to highlight the lowliness of the people. Perhaps it was this that Jesus found so offensive, for he teaches clearly that all men and women are equal before God, and to usurp a privileged position of supposed superiority is to deny the very justice and love of our heavenly Father. It is only in our acknowledgement of sinfulness that we can receive forgiveness. It is only in our humility that we can accept the gift of our status as children of our loving God.

Lord, help us never to sit in judgement of others, for we are all sinners before you.

We know little about the childhood of Jesus except this incident recorded only in Luke, which includes Jesus' remarkable declaration: 'How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'

The law required every Jewish man to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. It was not obligatory for women, but nevertheless was a mark of special devotion, and Mary went with Joseph. This year Jesus went with them as he was approaching his thirteenth birthday when he would become Bar Mitzvah – 'Son of the Commandment' – and when he too would become subject to the law's obligations and required to attend the festival himself.

In the temple Jesus was among the greatest teachers in the land. He listened to them and responded with intelligence and understanding. Mary and Joseph, perhaps lulled into indifference in the twelve years since the remarkable events of the nativity, were astonished and did not understand. However, Jesus' comment is not meant as a repudiation of their authority, and Luke is careful to emphasize that he

returned home 'and was obedient to them' (v. 51).

The only information we have about Joseph is what is recorded in the Gospels. We are told that he was 'a just man' (Matt. 1:19), and he appears as kind, dignified, a faithful guardian, sensible and quick to act. In all this he was self-effacing to the point of sacrificing his whole life to what God required of him. Very like Mary, Joseph gave his own *fiat mihi* – 'let it be to me' – to the purpose of God in the incarnation of his Son, and has therefore been described by Pope John Paul II as 'sharing the same salvific event'. He has also been inserted into Eucharistic Prayers II-IV as of last year.

Next time Luke shows Jesus going up to Jerusalem it is also Passover, and once again he disappears for three days, to reappear as our risen and victorious Lord. This time when we find him, we shall understand.

Blessed Joseph, you were father to our blessed Lord in your house at Nazareth. Pray for us that we may grow in understanding and be about our Father's house, and that we may be co-workers with you in bringing Christ to the world.

2 Sam 7:4-5, 12-14, 16 • Ps 88(89):2-5, 27, 29
Rom 4:13, 16-18, 22 • Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24 or Lk 2:41-51

It is said that a monkey can be caught with the aid of a morsel of food and a large, narrow-necked jar. If the monkey reaches into the jar and grasps the food, it will not be able to withdraw its fist – now clenched – through the narrow neck. Despite the threat of the approaching hunter, the monkey simply will not let go of the food and is therefore trapped. Whilst we may regard this as being poor crisis management on the animal's part, the truth is that we may ourselves have a similar attitude to our material wealth. Today's parable explores such human attitudes to riches most eloquently.

The concept of a reversal of material fortunes in the afterlife is seen in much ancient folklore. However, Jesus' parable is different in that it explores the moral dimension of the attitudes that accompany wealth. Also, Abraham's comments affirm that the law of God, in the Old Testament, rejects greed and demands charity. Furthermore, it can be seen clearly that God has a special love for the poor and disadvantaged.

The rich man certainly knew about the poor beggar at his gate. His request from the underworld

for Lazarus to act as an errand boy for him proves this, just as it indicates his low regard for the man. Even in death, the rich man's selfishness is undimmed. Admittedly, he shows concern for his brothers, but still none for Lazarus. His introspective, solitary, tormented state is just a continuation of the way his life was lived. As Pope John XXIII said, 'The greedy, avaricious man is never at ease in his mind; he is in fact a most unhappy creature.'

It would be good, this Lent, for us to consider the ways in which we may have developed an unhealthy attitude to our possessions, or to the acquisition of more of them. Often, our reliance on these things indicates a deeper lack of trust in God's goodness and boundless love. And while we have brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are suffering and starving, we may ponder how our loving Father might view our reluctance to share what we have.

Lord, help us to place our trust in your love rather than in earthly things. We repent for the lack of love we have shown to our brothers and sisters. Show us how we can use our possessions, our time and our effort to help those who are suffering.

Jeremiah 17:5-10 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6
Luke 16:19-31

Jesus' ministry is drawing to a close. Until now the chief priests and Pharisees have resolutely refused to listen to his teaching or come to faith in him. Their hearts and minds have remained firmly closed. The Parable of the Tenants represents a final attempt by Jesus to break through the stubbornness of the Jewish leaders in the hope that some of their number might recognize him as the One who fulfils the prophecies, the long-awaited Messiah, God's only Son.

Despite all their blindness and hardness of heart, Jesus loves these men. They are his brothers and he wants to reach out to them. Jesus can see beneath the surface and knows they are lost, in darkness and in pain. In their own, often confused way, they are seeking life, but in all the wrong places. Their interest is in power, prestige and wealth. Sadly, they choose to remain in the darkness and reject him.

In many ways, we are not so different. We too can go astray and seek fulfilment and security in the things of the world. Our hearts can harden as quickly as any Pharisee.

But, as with the Pharisees, Jesus never stops loving us. He is the Good Shepherd who always comes searching when we stray into the wilderness of sin. Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers (Heb. 2:11) for he bought us at the price of his precious blood to make us sons and daughters of the Father.

Today, Jesus through this parable is speaking to our hearts. In this Lenten season he asks us to turn to him, to rediscover that we need him desperately each day. He invites us to accept him as the cornerstone of our lives, to recognize him as the centre of all things, the One who gives meaning and significance to life. Peter tells us that anyone who trusts in this 'chosen and precious cornerstone' will never be put to shame (1 Pet. 2:6). Jesus, through our prayer, fasting and almsgiving, wants to open our eyes to the fact that he is the goal of all our hopes and aspirations and only he brings true fulfilment.

Father, soften our hard hearts by grace. In this holy season may we build our lives on Christ your Son, the chief cornerstone.

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28 • Psalm 104(105):16-21
Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

Jesus attracted those on the very outside of society. Tax collectors, prostitutes and other public sinners clearly enjoyed Jesus' company. They were drawn by his acceptance of them. This made them open to hearing what he had to say. The Pharisees, in contrast, were scandalized by the company he kept. They harshly judged those they saw as morally bankrupt or spiritually inferior. Their understanding of God was faulty, to say the least! As a result they were reduced to grumbling about Jesus.

Typically Jesus seized the moment to teach about his Father. Today's parable brings us into the essence of his mission – to reveal his Father. So often our image of God is tainted or distorted. We can fall into two extremes: on one hand, we imagine God as a tyrannical judge who is angry much of the time; on the other, we settle for the notion that God is indulgent and avuncular, his teaching and commands having little or no bearing on our lives.

Jesus' parable brings us right into the heart of his Father. God has given each of us free will – we are at liberty to follow or reject him. However, this immense gift of freedom carries with it a profound

responsibility. We are responsible for our actions and decisions. The son exercised his freedom and chose to leave the safety of his father's house. At the dawn of creation the human race also freely chose the path leading away from God. Removed from the love, security and protection of the Father's house we lost our way. Sin, death and corruption robbed us of the dignity we once possessed. Like the prodigal son we became slaves of our passions and drives.

The image of the chastened son returning to his father's house is deeply moving. We do well to ponder and meditate upon this picture of profound human need satisfied by divine mercy. Jesus' teaching about his Father exposes us to a love so divine and compelling that it has the power to melt the hardest of hearts. As we journey through this year we too can experience the warm embrace of our heavenly Father. Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii gaudium*:

'Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace.' How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost! Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy.' (para. 3)

Micah 7:14-15, 18-20 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 9-12
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

John presents us with a dramatic, even theatrical, encounter. Jesus is described in very human terms, sitting at the well, exhausted from his journey. The woman too is very human. Her appearance at the well at about noon, long after the other village women would have replenished their water supply for the day, may indicate her isolated position in local society. She was shunned because of her many sins. Yet it is she who becomes a missionary to her people.

Jewish/Samaritan relations were historically conditioned. About 722 BC the Assyrian army descended on Northern Israel, took its population into exile and colonized its land with foreigners who partially adopted Israel's religion over the centuries but were always viewed by the Jews as hated, semi-pagan invaders. The woman was therefore very surprised when Jesus spoke to her, and even more astonished when he asked her for a drink, since Jews did not share food or drink with Samaritans in case of ritual defilement.

Water becomes the sign by which both baptism and faith are explained to us. Water is the means, but the Holy Spirit flowing into

us is the reality. There is a vital connection between the flowing of water and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The 'living water' of which Jesus speaks brings not only awareness of her sin to the woman but forgiveness, hope in the person of Jesus as the Messiah, and faith in his words. The water Jesus offers is not something that human effort can achieve. It is pure gift of God, water which, when drunk, becomes within a spring of life. Jesus is referring in the first place to his own words of salvation, words that are spirit and life, because whoever listens to them and lives by them will continue to share in God's life. The water has a deeper meaning as a symbol of the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39). The Spirit enables us to understand the words of Jesus and to respond to them with a willing heart.

'The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.' (CCC 2560)

Exodus 17:3-7 • Psalm 94(95):1-2, 6-9

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8 • John 4:5-42

Once there was an old hound dog tied to his kennel. Every night he got up to howl at the passing train. He didn't howl because he thought the train would stop. Neither did he howl because he thought anyone would listen. He howled because he was a hound dog. Prophets are like that. They preach the truth not because they think people will respond, but because it is the truth and they are prophets.

In today's Gospel Jesus assumes the mantle of the prophet. Like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus speaks the truth even though it is unpopular, and despite the fact that it will be rejected. The truth is simple. He is the fulfilment of prophecy, but the Jewish leaders will reject him and the message will be taken to Gentiles. This upsets their expectations and prompts an immediate fulfilment as they try to kill Jesus then and there.

True prophets speak the truth. They don't speak their own visions or ideas. Instead they base their message on the Word of God. They also base their statements on a deep knowledge of humanity and of God. Because they see God's work in the past, prophets understand the present. Based on this they also see what will happen in the future

if their hearers do not repent. But, most importantly, prophets live out their message. Through their actions they make the message live.

This active, wise and all-encompassing vision is what the hearers cannot abide. That's why prophets will always be persecuted – because the truth they speak cuts straight to the heart. It challenges and subverts the status quo. The gospel may threaten and endanger the tenets of respectable society. In other words, when the gospel ceases to turn human expectations upside down it ceases to be good news.

So when the occasion arises, are we able to speak prophetically? It's not easy to speak up for the homeless, the elderly, the disabled and the poor. We feel self-righteous or we fear being branded as religious fanatics. But when our words are matched with actions, accusations of self-righteousness evaporate. Mother Teresa could speak like a prophet because she lived like a prophet. Likewise, in this season of Lent, the message of repentance is only real if it is fleshed out in a life of repentance.

Lord, give me the courage to be a prophet, and so to speak and live your word that others may turn to your love.

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

Luke 4:24-30

So often, when a story is familiar to us, it loses some of its impact. Reading a book for the second time or watching the film of a book we have read somehow doesn't evoke the feelings we experienced when the story was new and full of surprises. This may be true of today's Gospel, the awesome and amazing story of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 'The Annunciation to Mary inaugurates 'the fullness of time' (Gal. 4:4), the time of the fulfilment of God's promises and preparations. Mary was invited to conceive him in whom 'the whole fullness of deity' would dwell 'bodily' (Col. 2:9)' (CCC 484).

The incredible event takes place in such ordinary circumstances. The angel Gabriel goes to a town of no great significance, Nazareth, having a population of about 150 people at that time. We have all sorts of images of what Gabriel may have looked like from art, but suffice it to say it was not his appearance we are told that troubled Mary, but his words. Humanly speaking Mary would not have seemed anyone special, but Gabriel's greeting indicated that she had been uniquely blessed by God and chosen by him to be the mother of his Son.

Mary is troubled because she is humble. When she calls herself the 'handmaid' of the Lord, she uses the word for the lowest form of servant. 'Against all human expectation God chooses those who were considered powerless and weak to show forth his faithfulness to his promises: Hannah, the mother of Samuel; Deborah; Ruth; Judith and Esther; and many other women. Mary stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who constantly hope for and receive salvation from him' (CCC 489).

'How shall this be...?' asks Mary (v. 34). By the power of the Holy Spirit. All things are possible to the one who believes God's word, and this Mary did supremely. By virtue of our own baptism and faith in Jesus, the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary also dwells in our hearts and can do equally great things for us.

'Pour forth we beseech thee, O Lord, thy grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ thy Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by his passion and cross be brought to the glory of his resurrection, through the same Christ our Lord, Amen.'
(The Angelus)

Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10 • Psalm 39(40):7-11
Hebrews 10:4-10 • Luke 1:26-38

The law is like a teacher who lays down a foundation for future learning. Israel grew up under the tutelage of the law. Following the requirements of the law formed in God's people a knowledge of what is pleasing to him. It also teaches us that we are unable to please God – the law is holy, but we are powerless to obey it because of sin. The law leads us to Christ, who will save us from our sin (see Rom. 7:24-25).

The religious authorities of Jesus' day thought he was a revolutionary, a dissident and a wayward son. His presence threatened the delicate balance brokered by the Pharisees with their Roman masters. They thought he had come to abolish the law, the prophets and their sacred traditions when in fact Jesus was the living embodiment of their truth.

Israel's prophets pointed towards him and he gave the law its fullest meaning. The principles by which he lived his life underpinned the law and the prophets. Jesus was not a demolisher, he was a fulfiller. His life showed the grace of a life lived in humble and total obedience to God's commandments. His following of God's law was not merely external but reflected a profound desire and choice to live

in the power of the Holy Spirit day by day, minute by minute, moment by moment. Jesus' life was focused on completion and accomplishment – completing his mission and accomplishing the work given him by his Father.

For Jesus, the Torah and the tradition proclaimed by the prophets was not a dead letter but a vital, organic reality. It was to be lived, experienced and fulfilled. Jesus lived the spirit, kept the letter of the law and offered a way of righteousness beyond mere legal adherence.

Jesus challenged his hearers that their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. How can one exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees? The best answer is: we can't. Jesus' death and resurrection opened up a new way to live a righteous life. Jesus is the only One who has lived a truly perfect life. His fulfilling of the law and obedience to his Father allows us to rest and enjoy his righteousness – his holiness is our holiness, his righteousness our righteousness.

Lord Jesus, you are the supreme fulfilment of God's purpose for us. You are worthy of all praise, glory and honour.

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9 • Psalm 147:12-20
Matthew 5:17-19

The fact that Jesus carried out an exorcism was seen as marvellous by some, but not questioned by any of those present. What they did contest was the source of his power. Some of the people present attributed his power to an alliance with evil. Beelzebul, originally a Philistine deity, is here used to denote the prince or ruler of the demons.

Today's Gospel shows us Jesus' awareness of the reality of evil. There are two equal and opposite errors we can fall into concerning the devil: one is to believe in him excessively and the other is not to believe in him at all! Jesus argued that if he conquered evil by alliance with its leader, then it must be divided against itself and in a state of collapse. This is contrary to experience, for right to the end of Jesus' ministry Satan was active: for example, Luke tells us that he entered into Judas Iscariot (Luke 22:3). Jesus' mission was concerned with breaking Satan's power. His claim to carry out exorcisms 'by the finger of God' (v. 20) reveals that they are interventions by God to show his power over evil. The analogy of the strong man

guarding his palace suggests that, far from casting out demons by the prince of demons, Jesus is himself the stronger one sent by God to conquer the power of evil. Division of the spoil is an indication of a victorious battle.

We cannot be in a neutral position: if we fail to recognize that Jesus was on a God-given mission, then we are going against God's plans. He came to overcome evil through his death on the cross, but it will not be until his return that there will be a final triumph over evil. We are engaged in a conflict with an enemy who hates God and all who worship him. By resisting evil in our own lives we can unite ourselves to our Lord's mission. When we renew our baptismal vows at Easter we respond to the question 'Do you renounce Satan?' with 'I do'. In our lives and in our prayers, we can take a stand against him and his works.

Lord, we can see the power of evil in our own lives and in the world around us. Just as by the finger of God you drove out evil spirits, show your power in the conquest of evil today.

Jeremiah 7:23-28 • Psalm 94(95):1-2, 6-9

Luke 11:14-23

The question the scribes asked Jesus was commonly proposed to learned Jewish teachers. At the time of Jesus it was a common exercise to try to capture the entire law and prophets in short, pithy statements. Jesus' response was very much in the rabbinic tradition, but his juxtaposition of the two commandments was an original theological interpretation.

Jesus responded to the scribe's question with a quotation of Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This is the first of three passages that make up the Shema, regarded as a basic affirmation of Jewish faith. As commanded in Deuteronomy 6:9, it is copied on a small parchment scroll and usually placed in an ornamental case, known as the *mezuzah*, which is fixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes. Amidst the unbelievable horrors of the Holocaust, as they entered the gas chambers at Auschwitz and elsewhere, this declaration of God's unity and the duty to love God and obey his commandments was on the lips of Jews. The simple faith of those Jews was expressed by a Hungarian rabbi: 'It is clear beyond all doubt that the Blessed Holy One is the ruler of the universe, and we must accept the judgement with love.'

Israelites saw their chief duty in loving the Lord as being the observance of his commandments. Jesus connected this first commandment to a second by quoting Leviticus 19:18: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' The scribe recognized the vital truth of Jesus' response: love, not sacrifice, is what God desires of all people (Hos. 6:6).

Love of God, in the Jewish tradition, is shown through prayer: the Shema is recited twice daily and is one of the Torah passages contained in the tefillin, or phylacteries, worn during weekday morning service. The fact that Jesus underlined our debt to Israel shows us that we can learn from the Jewish tradition. Both at times of crisis, when we automatically turn to prayer, and in the daily bustle of our lives, we as Christians express our love of God through prayer, reading his Word and celebrating the Eucharist. What follows – love of our neighbour – takes up the sentiment of the famous response of Rabbi Hillel to a proselyte who wished to receive full instruction in the law while he was standing on one leg:

'What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbour.'

Hosea 14:2-10 • Psalm 80(81):6-11, 14, 17

Mark 12:28-34

This is a parable with a punch, told by the Lord in order to fight a disease. The malady about which he speaks is easy to catch but hard to heal. Its symptoms are unpleasant, often hidden, and deadly if untreated. Those infected by it become self-centred and self-righteous. Luke describes those so afflicted in these words: they 'trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others' (v. 9).

The parable highlights the tension between self-righteousness and the righteousness of God. The danger of all religious practice is that it can become an end in itself. Once this happens a cycle of self-congratulation sets in, which subtly denies the work of grace. The two men in the parable go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prays about himself. He is very conscious of his achievements, proud of the fact that he fasts twice a week and gives away one-tenth of his earnings. The purpose of his prayer is not to thank God for his grace but to elevate himself above others. The tax collector, meanwhile, can't even lift his head. He is afraid and ashamed; his prayer is abject, needy and humble: 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' (v. 13).

We are left in no doubt about who is more pleasing to the Lord. Jesus' affirmation of the tax collector's disposition teaches us much about the interior life. The weakness of the Pharisee is his self-deception; the strength of the tax collector is his self-knowledge. The sin of the Pharisee is pride; the virtue of the tax collector is humility. Self-knowledge is a gift. It protects us from a false view of ourselves. We would do well to take on board Pope John Paul II's keen insight into the human condition: 'Humbly and realistically we need to admit that we are poor creatures, confused in our ideas, tempted to wrongdoing, frail and weak, constantly in need of inner strengthening and consolation.'

This rather sober assessment should not depress us – if it offends it's because we don't appreciate the truth of our condition. The beauty of the tax collector is his humble acceptance of his state before God. A patient who accepts their diagnosis becomes pliable to the healing touch of the physician. A patient who rejects the diagnosis is harder to heal.

Heavenly Father, help me to understand my need and grant me a true knowledge of myself. Teach me to walk humbly before you.

Hosea 5:15-6:6 • Psalm 50(51):3-4, 18-21

Luke 18:9-14

Light plays an important part in Christian liturgy. Especially memorable is the ceremony of light at the Easter Vigil, now just three weeks away. But we light candles at most liturgical services, a sign to us of the presence of the risen Christ, the light of the world.

The early Church referred to baptism as 'enlightenment' or 'illumination' and the candidates for baptism as 'those being enlightened'. The story of the cure of the man born blind and his subsequent progress from physical sight to the insight of faith is a figure of what happens to the baptized person. John writes of the physical cure in such a way that it reflects and calls to mind the cure of spiritual blindness granted to those who wash sacramentally in the pool that is truly Jesus, the 'sent one' (v. 7).

There is a rich vein of irony in this story. We can see how God turns the world's expectations on their head. The reality of things is just the opposite of what it seems to be. Those who are so sure they can see are, in truth, blind. He who starts out blind takes a risk at Jesus' invitation and ends up seeing. He passes from blindness to sight to insight. The blind man contrasts

with the neighbours, who remain in ignorance; his parents, who refuse to take a risk; and the authorities and Pharisees, who refuse to believe what their eyes see. No one is so blind as the person who refuses to see.

Jesus affirms that he is the light of the world, and the giving of sight to the blind man is a sign of this. There is both revelation and judgement. The coming of the light brings illumination to those who will accept it, and brings to light the darkness in the lives of those who are obstinate in unbelief.

How is Jesus the light of the world? He opens minds to understand and scatters the darkness of ignorance. This he does by showing us God, revealing the divine purpose and the divine will in his teaching and deeds. He went through the darkness of his passion and death and rose to the glory of eternal light. He makes us sharers in his light-giving and life-giving work. We are called to be enlightened by Jesus and to become a light to others.

Lord Jesus, may your light shine ever more radiantly amidst the darkness of the world.

1 Samuel 16:1, 6-7, 10-13 • Psalm 22(23)

Ephesians 5:8-14 • John 9:1-41

This healing of the royal official's son is John's second miraculous sign (Greek *semeion*). Raymond Brown explains the term as 'a miracle which shows the onlooker something about Christ's mission, and often shows the Christian reader something more about Christ and the Church which continues his mission'. John sets the geographical scene quite clearly, referring back to chapters 2-4. The first sign also took place at Cana in Galilee (v. 46). Jesus and his disciples then spent a few days in Capernaum (where the royal official came from) prior to spending the feast of the Passover in Jerusalem. Here he met Nicodemus. Travelling from Judaea to Cana in Galilee via Samaria, Jesus met the woman at the well. To Nicodemus, Jesus spoke of rebirth and new life, to the Samaritan woman of living water and eternal life – we now reach the climax of restored life.

Through his first sign, Jesus 'manifested his glory; and his disciples believed' (John 2:11); here, the official and his household believed when his son was restored to life. This was all the more miraculous in that the healing took place not when Jesus saw the boy,

but when he simply said, 'Go; your son will live' (v. 50).

The official may have had an important role at Herod's court, but even this did not give him access to successful treatment for his son. Today, we would look to analgesics or antibiotics to relieve the fever, but even so parents would be beside themselves as their beloved child's temperature remained dangerously high. This man too must have been distraught. St John Chrysostom said, 'Fathers often are so carried away by their affection...not wishing to leave any means untried, which might save their children.' This man came to a teacher of whom he knew very little, yet whose word was sufficient. It was not 'signs and wonders' that brought life, but Jesus' words. His words give life to those who believe.

Just as Jesus healed the official's son, so he will respond to our need, if we but ask. As we come face to face with him in prayer, Scripture and the Eucharist, let us share with him our deepest needs.

Lord, just as you restored life to the official's son, I believe that your word can bring renewed life today. Speak the word only, and my soul shall be healed.

Isaiah 65:17-21 • Psalm 29(30):2, 4-6, 11-13

John 4:43-54