



There has been a long tradition that the three disciples were granted the vision of the transfigured Jesus in order to sustain them through the events of the Passion of Jesus, which were soon to take place. Certainly, the Transfiguration made a big impression on them. In his second letter Peter recalled the glory of that day: 'we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"...we were with him on the holy mountain' (1:16-19). Peter understood the Transfiguration as a moment when God the Father conferred honour and glory on his beloved Son, in anticipation of Jesus' submission to the terrible humiliation of the crucifixion.

The Father's pleasure in his Son was clearly linked to Jesus' willingness to fulfil the role he received on an earlier occasion when the Father's voice was heard. At his baptism, Jesus undertook the mission of the Suffering Servant prophesied by Isaiah (Isa. 53). This Servant would bear in himself the infirmities and iniquities of us all, by the Father's plan, so that

fallen humanity would be made righteous once again and restored to full communion with the Father. The glory, momentarily seen at the Transfiguration, is an anticipation of the glory of the resurrection, which will be Jesus' permanent condition once he has accomplished all that the Father has asked him to do.

Moses and Elijah, the two great representatives of the whole Old Testament, the three disciples and now all of us are given a glimpse of the glory of what Jesus is to achieve through his death and resurrection. The Old Testament is a long story of the gradual unveiling of God's plan of salvation. God's great desire has always been to restore fallen humanity to its vocation of being the 'image of God' in the world. It was a powerful climax to the Old Testament that Moses and Elijah were present to witness the glory of renewed humanity in Jesus. It is from Jesus that the glory radiates back across Israel's history to Adam and Eve, and also radiates forwards through the history of the Church to envelop each one of us.

'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another...'
(2 Cor. 3:18)

Genesis 22:1-2, 9-18 • Psalm 115(116):10, 15-19

Romans 8:31-34 • Mark 9:2-10

Monday 2nd March

Matthew 5:13-16 • St David (Solemnity in Wales only)

(Transferred from Sunday 1 Mar)

‘You are the salt of the earth.’ This expression from the mouth of Jesus has entered into the English language as a familiar metaphor. However, it is interesting to examine the phrase more closely and ask what exactly it means. When we describe someone as being the ‘salt of the earth’, we are usually expressing approval. One so described is thought of as a thoroughly good fellow, someone solid and reliable and without false airs and graces.

In Jesus’ parable, the image is surely taken from life – presumably, the use of salt in cooking. The focus seems to be on flavour and the possibility of salt losing its flavour. But herein lies the difficulty: does salt ever really lose its flavour?

Perhaps, we should consider other possible uses of salt. Salt is a very effective preservative. In the times before refrigeration, salt was used to inhibit the process of decay, especially of fish and meat. The bacteria that cause breakdown cannot thrive in a salty environment. We can see then how the metaphor might be applied to ourselves. As the followers of Jesus, we are called to incarnate the person of Christ into every situation. A quiet prayer or a kind word can often diffuse a tense or difficult situation; asking forgiveness can transform and renew a damaged relationship. This kind of saltiness is powerful in overcoming sin and its effects.

But perhaps the most interesting and unexpected feature of salt is its property of dispersing heat. Crushed rock salt was spread over a flat stone, which in turn sat on the fire or hot embers. The salt ensured that the heat diffused consistently across the stone, making it possible for a piece of fish or meat to be cooked evenly. Eventually, the salt broke down and no longer served its purpose, so it was scraped off the stone and used to fill in the holes in the road. Could this provide an explanation for the rather enigmatic words of Jesus: ‘if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men’ (v. 13). In this instance, being salt of the earth suggests the role of spreading and diffusing the message of the gospel.

Lord Jesus, help me to be an instrument of your saving grace and a vehicle for the burning heat of the gospel message. Amen.

Proper of Season: Daniel 9:4-10 • Psalm 78(79):8-13 • Luke 6:36-38

(Proper of Saints: Phil 3:8-14 • Ps 1:4, 6 • Wales: 2nd reading from Common of Pastors • Mt 5:13-16)

Tuesday 3rd March

Lenten Weekday • Matthew 23:1-12

The Gospel reading today presents a rather hard word for those who have any responsibility for teaching and leading. Jesus' words are directed, first of all, against the authorities among the Jews, who do not 'practise what they preach'. Interestingly, this does not mean, according to Jesus, that they do not have the authority to teach. On the contrary, it is important to follow the teaching of the authorized teacher, while not following his or her example.

Of course, the best sort of teacher is the one who also exemplifies in his or her life the message that is being taught. Even in the case of subjects at school, the most effective teacher is the one who has a passion for the subject and whose enthusiasm overflows into his or her life. When it comes to teachers and preachers of the gospel, it is even more important that their life should reflect their message. But herein lies the difficulty: for which of us could say that we truly incarnate, or reflect in our lives, the message that we teach or preach? And since all of us are called to preach the gospel by our lives, then it seems that all of us are likely to fall short. How do we live up to the goal of practising what we preach?

The key lies in the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit. It was the insight of Paul that we are spiritually transformed through contemplating Christ in the Scriptures – see 2 Corinthians 3:18. When we were baptized, we began to take on the image of Christ – we became a new creation! This, however, is only the beginning of the process, not its completion. Growing in his likeness is a lifetime's journey. When we read the Scriptures and pray to discern their meaning we become more and more transfigured so that our lives take on something of the savour of Christ! No doubt, other people will appreciate that we don't fully practise what we preach, but – and this is the crux of the matter – what we preach will have something of the taste of Christ and will therefore touch the hearts of others.

Help me, Father, not to be afraid to read the Scriptures and to speak about them in a simple way to others. For to share the Word of God is to share Christ himself and to co-operate in the very mission of the Holy Spirit! Amen.

Isaiah 1:10, 16-20 • Psalm 49(50):8-9, 16-17, 21, 23

Matthew 23:1-12

Wednesday 4th March

Matthew 20:17-28 • Lenten Weekday

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks to the disciples three times about 'going up to Jerusalem'. Each time he declares that the Son of Man is going to be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, who will condemn him to death, but then on the third day he will rise again. On the first occasion, Peter tries to remonstrate with Jesus. But, surprisingly, Jesus calls Peter by the name of Satan and says that Peter is an obstacle in his path (16:21-23). The second time, the disciples don't seem to know how to respond. Matthew simply records that 'they were greatly distressed' (17:23). On this third occasion, it seems almost bizarre that the mother of Zebedee's sons should come to Jesus with a request for favoured positions at his right and left in his kingdom. It really seems as though no one wants to include Jesus' clear words in their thinking.

It is evident that Jesus has brought them to the point where they could acknowledge him as the Messiah (God's Chosen One and the agent of God's salvation), and even have the beginning of an insight into Jesus being the Son of the living God. But they could go no further with him as he sought to show them the way that his Messiahship and Sonship was going to be lived out and accomplished. How could the two things go together? On the one hand, Jesus was to be and to bring about a glorious fulfilment of all of the hopes and expectations of Israel; and, on the other hand, he was to tread a path of suffering and crucifixion. The Gospel writers seem to go out of their way to show that no one could take in the truth about Jesus' Passion and death being the means towards the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation.

In the account of the Transfiguration in Luke's Gospel, Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about his passing which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. In other words, it is those who represent and personify the Old Testament who grasp the mystery of suffering and death at the heart of the Gospel message. The Old Testament, in other words, is the key to understanding the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, our own road through Lent must also take us through the Old Testament – as we shall see over the next few days.

Jeremiah 18:18-20 • Psalm 30(31):5-6, 14-16

Matthew 20:17-28

Thursday 5th March

Lenten Weekday • Luke 16:19-31

There are little details in today's parable that may be a clue to its interpretation. In the first place, we read that the rich man was clothed in purple and feasted sumptuously. Some scholars have seen in these details an invitation to understand that Dives represents Israel. Purple was most often associated with royalty and could refer to Israel's royal priesthood. Israel, in God's purposes, always had a priestly role, that of being a mediator between Israel's God and the world of the Gentiles. That Israel failed in this role, and rather chose self-righteously to emphasize the nation's difference from the Gentiles rather than their mission to the Gentiles, was the reason for the Exile – the exclusion of Israel from the covenant and from the land. Thus, in spite of the sumptuous food given to Israel – the covenant and law, and the teachings of the prophets – Israel was cut off. The parable does rather capture this state of affairs. Dives, the rich man, is exiled Israel, which failed to realize its true purpose especially towards the Gentiles.

Lazarus, it begins to become clear, represents the Gentiles. The remarkable and challenging element of the parable is that the fate of Israel and of the Gentiles appears to be reversed. Israel remains in torment, while the Gentiles rest in the bosom of Abraham. And yet, the fate of Israel is not permanently fixed. (But the fate of the richman is). There is the opportunity for change and an opening of the eyes to more fully realize Israel's priestly mission to the Gentiles – a mission that initially is fulfilled, not by Israel, but by Jesus himself.

We are on the verge of encountering some profound truths regarding the relationship of Jesus and Israel. In the first place, in the plan of God, Israel's failure served to reveal that she embodies the same sinful condition as the whole of humanity. In the Exile, Israel was in some way being the Suffering Servant of God, who carried all the iniquity of humankind. But, in the end, she could not embrace this role and recognize the plan of God in it. She did prepare the way, however, for the one who did embrace the role of the Suffering Servant, who did become the embodiment of the sin of all humanity, and who offered his life as a sacrifice to the Father. It is Jesus who reconciles all of humanity to the Father and will be the way for Israel finally to fulfil her mission.

Jeremiah 17:5-10 • Psalm 1:1-6

Luke 16:19-31

Friday 6th March

Matthew 21:33-46 • Lenten Weekday

It is through the Old Testament again today that we are invited to view the person and work of Jesus. At the centre of the parable is the vineyard. In Isaiah, Israel is likened to a vineyard planted by God, but because it produced bad fruit, it was destroyed (Isa. 5:1-7). At the time, these words were a precursor to the judgement of God that took the form of the destruction of Jerusalem and the time of exile in Babylon. When Jesus tells the parable using the same image of the vineyard, he adds a new focus of attention: the tenants, who bear some responsibility for the vineyard of God. It would not have been difficult to perceive that Jesus was referring to the chief priests and the religious leaders of the people – not only in Jesus' own time but also going way back into Israel's history. In a shocking indictment, Jesus almost characterizes the history of Israel's leadership as a succession of wicked tenants, who consistently ignored, persecuted or killed the prophets sent by God to bring the people to repentance.

God's forbearance is manifested in the fact that prophets were sent over and over again, but they were treated in the same way. It is here that the deeper mystery of Jesus' work of salvation is being uncovered. The prophets were sent by God to restore Israel to the covenant with God, but in fact they were rejected and bore within themselves God's judgement on sin. In the Exile, it was the whole nation of Israel at the time that bore the judgement of God. These various examples of individual prophets or of the whole society of Israel actually bearing the weight of Israel's sin and judgement were in reality preparing the way for something the parable is about to reveal.

'Last of all, he [the vineyard owner] sent his son to them' (v. 37 NIV). When the tenants mete out to the son the same treatment as they had given to all the other 'servants of God', they unwittingly fulfil the deepest purpose of God. For it was precisely by his becoming the Suffering Servant of God that Jesus becomes the 'new and eternal covenant' between God and man. Jesus bears the sin of all humankind and thereby restores the whole of humanity – both Jew and Gentile – to relationship with God.

Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28 • Psalm 104(105):16-21

Matthew 21:33-46

Saturday 7th March

(Memorial) SS Perpetua and Felicity • Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Luke places today's parable of the Prodigal Son within the context of the Jewish authorities' complaint about Jesus' habit of socialising with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus gives an explanation of his behaviour through the parable, which once again draws on a familiar Old Testament image: this time the image of two contrasting sons (e.g. Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob). In each of the pairs, there is one son who represents Israel and the forwarding of God's plan of salvation, and one son who is hostile and even murderous towards his brother out of jealousy.

Jesus picks up the same Old Testament imagery, but he turns it on its head. In his parable, the older brother represents Israel, and particularly Israel's leaders, while the younger represents the outcasts – the ones that Jesus is being accused of favouring with his company. As in the parables we have read in the past two days, there is a seemingly tragic inversion of the role and destiny of Israel and that of outcasts and Gentiles. Just as Dives ends up in torment and the wicked tenants have the vineyard taken from them, so in today's parable it is the elder brother who remains outside and away from the father's banquet. Just as Lazarus rests in the bosom of Abraham, so the younger brother, the one who removed himself from the father's house, actually returns and is reinstated as a true son.

This is not, however, to be seen ultimately as a condemnation and rejection of Israel, but is rather the mysterious fulfilling of the role of Israel as seen in the light of Jesus. We might express the true picture in the following way. When God created humanity, he intended that there should be on the earth a true image of himself. But humankind turned from God and the image was disastrously corrupted. God then called and chose Israel to be a true image of him. However, it turned out that Israel too was part of the problem and unable to reveal God to the world.

But here emerges the master-plan of God: God's Son enters into history in order to take on himself this role of Israel. He is able to reveal God to the world. Jesus, like the father in the parable, carries in himself and suffers as a result of the sin of both the younger and the elder brothers. He is their ultimate reconciliation.

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

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Sunday 8th March

John 2:13-25 • Third Sunday of Lent

There are two occasions documented in the New Testament when Jesus showed anger. This was the first; the second was in the synagogue in Capernaum, when the Pharisees refused to answer his questions: 'he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart...' (Mark 3:5). Feeling angry is part of being human, and the Gospel of John presents Jesus as fully human. This is the only Gospel in which we see Jesus tired and hungry (4:6-7) and weeping at the death of his friend (11:36).

John stresses that although Jesus was fully human he is also divine – on two occasions Jesus speaks of his own pre-existence (6:62; 8:58). It's normal to be angry when there is a good reason; anger is a natural response to being attacked, insulted, deceived or frustrated. But it would be wrong to think that Jesus' anger was born out of anything other than love. On both of the occasions we are told that Jesus was angry, his motivation was not selfishness or frustration: Jesus' anger was rooted in concern for true worship and holiness, and for the Pharisees and their spiritual condition.

Anger as an emotion is not in itself morally wrong; it can be useful, and in fact the psychologists tell us it is harmful to repress our anger. It is how we choose to express our anger that is the issue. As it states in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 'Anger is a desire for revenge. "To desire vengeance in order to do evil to someone who should be punished is illicit," but it is praiseworthy to impose restitution "to correct vices and maintain justice"' (para. 2302). Jesus' anger has the proper motivation and duration; he does not let his anger turn into bitterness and he doesn't hold grudges. Jesus is in control of his anger; he doesn't let this emotion control him.

What makes us angry, and how do we deal with that anger?

'My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.' (Jas. 1:19-21 NIV)

Exodus 20:1-17 • Psalm 18(19):8-11

1 Corinthians 1:22-25 • John 2:13-25

Monday 9th March

Luke 4:24-30

Yesterday we talked about Jesus' anger. In today's Gospel Jesus' words angered those listening to him in the synagogue in Nazareth. In fact, the people were so incensed by what Jesus said that they intended to throw him off a cliff. What did he say that made them so angry?

Jesus had been away from his home town, preaching in Judea and Galilee. His teaching had been well received and his reputation was growing. Those in Nazareth would have been interested to hear him speak: here was Mary and Joseph's boy, come home to see his family and friends. In the synagogue Jesus stood up and read from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And...the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (vv. 18-22).

Jesus was initially well received: those who were present were impressed with his wisdom and how he communicated his message. In fact, the people were amazed: was this really the Jesus who grew up among them? It is often suggested that it was the incredulity of the people that gave way to anger and the rejection of Jesus: who was he kidding? But today's Gospel indicates something different, beginning as it does, two verses later, with Jesus explaining that 'no prophet is acceptable in his own country' (v. 24). He underlined his point, giving the examples of Elijah and Elisha who were not sent to and for their own family and friends, but for others. It was this that really angered the people: being told that they had no special claim on him, even if he was one of their own. Jesus had not been sent especially for them. This anger was perhaps a jealous rage.

Dear Lord, help me to show love to others by helping them to get ahead and reach their goals. Don't let me disregard or compete with others in an effort to be number one. Help me to remember that we are all number one in your eyes: you love me no more and no less than anybody else. Amen.

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

Luke 4:24-30



March • Tuesday

Matthew 18:21-35 • St John Ogilvie (Feast in Scotland)

There is always a strong connection between the First Reading and the Gospel, and this is particularly so on Sundays. The theme of today's Gospel is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an important part of our faith. What is wonderful about this Gospel is the promise of God's mercy when we show mercy to others. Its teaching is underlined by the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. The fact that we, like Peter, must be prepared to forgive others repeatedly, indicates that God is prepared to do the same for us, as he does through the sacrament of penance and reconciliation.

We all 'have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23), and need to continually embrace mercy as a way of life. Jesus suffered execution at the hands of the state, but he did not let hatred overcome him. He forgave those who hated and abused him. It is said that on the scaffold St John Ogilvie mirrored this example and embraced and forgave his executioner. We are often deeply

moved when we hear of forgiveness such as this. Just days after the murder of James Foley by Islamic State terrorists, his parents told the media that one day they would feel able to absolve their son's murderers, because as Christians they had to.

In today's Gospel we are called to be generous with our mercy. This is a challenge for those who have been caused the greatest pain by the lives of their loved ones being cruelly taken. We pray that we can all expand and deepen our hearts so that we may love as God loves, and overcome our anger so that we can forgive those who have wronged us. Whether it is letting go of a hurtful remark, an infidelity in friendship or love, some cutting gossip, or some other injustice, being forgiving frees us as well as the other person. This also helps us to look at the times in our lives when we have needed to be forgiven by others.

O my God, because you are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against you, and by the help of your grace I will try not to sin again.

*Isaiah 50:5-9 • Psalm 76(77):12-16, 21 • John 12:24-26
(Proper of Season: Dan 3:25, 34-43 • Ps 24(25):4-9 • Mt 18:21-35)*

Wednesday 11th March

Matthew 5:17-19

Jesus is crystal clear about his mission: 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil them' (v. 17). This is typical of the Gospel of Matthew, which is the most Jewish of all the Gospels, insisting throughout that Jesus fulfils the promise of the old law.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells us that those who uphold the law – the Ten Commandments – and teach it, will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven. By baptism we share the priesthood of Christ, and we share in his prophetic and royal mission. We are ' "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people that [we] may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [us] out of darkness and into his marvellous light"' (CCC 1268). Evangelization through living out the gospel message is part of our baptismal commitment. How clear are we about our mission?

Yesterday was the feast of St John Ogilvie. At the time of St John's martyrdom King James VI of Scotland and I of England was on the throne. King James was Protestant, and thus so was Scotland. On the scaffold St John Ogilvie was given the option of a last-minute reprieve if he took the King's spiritual jurisdiction, but he refused, declaring his loyalty to the King in civil but not religious matters. St John Ogilvie died for his faith. In the Middle East today there are Christians who have surrendered their lives, rather than their faith, to Islamic State terrorists.

If we had to, could we defend our beliefs? How far would we go to defend our faith? None of us knows how we would react in such circumstances, but we pray for those who face this decision, remembering the words Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth: 'For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor. 12:10).

'Mary, Virgin and Mother, you who, moved by the Holy Spirit, welcomed the word of life in the depths of your humble faith: as you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One, help us to say our own "yes" to the urgent call, as pressing as ever, to proclaim the good news of Jesus.' (From Pope Francis's Prayer to Mary, star of the new evangelization)

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

Matthew 5:17-19

Thursday 12th March

Luke 11:14-23 • Lenten Weekday

This is a Gospel reading which challenges us to look into our own hearts. What lies there that needs to be cast out? Jesus demands our loyalty: 'He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters' (v. 23). Are we loyal, in our hearts, to Jesus? Do we profess our faith to him as we live out our daily lives?

Loyalty as a concept is about faithfulness and devotion. This is not the same as the 'loyalty card' or 'loyalty scheme' which is a feature of modern business. How many supermarket loyalty cards do you have? Few of us are completely loyal to one store. We are easily lured by other businesses offering special deals. How easily are we lured away from Jesus and his teaching by something that looks more tempting? The Encyclopaedia Britannica (Eleventh Edition) traces the word 'loyalty' to the fifteenth century, noting that then it primarily referred to fidelity in service, in love, or to an oath one has made. The origin of the word is from the old French loialte, which is rooted in the Latin lex meaning 'law'. In a sense, one who is loyal is also lawful. But there is divine law and earthly law, and later in Luke's Gospel Jesus acknowledges this: 'give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's' (20:25 NIV). God knows the secrets of our hearts, and the actions we take in private. Ultimately we cannot serve two masters: 'No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other' (Luke 16:13).

Most of us will not be called to show our loyalty in the same way as the martyrs, but the former British general attorney, Dominic Grieve, has said that the 'appalling' scenes in Iraq, which have seen Islamic extremists behead and crucify religious minorities including Christians, showed it was 'more important than ever' for people to express their religious beliefs. Grieve believes Britain should be unashamedly evangelical about its Christian faith and that 'people with faith have an entitlement to explain where that places them in approaching problems'. This is how we can demonstrate our loyalty.

Dear Jesus, help us, through following your example and by the power of your Holy Spirit, to be forgiving, loyal and dependable in the midst of difficult circumstances. Amen.

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

Luke 11:14-23

Friday 13th March

Mark 12:28-34

Jesus' opponents in the Gospels are the chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees and Sadducees. These groups form the Jewish leadership. What do we know about them?

The Pharisees criticized Jesus for not keeping the law and consorting with sinners; Jesus in return called them hypocrites who betrayed the heritage of the Jewish prophets and said they had their priorities wrong. In their view Jesus, by healing people, interpreting the law and forgiving sins, was taking on the authority of God. Though the Pharisees were in conflict with the Sadducees on a number of issues (the Sadducees rejected the Pharisees' belief in the resurrection of the dead) on this issue the two groups were agreed.

The elders acted as community leaders and judges. The chief priests were members of the high priestly families or those acting with the authority of the high priest. The scribes with whom Jesus argued were probably lawyers and judges. While the scribes interpreted Jewish law, they did not make it: hence, their position of conflict with Jesus, who claimed authority over the law.

Throughout Jesus' time in Jerusalem to this point, his experiences have been characterized by conflict. The leadership is hostile to Jesus because his interpretation of the law turns their understanding of it on its head. But the question asked by the scribe in today's Gospel seems sympathetic. There are two interesting points to note about this. The first is about the question itself: Jewish law contains over six hundred different regulations and it was common at the time for scholars and priests to try and distil them down into fewer, more fundamental principles. But the scribe doesn't challenge Jesus to summarize the law into a single commandment: he assumes Jesus can and wants to know what it is. The second point to note is about Jesus' answer, which doesn't come from the laws themselves or even from the Ten Commandments, but is an amalgamation of the opening of the daily Jewish prayer found in Deuteronomy (6:4-5) and part of Leviticus 19:18. Jesus' answer emphasizes the sovereignty of God over all humanity – which is inclusive of the Jewish leadership. Pleased that the scribe had grasped the spirit of the law, not just the letter, Jesus tells him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God' (v. 34).

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

Mark 12:28-34

Saturday 14th March

Luke 18:9-14

The sin committed by the Pharisee in today's Gospel reading is that of pride. This of course was Lucifer's great sin: he wanted to be like God. The first step along the pathway to pride is spiritual blindness. In the same way that a well-lit mirror reveals the flaws in our complexion, any glimpse of God reveals our frailty and sinfulness. The tax collector in Jesus' parable doesn't even dare to raise his eyes towards heaven. Some of Jesus' harshest polemics are directed against the 'hypocrisy' and 'blindness' of the Pharisees (e.g. Matt. 23; John 9).

Jesus chooses two extreme examples in this parable, which can be seen as a defence of the criticism of him by the Pharisees that he consorts with sinners. Here we have a self-righteous member of the influential Pharisees and a tax collector. Tax collectors were hated in the time of Jesus because they worked for Rome and often overcharged (Luke 3:13). Jesus challenged the Jewish purity laws (which the Pharisees paid close attention to) according to which tax collectors were outcasts, explaining that we are not saved by great works of righteousness, but by grace, as Paul would later write in his letter to the Ephesians (2:8).

In yesterday's Gospel reading Jesus crystallized the one great commandment by which we should live our lives: in today's we are given the essence of the gospel. The tax collector exhibits precisely what Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:3). Being poor in spirit means admitting we have nothing to offer to God to atone for our sin. We come to God as we are and ask for his mercy. Jesus tells us that the prayer of the tax collector is heard and answered: 'I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other' (v. 14).

When we are challenged we try and justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others. This is a symptom of pride. Our standard for comparison is God himself, and we all fall short of his glory (Rom. 3:23).

'O God, who resist the proud, and give grace to the humble: grant us the virtue of true humility, whereof your only-begotten Son showed in himself a pattern for your faithful; that we may never by our pride provoke your anger, but rather by our meekness receive the riches of your grace.' (Prayer for Humility)

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

Luke 18:9-14

Sunday 15th March

(B) Fourth Sunday of Lent • John 3:14-21

St John had a particular insight into Jesus and his mission which he wanted to pass on to us through his Gospel narrative. If we can grasp it, it can change our lives and the way we approach Scripture. St John understood the truth that Jesus' passion – his suffering on the cross and his brutal death – is, in fact, his glory. Jesus' glory is his cross. An instrument of torture and death became for us the tree of life. This revelation can also transform the way we understand the season of Lent.

Jesus' cross is the gateway through which we must all pass to receive the life God intended for us. Although we may struggle to come to terms with it, this is the truth of salvation. The great French priest and theologian Jean Baptiste Lacordaire wrote: 'God on the cross! That is all my theology!' The cross is, if you like, the way into the mystery of God. Archbishop William Ullathorne understood this when he said: 'The world is full of mysteries; heaven is all mystery to us earthly creatures. But whoever embraces the cross with open heart finds there the explanation of a thousand mysteries.'

We touch on this mystery in today's Gospel. The essence of God's plan of salvation is very simple: God so loved us that he sent his Son to save us. In order to be saved, we need to believe in Jesus, receive the Holy Spirit and live life in his fullness. We do well to ponder on this simple but powerful message. John wants us to embrace these truths and make them our own. It was God's plan that Jesus would die on the cross to save us. Through the cross abundant grace was poured out upon humanity, with the result that we were reconciled to the Father, our sins were forgiven, Jesus was glorified and the Holy Spirit could be sent from the Father. Light has come into our world. If you are ever tempted to fall into darkness and despair, look at the cross. The cross means light for the world, and our vocation is to walk as children of the light.

Lord Jesus, I dedicate my life to you to live by your truth and light. I believe in you and your saving mission and throw myself on your mercy that I may live as a child of the light.

2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23 • Psalm 136(137):1-6
Ephesians 2:4-10 • John 3:14-21

Monday 16th March

John 4:43-54 • Lenten Weekday

The healing of the royal official's son is John's second miraculous sign. A sign is a miracle which points to a significant aspect of Jesus' person or mission. Nothing in Jesus' life was incidental; every meeting and encounter was packed with meaning and significance. In today's reading we are given an insight into the restored life which Jesus came to give each and every one of us.

We do not know much about the royal official who came to seek Jesus' help but it is likely that he had an important role in Herod's court. Despite his social standing and position he did not have access to the medical help which might have saved his son. He was desperate and frantic, as any parent would be. Referring to this parental impulse St John Chrysostom once said: 'Parents are often so carried away by their affection... not wishing to leave any means untried, which might save their children.' In approaching Jesus the official was humble, revealing his need and begging for mercy. This is a good attitude for us all to adopt when we approach Jesus. Jesus' response is immediate – he does not need to visit the child but simply informs the distraught father, 'Go, your son will live' (v.50). Our official did what God wants us all to do: he took Jesus at this word and, sure enough, when he arrived home his son was restored to health. So powerful was the impact of the boy's healing that the entire household believed.

Jesus came to heal and restore us not just to physical health but to spiritual health as well. In the same way that the official's son was healed, so we too can be healed and restored. We all have many needs and we all need God's grace and mercy. God has made provision for healing in many ways but especially through the sacraments. Through the sacrament of reconciliation, for example, we can know and experience God's forgiveness and healing. Physical healing of sickness and disease is truly wonderful and evokes in us deep gratitude to God. However, just as wonderful is spiritual healing. Let us seek the Lord in confession and receive the healing he longs to give us.

Lord Jesus, you are the divine Healer and Physician. You bring health and wholeness as we seek to be holy and give our lives to serving you and your church.

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

John 4:43-54

Tuesday 17th March

(Mem in Wales) (Feast in England) (Solemnity in Ireland)

St Patrick • John 5:1-3, 5-16

From all the sick people gathered around the healing pool at Bethesda Jesus chose one man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Why he chose him, we just don't know as no clues are given. The Lord noticed him, perhaps, because among all the sick and suffering he appears to have had no one able even to help him into the pool. Why him, though, and nobody else on this occasion?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers us an answer: 'Jesus did not heal all the sick. His healings were signs of the coming of the kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover' (para 1505). Jesus' question to the man is both searching and profound and also perplexing: 'Do you want to be healed?' The man, in fact, does not directly answer the question but explains his predicament. His disability and personal circumstances prevent him from even getting down to the pool. He clearly wants to get well but has no one to help him. The Lord responds: 'Rise, take up your pallet, and walk' (v.8). The miracle is immediate and powerful – the man walks.

Jesus came to heal us body and soul. We are all wounded by sin and we all need the healing touch of Christ. St Athanasius reflected: 'The Lord did not come to make a display, he came to heal and teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for him who came to heal and to teach, the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put himself at the disposal of those who needed him.

The Lord asks us the same question he asked of the invalid in today's Gospel: 'Do you want to be healed?' Every day we need to know Christ's healing and forgiveness. Do you know your sins are forgiven? Are you burdened by a sense of guilt which will not go away? We can know Christ's healing touch through the sacrament of reconciliation and the grace of the Eucharist.

Lord, I want to get well. I want to immerse myself in the healing water of your love and mercy. Help me to prepare for Lent by making a good and honest confession and so know a time of renewal and refreshing.

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12 • Psalm 45(46):2-9 • John 5:1-3, 5-16

Proper of Saints: Jer 1:4-9 • Ps 116(117) • (Ireland only) Acts 13:46-49 •

Lk 10:1-12, 17-20

Wednesday 18th March

John 5:17-30 • Lenten Weekday

In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares, 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does' (v. 19 NIV). In turn we read in Galatians 3:26 that 'You are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ' (NIV). As Jesus can work no wonders without God, so we can work no wonders without God through him.

We awaken to God when we understand that we spread our wings via God, flying via a dependence upon his Light. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven', the Bible says (Matt. 5:3). The theologian Ilia Delio writes of this poverty as a 'radical dependence' upon God that frees and empowers us. 'The human person who is in relationship to God does not possess, but only receives', she writes. 'Our poverty is our receptivity, God fills the emptiness, so to speak...Poverty means that human life, from birth to death, hangs on the threads of God's gracious love.'

How do we attain this poverty? We must, says Delio, give up the need to defend ourselves against others, compete with others and tally our differences with others. 'Economic poverty is not difficult to attain', she asserts. 'Spiritual poverty, however, can be. It means relinquishing that which we possess to smother the ego or barricade it against the intrusion of others. It is the antidote to human violence, to the need to assert ourselves over and against others.'

This is the wisdom of St Clare of Assisi, who, according to Delio, 'suggests that poverty is the basis of spiritual vision or contemplation. To be a truly human person is to be poor.' The riches to rags lifestyle that she and her mentor St Francis of Assisi led, were merely outer symbols of an inner 'poverty', of a complete reliance upon God. When we beg God for help and our hearts are nourished by his love and support, then we truly know the humility and gratitude of spiritual poverty.

'Christ is the bridge that unites our alienated self to our true self, and our true self to others in which we find our completion', writes Delio. 'We learn from St Francis that the person who comes to know him or herself in God is the poor person, and the one who is poor is free to love.'

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

John 5:17-30

Thursday 19th March

(Solemnity) St Joseph, Husband of Mary • Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24

St Joseph was an important figure in Jesus' life. From him he must have learnt much – he was his earthly father after all – and his obedience to Joseph was the temporal image of his filial obedience to his heavenly Father. Joseph must have done a great job because Scripture records that Jesus was obedient to his parents and that he increased in wisdom and stature, in favour with God and man.

Paul VI, reflecting on the home at Nazareth, wrote: 'The home of Nazareth is the school where we begin to understand the life of Jesus – the school of the Gospel. First, then, a lesson of silence. May esteem for silence, that admirable and indispensable condition of mind, revive in us... A lesson on family life. May Nazareth teach us what family life is, its communion of love, its austere and simple beauty, and its sacred and inviolable character... A lesson of word. Nazareth, home of the "Carpenter's Son", in you I would choose to understand and proclaim the severe and redeeming law of human work... To conclude, I want to greet all the workers of the world, holding up to them their great pattern, their brother who is God.'

Being Mary's husband and Jesus' earthly father certainly had its own unique challenges: the virgin birth, the visit of the Magi, meeting Simeon and Anna in the temple, the escape to Egypt, and losing Jesus for three days when he was only twelve years old. Joseph could not have understood these events as they unfolded. What we do know is that he and Mary accepted them in faith.

There is a humanity and ordinariness about Joseph which makes him so attractive to us. His patronage of carpenters (and allied trades) is traditional, but he is also patron of doubters because he doubted whether to take Mary as his wife; of travellers, because of his flight into Egypt; and of a happy death, because a holy legend grew up that Jesus and Mary were by his bedside when he died.

'Every action of yours, every thought, should be those of one who expects to die before the day is out. Death would have no great terrors for you if you had a quiet conscience... Then why not keep clear of sin instead of running away from death? If you aren't fit to face death today, it's very unlikely you will be tomorrow.' (St Thomas à Kempis)

2 Samuel 7:4-5, 12-14, 16 • Psalm 88(89):2-5, 27, 29

Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22 • Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24

Friday 20th March

John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30 • Lenten Weekday

In the Gospel of John, we read of Jesus going to the festival of Tabernacles. When the crowds doubt him, he instructs them to ‘Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment’ (v. 24 NIV). He then goes on to say: ‘you know me, and you know where I am from.’ Is he here referring to being from Galilee, or does his statement have spiritual meaning? How capable are we of recognizing God? ‘Do you have eyes but fail to see?’ Jesus asks us (cf. Mark 8:18).

We can ask ourselves how we judge. Those with a spiritual intuition can often recognize a light that emanates from those who have a true relationship with God. They are as if lit from within. They have a wonderful presence about them and we enjoy being with them.

If we look at what is thought to be the earliest icon of Christ, the Christ Pantocrator of St Catherine’s Monastery, we can clearly see the radiance of God beaming from the right side of him. The other, depicted as his ‘human earthly side’, is not so luminescent. We must seek out this luminescence of truth in our spiritual teachers and, if we are lucky, our friends. A person may wear a religious uniform, go dutifully to Mass, know the ins and outs of the Bible, but if he or she does not have that radiance, should we call them ‘spiritual’? After all Dante’s hell was full of cardinals!

In Philomena, journalist Martin Sixsmith tells the incredible tale of a woman who had her son taken from her by nuns. Having been dumped in the convent by her father (as a pregnant unmarried teenager), she almost died in childbirth. She was not allowed to leave the convent and then her son, at the age of three, was sold (for a high price) to an American family. When she and her son tried to find one another years later, the nuns lied, denying them contact before the son died. Countless others experienced equally appalling treatment. Yet those selling the babies for money and refusing to reunite those they had divided were nuns!

Let us, as Jesus says, judge not by appearances. Let us learn to ‘judge correctly’. If we pray regularly, if we forge a relationship with the stillness of God, we will be given the eyes that see and recognize God in others.

Wisdom 2:1, 12-22 • Psalm 33(34):16-23

John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Saturday 21st March

Lenten Weekday • John 7:40-52

John makes a very telling comment in this passage: ‘So there was a division among the people over him’ (v.43). From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus’ words had two equal and opposite effects. They either inspired, comforted and encouraged or they aroused terrible hostility and bitterness. We meet these two poles of opinion in today’s reading. Both reactions are provoked by what we could (and should) refer to as the most important question that as human beings we can ask ourselves: Who is Jesus? Our dignity and destiny as human beings hinges on our answer. We can’t just ignore Jesus – he did not give us that option. We need to decide for ourselves who he was.

Addressing the question of whether it is possible to regard Jesus just as a great moral teacher, which is an approach many feel happy with, the great Christian apologist C S Lewis said: ‘A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic... or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the eternal Son of God; or else a madman or something worse!’ (Mere Christianity).

Very few people struggle with Jesus as a moral teacher. Many are happy to think of him as a model of how to live a truly good human life. The sticking point comes when we get into who he said he was! The shocking and scandalous truth is that Jesus said he was God! Many of the Pharisees and Jewish leaders of the day would not or could not accept that Jesus was who he said he was – our Lord and God. We all need to weigh up the evidence and come up with our own answer to the all-important question: who is Jesus? Was he a lunatic, was he evil, or was he in fact the Son of God? For those of us who choose this third option, the only worthy response is to bow down and worship him.

Lord Jesus, no human could speak as you spoke – because it would be a lie. You, however, spoke the truth because you are the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, holy and eternal, Lord and God. We boldly and firmly proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth is Lord of the Universe.

Jeremiah 11:18-20 • Psalm 7:2-3, 9-12

John 7:40-52

Sunday 22nd March

John 12:20-33 • Fifth Sunday of Lent (B)

Jesus transforms everything. An instrument of execution and death has become an instrument of life. Jesus did not recoil from his destiny: he recognized that in the cross his 'hour' had come and that his whole life had been a journey to this moment.

So much of Jesus' teaching is taken from observing the natural world. He took note of a principle within nature that life is born from death. We all understand that in order for a plant to grow, a seed needs first to be buried in the earth. Unless this happens it remains only a single seed – if buried in the soil, then many seeds are produced. Jesus saw his own death mirrored in this process of nature. He knew that his entire life was a preparation for his suffering and death upon the cross. In the history of the world there has never been a more important death, for from this death would come life for the world.

In 1980 Archbishop Oscar Romero was murdered by an assassin's bullet as he celebrated the Eucharist. Moments before, in his sermon, he had said: 'To each one of us Christ is saying: "If you want your life and mission to be fruitful like mine, do as I. Be converted into a seed that lets itself be buried. Let yourself be killed. Do not be afraid. Those who shun suffering will remain alone. No one is more alone than the selfish. But if you give your life out of love for others, as I give mine for all, you will reap a great harvest."'

Just as Jesus laid down his life, so we are called to lay down our life for others. Just as the cross was Jesus' hour of glory, so we too are called to take up our cross and follow him. Only if we are willing to die to ourselves in this way, will we know the joy of harvest in our lives.

The cross reveals God's love – it makes it plain for all to see. St Rose of Lima famously said: 'Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven.' Pray for the grace this Lent to understand the cross in a new way as the source of all life, all blessing and every grace.

'It is not easy to follow Jesus closely, because the path he chooses is the way of the cross.' (Pope Francis)

Jeremiah 31:31-34 • Psalm 50(51):3-4, 12-15

Hebrews 5:7-9 • John 12:20-33

Monday 23rd March

Lenten Weekday • John 8:1-11

Newspaper editors of a particular kind understand well that a sex scandal sells newspapers! There is something voyeuristic and rather sad in human nature which delights to read about the individual who has fallen from grace or has ruined their life.

This instinct was very much alive and kicking in first-century Palestine. The scene John sets for us is remarkable given it takes place at dawn. How on earth did they manage to capture this poor woman in such a compromising situation – and where was the man? We all know it takes two to tango! The poor woman dragged before the Lord, and surrounded by hostile and aggressive men who wanted to put her to death by stoning, must have been a pitiful sight. They could have dealt with the matter in private, but no – they had her stand before them. This was clearly entrapment both of the woman and of Jesus.

The scene is underpinned by menace and wickedness which makes the adultery appear minor in comparison! In Jewish law, for adultery to be proved, it was necessary that the perpetrators be actually caught in the act – witnesses were needed (the mind boggles!). Furthermore, stoning was only prescribed if the woman was a betrothed virgin or a married woman (Deut. 22:23-24) and then both parties were to be executed, not just the woman (Lev. 20:10). The Pharisees were bending the law to suit their own purposes and, in fact, the whole situation was done to entrap, to intimidate and cause mischief.

Since the Romans did not allow the Jews to carry out capital punishment under their jurisdiction (see John 18:31), if Jesus had agreed to the stoning he would have been in conflict with them. But if he had spoken out against it, he would have been accused of not upholding the law. He was in a catch-22! However, the teachers of the law had not banked on Jesus! His response reveals, if one can say such a thing, his genius. The way he diffused the situation is breathtaking. Only those who were without sin had the right to throw a stone at her! The Pharisees had been beaten by the wisdom of Christ and they departed the scene – with their tails between their legs.

‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?...Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.’ (John 8:10-11)

Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62 or 13:41-62

Psalms 22(23) • John 8:1-11

John wants us to understand Jesus' divinity. Of course, Jesus was equally a human being. He was fully human, fully divine. For obvious reasons we relate to Jesus' humanity, but it is important that we also recognize his divinity: we are called to bow down and worship Jesus, the God-Man.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that the gateway into knowledge and understanding was through the door of 'awe and wonder'. He saw that the more we stand in awe and wonder, the more our minds adopt the right attitude to learn and absorb – our amazement urges us on to plumb the depths of whatever it is that we are studying. Nowhere is this truer than in our contemplation of the incarnation.

The meaning of the incarnation is expressed well by Jesus when he says: 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world' (v. 23). It is so amazing to think that the divinity in Jesus did not overwhelm his humanity, and that his humanity did not corrupt his divinity. 'What he was, he remained and what he was not, he assumed', proclaims

the Roman liturgy. And the liturgy of St John Chrysostom declares: 'O only begotten Son and Word of God, immortal being, you who deigned for our salvation to become incarnate of the holy Mother of God and ever virgin Mary, you who without change became man and were crucified, O Christ our God, you who by your death have crushed death, you who are one of the Holy Trinity, glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us.' We are called to penetrate this mystery ever more deeply – and we have received the grace to do so. It is a truth we will spend the rest of our lives seeking to fathom and understand.

Consider that the One who created the universe, the Lord, the Almighty, worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, acted with a human will and loved with a human heart. Having been born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in every way except one: he never sinned.

'As man alone, Jesus could not save us; as God alone he would not: incarnate he could and did.'
(Malcolm Muggeridge)

Numbers 21:4-9 • Psalm 101(102):2-3, 16-21
John 8:21-30

‘Lowliness was taken by majesty, weakness by strength, mortality by eternity. To pay the debt of our fallen state, the nature which was inviolable was united with a nature which was passable. Thus, in accordance with our needs, the one and same mediator between God and man – the man Jesus Christ – was able to die in the one nature and was incapable of death in the other.

‘True God, then, was born in the complete and perfect nature of true man; completely human and completely divine. By human, I mean that nature which the Creator founded in us at the beginning, and which he undertook to restore. For there was no trace whatever in our Saviour of those elements which were introduced into us by the deceiver, and to which man, when deceived, allowed entrance. Nor does it follow that because he undertook to share with us our weaknesses, he thereby shared our sins.

‘He took the form of a servant without stain of sin. He enhanced our humanity but did not thereby diminish his divinity. The emptying by which the invisible one made himself visible, and by which the

Lord and Creator of all things willed to be one with mortal men, was a bending down in pity, not a failure of power. Accordingly, he who in the form of God was the maker of man, was himself made man in the form of a slave.

‘Thus the Son of God enters into the depths of this world, coming down from his heavenly throne, yet not leaving his Father’s glory, begotten into a new order by a new birth.

‘I say a new order, because he was in his own nature invisible, but was made visible in ours. He is incomprehensible, yet he willed to be comprehended. Enduring before time began, he began to be in time. The Lord of the universe took on the form of a slave, veiling his infinite majesty. The God who cannot suffer did not disdain to be a man who can, and, immortal though he was, to subject himself to the laws of death...

‘The one and same Jesus is truly Son of God, and truly son of man. He is God insofar as in the beginning he was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And he is man insofar as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ (St Leo the Great)

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

In today's Gospel we enter into a clash of two civilizations – the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of this world. It is as if the two are engaged in a battle to the death because the darkness wants to extinguish the light. The light of Christ, however, illuminates the darkness and especially the darkness of the mind and heart. The Jews who resisted him are, in a very real sense, speaking not just for themselves but for a realm both seen and unseen which despises and hates the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus.

You see, the incarnation is a shocking and terrible scandal of unfathomable depth – it horrified the Jews, who refused to believe in Jesus. There is a tradition that teaches us that, right back at the beginning of time, Lucifer himself, on learning of God's plan, also refused to bow before Jesus, the God-Man.

Jesus, in today's Gospel, seals his fate with the Jewish leaders when he utters the unutterable, referring to himself by the sacred name for God 'I am': 'before Abraham was, I am' (v. 58), thus revealing his divine identity. But only those who are willing to go through a

mysterious death to self and to experience something of a new birth from above are able by the grace of revelation to accept this truth. Some, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, were open to the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and minds and followed Jesus – many, however, did not and plotted instead to take his life.

Acknowledging Jesus' divinity is itself a God-given grace. As St Catherine of Siena wrote: 'You are a fire that takes away the cold, illuminates the mind with its light, and causes me to know the truth.' God became man in order to save us by reconciling us with himself. God became man so that we would know God's love and have a model of holiness.

We know Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light; he is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and no one can come to the Father except through him. God became man so that we could have a new dignity and a new destiny, and so that one day we might partake in the divine nature.

'For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.'
(St Athanasius)

Genesis 17:3-9 • Psalm 104(105):4-9

John 8:51-59

Friday 27th March

Lenten Weekday • John 10:31-42

Let's get right down to the point: Jesus claimed to be God. It's as simple as that. Just how offensive this was to the Jews of his generation is hard for us to grasp. For them God was transcendent, other, beyond and in a certain sense unreachable (of course all these things are true). But in Jesus, God became touchable, real, tactile, present in time and, most shocking of all, a human being. To say his hearers were incandescent with rage would be understating it – they were frenzied and murderous. To pelt a man to death with stones, a crowd needs to have gone beyond the point of the rational or reasonable. In a way, their reaction was understandable. For a mere human being to claim to be divine was no less than blasphemy. And blasphemy, under the law, carried the penalty of death. They were clear why they were stoning him: 'because you, being a man, make yourself God' (v. 33).

The great Christian writer and apologist C S Lewis had a penetrating insight into the incarnation:

The things he [Jesus] says are very different from what any other teacher has said. Others say, 'This is the truth about the universe. This is the way you ought to go,' but he says, 'I am the Truth, and the Way, and the Life.' He says, 'No man can reach absolute reality, except through me. Try to retain your own life and you will inevitably be ruined. Give yourself away and you will be saved.' He says, 'If you are ashamed of me; if, when you hear this call, you turn the other way, I will also look the other way when I come again as God without disguise. If anything whatever is keeping you from God and from me, whatever it is, throw it away. If it is your eye, pull it out. If it is your hand, cut it off...Come to me, everyone who is carrying a heavy load, I will set that right. Your sins, all of them, are wiped out. I can do that. I am Rebirth, I am Life. Eat me, drink me, I am your Food. And finally, do not be afraid, I have overcome the whole universe.'

Lord God, I confess the name of your Son Jesus. He is the Lord of the universe. Grant me the gift of wonder this Lent – wonder at the incarnation, wonder at the cross, wonder at the resurrection.

Jeremiah 20:10-13 • Psalm 17(18):2-7

John 10:31-42

Saturday 28th March

John 11:45-56 • Lenten Weekday

‘From that day on they took counsel how to put him to death’ (v. 53). Why were the religious leaders so intent on killing Jesus? One reason may have been that they were jealous of Jesus’ popularity and worried that everyone was going to him. After Jesus had raised Lazarus from the tomb, John writes: ‘Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him’ (v. 45). Another reason may have been that the Jewish leaders had a genuine fear of an uprising and the consequences that would ensue (v. 48). Ironically, Jesus’ death did not prevent the destruction of Jerusalem. Or perhaps Jesus simply did not fit the religious leaders’ definition of a holy man (John 7:12, 48) and they felt his claims were blasphemous.

Whatever the reason why the most religious and devout people of Jesus’ day wanted to kill him, their scheming was under God’s eternal purpose: ‘this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed’ (Acts 2:23). Caiaphas’ words, ‘it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish’ (v. 50), are prophetic.

Holy Week is an opportunity to try to imagine how we would have responded had we lived in Jesus’ day. Today’s Gospel ends with a sense of anticipation and excitement: about the Passover that was approaching and about the presence of Jesus in Jerusalem. As we prepare to celebrate Holy Week we can rejoice at the opportunity to celebrate the most beautiful liturgy in the Church’s year. We can also ask the Holy Spirit to help us stay close to Jesus and to deepen our understanding of the mystery of his Passion.

‘When the Church celebrates the mystery of Christ, there is a word that marks her prayer: “Today!” – a word echoing the prayer the Lord taught her and the call of the Holy Spirit. This “today” of the living God which man is called to enter is “the hour” of Jesus’ Passover, which reaches across and underlies all history’ (CCC 1165).

Father, purify our hearts and minds as we celebrate the death and resurrection of your Son. May we enter more deeply into the mystery of your great love for us and be drawn closer to you and to one another.

Ezekiel 37:21-28 • Jeremiah 31:10-13

John 11:45-56

Sunday 29th March

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion • Mark 14:1–15:47

‘Hail, Son of David, our King and Redeemer of the world! The prophets foretold that you would come and save us.’

Holy Week, the Church's most solemn week, begins today. Seize the moment; be expectant and hopeful. God is working in our lives – leading us to a deeper understanding and knowledge of the mystery of our faith revealed through the cross and resurrection. Holy Week is a grace-filled opportunity to come to know God in a new, fresh and dynamic way. It is a holy time during which we can immerse ourselves in the Paschal Mystery – Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

Many centuries before Christ Zechariah prophesied that the Lord would enter Jerusalem as a divine warrior to establish his dominion ‘from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth’ (Zech. 9:10). By entering Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus, like an Old Testament prophet, symbolically acted out this prophecy, fulfilling it both figuratively and literally: ‘Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass’ (Zech. 9:9). Today's Gospel captures the moment in Jesus' life when he was recognized as the promised Messiah. Perhaps among the crowd welcoming him into the holy city were those who had been with him during his ministry – people he had healed or delivered, people who had listened to his teaching and come to faith.

Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey but left the city carrying a cross on his way to Calvary, his life seemingly thrown on the scrap heap of history – ‘for a hanged man is accursed by God’ (Deut. 21:23). However, this was all part of God's sovereign plan, for Jesus is the Suffering Servant, the Servant King. In the same way that many of the crowd spread their garments and leafy branches on the road as Jesus passed by, we are called to spread ourselves before the Lord during this solemn and holy week, praying, pondering and reflecting on the meaning of Jesus' cross and on the truth that we have been crucified with Christ: ‘it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal. 2:20).

Lord, this week I join the crowd in proclaiming: ‘Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!’ (Mark 11:10)

Isaiah 50:4-7 • Psalm 21(22)8-9, 17-24

Philippians 2:6-11 • Mark 14:1-15:47

Monday 30th March

John 12:1-11 • Monday of Holy Week

In our Gospel today darkness is contrasted with the light – the darkness of Judas and the light of Mary. Judas was mean, Mary was generous; Judas was indignant, Mary was humble; Judas rebuked, Mary embraced. What Judas regarded as her weakness was in fact her strength: she was lavish, ‘wasting’ her precious nard on anointing the Lord. In Judas’ view she had her priorities all wrong – he claimed to care for the poor whereas she only cared for Christ.

A hallmark or motif of Pope Francis’ pontificate has been his care for the poor. His care for the poor is, however, rooted in his love for Christ, and this is how it should be. We cannot reduce our faith to simply serving the poor as many without faith do this with more commitment and zeal than many Christians. Human poverty is a fact of life – due to human selfishness and greed it will never be eradicated. We can alleviate the symptoms of poverty by raising vast sums of money and by campaigning against it, but tragically poverty is here to stay. To make poverty history we would have to put an end to original sin and our human fallenness! The solution to poverty is to love Christ, for in loving Christ we love the poor.

The problem is that often we emphasize the social teaching of the Church, forgetting that it is rooted in having a personal relationship with God. As noble as it is to care for the poor, what must come first is sitting at the feet of Christ because it is there that we learn to be servants of the poor. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who served the poor, once said: ‘Unless I spend time before Christ present in the Eucharist I would not have the energy or the strength to serve the poor and care for the dying.’

We may not have nard to ‘waste’ on the Lord but we do have the gift of time. Our time is a precious and valuable commodity, and what we value most in life we lavishly give our time to. If, like Mary, this week we waste the oil of our time on the Lord, in prayer, in reading the Scriptures and perhaps even before the Eucharist, we will be richly blessed and rewarded.

Lord, give me a heart for the poor because my heart rests in you.

Isaiah 42:1-7 • Psalm 26(27):1-3, 13-14

John 12:1-11

Tuesday 31st March

Tuesday of Holy Week • John 13:21-33, 36-38

One of the remarkable things about the Gospels is the absence of propaganda or guile – as even non-believers often attest. They paint the disciples as all too human. Today's Gospel reading provides us with a perfect example of this, highlighting a truth that we may find hard to stomach, namely how similar in character Judas and Peter were. We forget that Peter was transformed by the events of the resurrection and, perhaps even more powerfully, of Pentecost.

What distinguishes Peter from Judas isn't his sin but his repentance. Perhaps the greatest gifts that Peter received from the Lord were self-knowledge and self-awareness. These two precious gifts are often in short supply both in our own lives and in those around us. It takes courage to plumb the depths of our own heart and see what its drives and motivations are, and then to bow low before the Lord in humble repentance. While Peter wept for his sin, Judas despaired.

Holy Week presents us with a wonderful opportunity to grow in our understanding of ourselves, which has the knock-on effect of helping us to grow also in our understanding of God and other people. Why is this? It is because we come to know something of our own darkness and sinfulness, and of how dependent we are upon the mercy of God. We tend to think that as believers the accent is on our actions, how righteous and good we are, how noble and so on. But really the Christian is someone who knows that they are a beggar before the throne of God's grace – a beggar who is no better than anyone else but who knows where to find food. We can only really come to this place through a grace of revelation.

St John Vianney once prayed that the Lord would grant him the gift of self-knowledge. But when the Lord granted his prayer, so overwhelmed was he by the piercing clarity he had received that he had to beg the Lord to take it away again. And this was at the height of his sanctity! Perhaps at the end of the day there was no difference at all between Judas and Peter – it was just that Peter learnt to cry out, 'Lord, have mercy upon me a sinner.'

Lord, grant me the gift of self-knowledge, that I may fall on my knees before you in praise, thanks and gratitude for saving a wretch like me.

Isaiah 49:1-6 • Psalm 70(71):1-6, 15, 17

John 13:21-33, 36-38