

Tuesday 1 March

Matthew 18:21-35 • St David (Solemnity in Wales, Feast in England)

The parable of Jesus in today's Gospel seems guaranteed to provoke some strong reactions. It is so full of extremes that we almost can't help feeling somewhat outraged at the whole situation. Clearly, Jesus is making a contrast between the mercy shown by the king to one of his servants and the lack of mercy shown by that same servant to one of his fellow servants.

One of the extremes that may be lost on us is found in the description of the amounts owed by the respective servants. The first servant owed the king 10,000 talents, while the fellow servant owed 100 denarii. Helpfully, some Bibles note that 'this talent was more than fifteen years' wages of a labourer; the denarius, however, was a day's wage for a labourer'. In other words, the debt of the fellow servant was miniscule compared with the servant's debt to his kingly master. This massive difference leads us to feel that the first servant's indifference to his fellow is utterly beyond belief. After having been released from such a huge debt, how could he possibly have been so callous towards his fellow servant?

Certainly, the king was outraged. However, perhaps we are a little disconcerted by the extreme nature of his reaction. He went from amazing generosity to rather excessive retribution. We might even think that the king was behaving in a remarkably similar manner to that of the servant himself. It appears that the king completely withdrew his former generosity. It is something of a sting in the tail.

Getting to the heart of the matter, what is at stake here is that the true value of forgiveness is that it transforms the heart and mind. The action of the servant towards his fellow reveals that he had not really received the forgiveness of the king – he had not truly accepted in his heart what the king had done for him. As a result there was no change in him. He was still filled with anger and harshness, even though he had been treated with kindness and mercy. The retribution of the king was only the outward sign of the inward reality, that the servant had not really received the king's mercy at all or in only a superficial manner. Truly to receive mercy is to be transformed – we can't help but become merciful ourselves.

Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Dan 3:25, 34-43 • Ps 24(25):4-9 • Mt 18:21-35

(Proper of Saints: Phil 3:18-14 • Ps 1:4, 6 • [Wales 2nd reading from Common of Pastors] • Mt 5:13-16)

Wednesday 2 March

Lenten Weekday • Matthew 5:17-19

It is relatively understandable to us that the prophets of the Old Testament at times spoke of things that were to happen in the future and that, at the coming of Jesus, it was possible to look back and see that their words began to make sense in the light of the person and mission of Jesus. In this sense Jesus could be said to fulfil the prophets. But what about the Law? In what sense might Jesus be said to fulfil the Law?

Although Jesus spoke of not abolishing the Law, there is a sense in which it seems that he did abolish the Law. For example, there is a great deal of Law concerning the offering of sacrifices in the temple. Shortly after Jesus' resurrection, the temple was destroyed and no further sacrifices have taken place. On the other hand, the heart of the Law is the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. These have not come to an end.

We can perhaps see here a somewhat deeper meaning to the word 'fulfil'. One of the great difficulties about the Old Covenant that God made with the people of Israel is that the people were unable to remain faithful to it. Insofar as the Ten Commandments represented a more fundamental law of loving (worshipping and serving) God and loving our neighbour, we can see that it was Jesus himself who carried it out most perfectly. His sacrificial death on the cross was, at one and the same time, a perfect act of love and sacrifice to the Father, and also an act of loving mercy towards the whole human race. So perfect was Jesus' sacrifice that the daily and annual sacrifices in the temple were no longer needed. Jesus' sacrifice actually achieved what the temple sacrifices aspired to – namely, to bring about a reconciliation between God and his people. Jesus' sacrifice was the reality, while the Old Testament sacrifices now came to be understood as signs or shadows pointing to the reality of Jesus. As such, the whole of the Law was brought to completion by Jesus. He fulfilled it, rather than abolished it.

There is a real sense in which the whole of the Old Testament is seen in a new light with the coming of Jesus. The whole Old Testament can now be seen to bear the imprint of Jesus.

Holy Spirit, help me to treasure the Old Testament and find Jesus hidden in its pages.

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

Matthew 5:17-19

Thursday 3 March

Luke 11:14-23 • Lenten Weekday

We are probably meant to read the account of Jesus casting out the demon from a dumb man within the context of the earlier part of chapter 11 of Luke's Gospel. The context is that of Jesus teaching about prayer at the request of one of his disciples. Jesus indicates the way that we can speak to the Father in prayer. He reveals the Father as one who is most willing to respond to our requests – more willing indeed than a human father might respond to his son.

Significantly, he remarks, 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' More than any other gift, it appears that the Father most wants to give the gift of the Spirit to his sons and daughters. And yet this also seems to depend on asking the Father. The key to prayer is to desire the very things that God wants to give us. The more we are filled with the Holy Spirit, the more our desires will correspond with the petitions of the Our Father.

Against this background, Jesus comes across a man who is dumb. There is an implication that because he is unable to speak, he cannot pray or ask the Father for his gifts. Jesus sees in this the bondage of the evil one, who from the very beginning has sought to rob the human race of the blessings of God. The enemy has turned the human race away from its natural dependence on God, and has insinuated the lie of self-dependence. When we try to rely entirely upon ourselves, we can close ourselves to the knowledge and experience of God's love in our lives. The bondage of the evil one leads to a form of pride that will not even ask the Father for his gifts. It is a kind of spiritual dumbness.

Maybe we do ask the Father for what we need. But do we always pray for the things that the Father wants to give us, the things the Father knows we need? Do we really pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit? Or to see God's kingdom established? Or to have our trespasses forgiven? If we understand the role of the evil one in robbing us of God's fullest blessings, we will perhaps pray more fervently, 'deliver us from evil'!

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

Luke 11:14-23

Friday 4 March

Lenten Weekday • Mark 12:28-34

Whenever we read of scribes approaching Jesus, it is usually the case that they have some hidden agenda – trying to catch him out or expose him in some way. However, in today's reading the scribe had no hidden motive. He had a good heart. In fact, he'd been impressed with the way that Jesus had handled the questions of the Sadducees and had tried to open their minds to the meaning of the Scriptures. As a result, he came to Jesus with a genuine question of his own.

There were disputes among the experts on Jewish law as to whether there was a general commandment that would sum up the rather large body of teaching in the Torah (Jewish law). Jesus answered that the whole law could be summed up in two fundamental commandments: to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbour as ourselves. All of the Old Testament law is really only unpacking and spelling out in much more detail how we might love God and our neighbour. If we consider the Ten Commandments, we can see that the first three relate to loving God, while the remaining seven relate to responsibilities towards our neighbour.

The scribe was clearly moved by Jesus' words and was happy to embrace them. This led Jesus to say: 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' We might be a little puzzled as to why Jesus said 'not far'. Was something more required? What did the scribe need?

At the heart of the message that Jesus had come to bring about the kingdom of God was the person of Jesus himself. The kingdom of God was close at hand because Jesus had come among us. To be open to God's kingdom is to be open to Jesus himself. Jesus is the very embodiment in the world of God's love and mercy. It is ultimately Jesus himself who makes the Father known. It will be Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross that will heal the sinfulness of humanity and bring about a reconciliation with the Father. We receive the Father's mercy and salvation by receiving Jesus into our lives. In our union with Jesus we become sons and daughters of the Father.

Lord Jesus, draw us into your Father's kingdom by drawing us close to you. Help us to walk with you day by day.

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

Mark 12:28-34

Saturday 5 March

Luke 18:9-14 • Lenten Weekday

When Jesus explained why he taught in parables, he said, ‘so that men may be ever seeing but never perceiving’ (e.g. Mark 4:12 NIV). This issue of seeing but not seeing seems to be the very matter at stake between the two persons in the parable. What are the two characters actually seeing? The publican is seeing his own sinfulness, while the Pharisee is seeing his own virtue. But that is not quite the whole picture. The deeper question is how are they both seeing God? Remember they both went to the temple to pray!

Clearly, the publican is glimpsing something of God’s transcendent holiness. The temple is a holy place and the publican knows it. He remains at a respectful distance, knowing that he can only approach on the basis of God’s mercy. By contrast, the Pharisee is barely seeing God at all. Although he begins his prayer, ‘God, I thank you...’, the rest could hardly be described as a prayer. Perhaps there is a bit of irony in the previous verse when Jesus says that the man ‘said this prayer to himself’! He is not focusing on God but on himself.

The truth is that only when we look to see God do we also see the truth about ourselves. It is only when our prayer acknowledges the awesome holiness and transcendence of God that we also realize, as the hymn records, ‘the great abyss between the God of holiness and man’. And now we reach the heart of things. This abyss is only crossed through the saving mercy of God himself. Proverbs 28:13 states: ‘He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.’ This is what the publican was seeking. The Pharisee did not even realize his need for it. In his mind he has reconciled himself by his fasting and his tithes. His pride and his arrogance, far from reconciling him, only reveal the breadth of the abyss.

Proverbs 21:2 teaches: ‘A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart’ (NIV). When Jesus makes the statement, ‘I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God’, he is actually saying something far more significant. He is saying that he, Jesus, is exercising the judgement of God. In Jesus, the judgement of God, especially the saving mercy of God, has become incarnate.

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

Luke 18:9-14

Sunday 6 March

(C) Fourth Sunday of Lent • Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Another parable of Jesus in Luke's Gospel picks up the same theme as our reading yesterday. It is the parable of the Prodigal Son. The first three verses provide the context of the parable. Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus, while the Pharisees and scribes were murmuring against him. Like the Pharisee in yesterday's reading, these murmurers were content with their own righteousness and condemning of those who were attracted to Jesus.

The two sons in today's parable could be said to be very similar to the publican and the Pharisee. The younger son humbly acknowledges his faults and throws himself on his father's mercy. The elder son, by contrast, is oblivious of his own sin. Like the Pharisee, he focuses on what he regards as his own righteousness: 'All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders' (v. 29). Yet there is a malice in his heart towards his father. His words betray a deep anger and reveal that he has failed to realize that everything has been given to him by his father. He regards his work as slavery, even though at the beginning of the parable we learn that the father had divided his property with his sons. He thinks that what he has is something he earned rather than the father's gift and his way of thinking impairs his judgement. In a subtle way, Jesus reveals that the elder brother shares in the sin of Adam. Adam denied his responsibility for his wife, Eve, and blamed God for the problem – 'It was the woman you gave me!' (cf. Gen. 3:12). In a similar way, in his anger, the elder son denies any relationship with his brother and blames the father. When he describes his brother as 'this son of yours!' he is revealing the true state of his heart.

Yesterday, we saw that the hidden meaning of the parable is that Jesus is the incarnation of God's judgement. He declared that the publican left the temple reconciled with God, while the Pharisee did not. In today's parable, a further dimension of Jesus is revealed. One thing is clear in the parable: that the father loves both his sons. The elder son excluded himself, but the father reaches out to him, pleading with him to let go of his self-righteous mind and hardened heart. Neither son is excluded from the father's mercy – in the same way that Jesus' mercy extends to all.

Joshua 5:9-12 • Psalm 33(34):2-7

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 • Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Monday 7 March

John 4:43-54 • Ss Perpetua and Felicity (Memorial)

At this moment in our Lent season the Gospel readings are no longer taken from one of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). From now on the readings will be from the Gospel of John. We are less than two weeks away from the beginning of Holy Week, and the Johannine Gospel readings will reveal the growing hostility of the Pharisees and Jerusalem authorities against Jesus. All is now making way for the passion and death of Jesus.

There is, however, an interesting connection between the recent readings from Luke's Gospel and the readings to come. We have seen in the last few days that Jesus' parables revealed a contrast between publicans and Pharisees, symbolizing the contrast between those who recognize their sin and their need for God's mercy and those who trust in their self-righteousness. In the Gospel of John there is a similar contrast highlighted – not, this time, between publicans and Pharisees, but between the inhabitants of Galilee and the inhabitants of Jerusalem! In John's Gospel, these two groups take on a symbolic meaning. The Galileans are generally open and receptive to Jesus, while the citizens and authorities of Jerusalem are hostile. Increasingly, the Gospel readings will manifest the antagonism of the people of Jerusalem towards Jesus.

Today's reading, however, sees Jesus returning to Galilee. The reason for leaving Jerusalem is that a prophet has no honour in his own country! John emphasizes the contrasting welcome given to Jesus by the Galileans. Furthermore, their welcome was related to Jesus' actions in Jerusalem, which they had witnessed because they had accompanied him there. They will accompany him again to Jerusalem when he makes his final entry on Palm Sunday. It will be the Galileans who wave the palm branches and proclaim, 'Hosanna to the Son of David'! The citizens of Jerusalem, however, will be the ones to cry, 'Crucify him!'

As though to illustrate more effectively the difference between Galileans and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, John now relates an incident in which the faith of an official from Capernaum is rewarded by the healing of his dying son. It is significant that the official trusted in Jesus' word (and promise) that his boy would be well before he received news of his actual recovery. John links this event to the miracle at Cana, where the servants, at Mary's encouragement, also put their trust in Jesus' word.

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

John 4:43-54

Tuesday 8 March

Lenten Weekday • John 5:1-16

Jesus returned once again to Jerusalem. It was the Sabbath and a feast of the Jews. Jesus performed the healing of a paralyzed man at the pool at Bethesda in Jerusalem, and John tells us that the Jews began persecuting Jesus because he had healed the man on the Sabbath. What a contrast with the Galilean official in yesterday's reading! No one saw in this healing a revelation of the true identity of Jesus. It is not described as a 'sign' by John. This is not to imply that the healing was not a sign, but rather to emphasize the inability of the people of Jerusalem to see it in that way.

It is significant that the man who had been healed at the pool and had been instructed by Jesus to take up his mat and walk, was asked by the Jews (i.e. the Jewish authorities) who it was that had told him to walk. John tells us: 'the man who had been healed did not know who it was...' (v. 13). Although Jesus had significantly touched his life, indeed had transformed his life, the man did not know him or acknowledge the power of God in the person of Jesus. It seems that the man was only focused on himself and on being well. He had not reached a position of faith in Jesus and following his word. When Jesus later met him again, he commanded him, 'Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.' It is not clear if this brought the man to faith in Jesus or not. All we are told is that he went to the Jews to tell them that it was Jesus who had healed him. There is something rather cold about the whole incident and, as we have seen, it stands in marked contrast with the response of the official from Capernaum whose son was healed.

Two different, almost opposite responses to Jesus. On the one hand, the official and all his household believed – we can perhaps sense the joy of this man from Galilee, a joy that also profoundly affected his family. On the other hand, the rather cold indifference of the man at the pool of Bethesda. The authorities were preoccupied with the regulations concerning the Sabbath. Which path do we take? Warmly embracing Jesus or indifference towards him, concerned only with following the rules?

'Lord, I need you,...take me once more into your redeeming embrace!' (Pope Francis)

Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12 • Psalm 45(46):2-9

John 5:1-16

Wednesday 9 March

John 5:17-30 • Lenten Weekday

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis wrote: ‘I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to let him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord”’ (para. 3).

The Gospel reading today is like a great cry from Jesus to be open to him and, through him, to be open to the Father. Three times Jesus declares: ‘Truly, truly, I say to you...’ It is as though Jesus were begging us, ‘Please listen to me, don’t be indifferent. I and my Father want to do something wonderful and powerful in your life. It is like the dead being raised to life. You will begin to hear my voice – a voice, not of judgement and condemnation, but a voice of love; a voice that you will experience as life-giving. The Father is at work at this very moment, and he has given me, the Son, authority to act in his name, to give life to those who are dead!’ It is possible to be spiritually dead – not knowing and honouring the Father, not knowing and honouring the Son. But if today you hear the voice of the Son of God, you will know that you have life; you will be spiritually alive!

The words of Jesus in the Gospel reading invite us to encounter Jesus speaking to us today.

For you, the reader of Bible Alive, every day is an invitation to encounter Jesus speaking to you through his word. In paragraph 153 of *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis suggests a number of questions we might ask ourselves after reading a daily Scripture passage: What does the text say to me? What attracts me about the text? What aspect of my life does God want to change through this text? What troubles me about this text? Remembering that God does not want to overwhelm us, we can begin to open ourselves to him speaking. Jesus is ready for even the smallest step towards him. He will approach us gently through the Scriptures, but we shall be filled with joy.

Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. You have the message of eternal life.

Isaiah 49:8-15 • Psalm 144(145):8-18

John 5:17-30

Thursday 10 March

(Feast in Scotland) St John Ogilvie • John 5:31-47

A renewed encounter with Jesus Christ! This is what Pope Francis has invited us to experience. It is the same message as that proclaimed by Pope Benedict in the Year of Faith. But how is this to happen? How do we open ourselves to this renewed encounter?

In the remaining section of the fifth chapter of John's Gospel, which is our reading today, Jesus seems to be addressing this question. He is speaking about the various ways that testimony can be given to Jesus. Paths that bear witness to Jesus and open the door to encountering him are the subject matter of today's Gospel reading. Specifically, Jesus refers to John the Baptist as a witness to Jesus, but he particularly focuses on the Father and the works of the Father that Jesus performs – works that Jesus would be unable to perform without the Father's authority, and, indeed, works (especially the miracles) that Jesus only wanted to perform because it was the Father's will. Believing that Jesus was sent by the Father and that he carried out the will of the Father provides a powerful motivation for opening our lives to Jesus. We can be confident of doing what is most pleasing to the Father and fulfilling his greatest desire for our lives, if we receive and welcome the living presence of Jesus into our lives. The Holy Spirit too will bear witness, within our own spirit, that Jesus is truly our Lord and Saviour!

The other great witness that Jesus speaks about is Sacred Scripture. In the original context of Jesus' words, the Scriptures were what we know as the Old Testament. Now all of Scripture bears witness or testimony to Jesus. The heart that welcomes Jesus will find Jesus present throughout the Scriptures, even though, at first, his presence may seem hidden. As an example, look at the Old Testament reading from today's Mass: Exodus 32:7-14. This text records the intercession Moses made on behalf of the rebellious Israelites, who had set up the molten calf as their god. In his prayer on behalf of the sinful people, Moses is an image of Christ, who pleaded for the whole human race. God's mercy revealed to Moses becomes fully realized when Jesus himself bears the brunt of human rebellion and at the same time manifests the Father's forgiveness.

Holy Spirit, open my heart to Jesus, through the witness of the Father and the revelation of Sacred Scripture.

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

(Proper of Saints: Isa 50:5-9 • Ps 76(77):12-16, 21 • Jn 12:24-26)

Friday 11 March

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

Today's reading is set against the backdrop of the Jewish feast of Booths or Tents or Tabernacles – Sukkot in Hebrew – an annual feast of thanksgiving for the harvest and for the exodus of the Jewish people from their captivity. To this day it continues to be a very popular feast within Israel marked by great rejoicing. During the feast the celebrants live in huts made out of branches, similar to those the Israelites would have built during their desert wanderings and also used by those harvesting crops. Jesus heeded the advice of his wider family to attend the feast but resisted their timing – he went later and in secret (v. 10), for his hour had not yet come.

The religious authorities, the crowds and indeed his own extended family struggled to understand who Jesus was. They were confused and baffled by him. Who was he? Where was he from? Who sent him? Today many are still confused and baffled by Jesus – who was he, where was he from and who sent him? They seek to understand him from a limited human perspective. We could call this a horizontal perspective. Jesus can only be understood from the perspective of heaven. We need a grace from heaven to touch the mystery of Christ. Jesus boldly proclaimed that he was the One sent from the Father. This was too much for the crowds, who tried to seize him. They could not touch him, however, because his time had not yet come (v. 30).

Our faith invites us to expand our vision, deepen our perspective and widen our hearts to see more clearly that Jesus is the divine Son sent from the Father. This is the secret kept hidden but finally revealed – that God the Father sent the Son, born of the Holy Spirit, and that the God of Israel is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we pray to the Father, he reveals the Son; when we pray to the Son, he reveals the Father; when we pray to the Spirit, he reveals the Father and the Son. Our faith is rooted in this revelation and it is by revelation that we probe, penetrate and plumb the depths of the mystery that the Father sent the Son.

Lord, whom will you send to proclaim that the Father sent the Son? Send me, Lord, for blessed are the feet of those who bring good news.

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

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

Saturday 12 March

Lenten Weekday • John 7:40-52

There are many important questions in life but the most crucial question of all is this one: who do you say that Jesus of Nazareth is? He was certainly a great moral teacher; he was surely a prophet; he claimed to be a king. He lived only thirty-three years – most of them lived hidden from the world. His public ministry lasted only three years, ending in the most ignominious and brutal death known to man, crucifixion. During his own lifetime he caused division, as he divides in our lifetime. Accept him, reject him, hate him or love him – which is it to be?

John brings us right into the drama of this choice in today's Gospel. In the understanding of the Jewish people the Messiah would come from Bethlehem – but, or so they thought, Jesus came from Nazareth. They did not know that, although raised in Nazareth, Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem. This was a key reason why the Pharisees rejected Jesus, as is evident from their response: 'Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee' (v. 52). Their arrogance, leading to certainty, had blinded them to the word of God. They searched the Scriptures but refused to come to the One to whom the Scriptures pointed and for whom they longed. They were rather like the proud man described by C.S. Lewis: 'A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you're looking down, you can't see something that's above you.'

John concludes chapter 7 with these words: 'They went each to his own house.' This verse isn't in today's reading but it is filled with meaning, suggesting that each settled back into their own way of life, their own way of thinking, and missed the opportunity to know Christ. Are we like this? Do we miss the opportunity to know Christ by settling into our own comfortable ways of thinking? Like the Pharisees we can be trapped by our arrogance. But through the gift of repentance we are humbled, and God exalts the humble with the gift of a deeper revelation into the central mystery of our faith, that Jesus of Nazareth is true God, true man, light from light, truth from truth, divine but made man.

Lord Jesus Christ, I confess with my heart and proclaim with my lips that you are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Jeremiah 11:18-20 • Psalm 7:2-3, 9-12

John 7:40-52

Sunday 13 March

John 8:1-11 • Fifth Sunday of Lent (C)

The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery is one of the most beautiful and powerful in the whole of Scripture. It is also one of the most mysterious and intriguing because of the way it has been handed down to us. This majestic Scripture, revealing as it does the overwhelming mercy of Christ, is missing from the oldest and best Greek manuscripts and seems to have been unknown to the early Greek fathers. The earliest reference to it can be traced to a third-century writing called the Didascalia. In short, this wonderful incident in Jesus' life did not form part of the original Gospel of St John. Scholars are baffled by this, but one theory is that the account was originally part of St Luke's Gospel because of its emphasis on God's mercy and compassionate treatment of women.

We should thank and praise God that this story's transmission down to us today was protected and guided by the Holy Spirit because it highlights in a most poignant and truly beautiful way the extent and depth of God's mercy towards sin, especially sexual sin. Of all the sins sexual sin tends to attract the most attention. The tabloid newspaper industry, in particular, is heavily focused in bringing all manner of peccadillos to our attention for our titillation and judgement – and, of course, increased newspaper sales!

The truth is, however, we are just like the woman caught in the act of adultery. Jesus taught that a man or woman commits the act of adultery simply by looking upon another with lust in their hearts (Matt. 5:27-30). Who has not sinned in this way and therefore who does not need the mercy of God? Confronted with this situation, Jesus' mercy and forgiveness was so powerful, so shocking, that it disarmed a violent crowd intent on killing. To every true penitent, every sorrowful sinner, Jesus says, 'Neither do I condemn you...' It is often due to feelings of guilt and self-loathing that we keep falling back into a compulsion, whatever that may be. The cool balm of God's mercy and forgiveness brings healing and relief and enables us to turn away from sin, and indeed gives us the grace not to sin again.

Father, forgive me for I have sinned – against you and you alone have I done what is evil in your sight. Wash me and I shall be clean; cleanse me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Isaiah 43:16-21 • Psalm 125(126)

Philippians 3:8-14 • John 8:1-11

Monday 14 March

Lenten Weekday • John 8:12-20

Under the Torah (the Jewish law) for a testimony to be valid two witnesses were required (Deut. 17:6). Jesus believed his testimony about himself was validated by his own witness and that of the Father. Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees essentially revolved around his testimony and his authority: he testified that he knew the Father and he claimed to have authority to forgive sin. Now, if we cut the Pharisees a little bit of slack, their desire to probe into Jesus' testimony and authority was not unreasonable. Nevertheless, they were not sincere and genuine in their enquiry, which was largely motivated by the fact that they saw Jesus as a major threat to their way of life and, more importantly, their authority.

Plenty of human beings in history have claimed a special relationship with God and indeed have even claimed they are the Messiah – not many, however, have said they can forgive sin. With piercing insight C.S. Lewis noted: '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 Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.' When we make this choice we are in effect choosing to live in the light or to be overwhelmed by the darkness.

Jesus is the Light of the World. We are called to testify to this light and to share our experience that we know where we are from and we know where we are going. For in Christ Jesus we are born again through baptism and are a new creation – this is where we are from. We know where we are going because we are on a pilgrimage back to the Father's house.

It is the fruit of the Spirit in our lives which bears eloquent testimony that we no longer live for ourselves but for Christ. We have received joy, we witness to joy; we have received mercy, we witness to mercy; we have received forgiveness, we witness to God's forgiveness. We have received a clarity and conviction that we have touched the meaning of existence – our dignity and destiny – which is to live and walk and move as children of the Father, redeemed by the Son, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Lord, teach me to walk in your divine light.

Daniel 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62 • Psalm 22(23)

John 8:12-20

Tuesday 15 March

John 8:21-30 • Lenten Weekday

In his Gospel John's accent is very much on Christ's divinity – although not at the expense of his humanity. John is clear that in Jesus of Nazareth we encounter the one who is from above: 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world' (v. 23). John invites us to enter a different realm – a heavenly and eternal realm.

We tend to live our lives very much in the here and now, ruled by the demands of day-to-day living. However, when we contemplate St John's Gospel it is as if we are being encouraged to put down the troubles and challenges of daily life and rest in Christ. The truth of Christ can set us free so that our minds and heart are expanded to contain in ever-deeper measure the mystery of Christ.

In Christ Jesus God became man. Jesus is from above and we are from below because Jesus of Nazareth is God. As St Clement of Alexandria said: 'The Word of God became a man that you also may learn from a man how man becomes God.' St Athanasius, that great theologian of the incarnation, wrote: 'The Word of God, Jesus Christ, on account of his great love for us, became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.' The good news is that because God became man, life would never be the same again.

What does this mean for us in the here and now? It means that we can know this life which comes from above as we live here below. We are partakers in God's divine nature and have some share in the fellowship which exists between the Father and the Son. Since we have been raised with Christ we set our hearts on things above, not on things below. This means that by God's grace we can practise the presence of God as we move through our day. We set our minds on things above – the promise of eternal life, the heavenly life, the promises of Christ, the great truths of our faith, creation, the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension and the second coming.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. You are above all things and before all things – we worship and adore you, Lord of heaven and of earth.

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

John 8:21-30

Wednesday 16 March

Lenten Weekday • John 8:31-42

We enjoy many freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of movement and the privilege of living in a democratic and free society. Prisoners often reflect that the loss of their freedom is the greatest deprivation they face. The Human Rights Act is a charter designed to safeguard these basic principles which are at the heart of being human.

True freedom is more than this, though, isn't it? True freedom is interior and has to do with our spirit and our soul. The kind of freedom Jesus speaks of is a freedom which liberates us from our deepest prisons and deepest bondage. Who other than God-made-man could utter these words: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (v. 31 NIV)? Sometimes it is worth reading a Scripture very slowly, letting the words sink in, and letting its efficacy and power seep into our hearts and minds.

What does Jesus' word set us free from? We are slaves of sin. We are caught in the bondage of our fallen and wounded humanity. We are like the walking wounded. But the word of God has the power to heal the deepest wounds in our lives and restore us to wholeness. True freedom is to be set free from the power of sin over our lives. Paul wrote to the believers in Galatia: 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (Gal. 5:1 NIV).

St Bernard of Clairvaux declared: 'I have freed my soul.' We can be set free from the sin in our lives. How can this be? The gospel teaches us to count ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (see Rom. 6:11). How do we do this? We do this by appropriating the blessing of our baptism, proclaiming in faith that we are a new creation and that God's Spirit now lives in us. By praying in this way we can choose to live in the freedom Jesus won for us on the cross.

Lord, through baptism I am immersed into your death and resurrection. By your grace put to death in me the desires and drives of my heart which lead me into darkness and sin, and let me walk in the radiant light of Christ.

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

John 8:31-42

Thursday 17 March

Luke 10:1-12, 17-20 • St Patrick (Solemnity in Ireland; Feast in England & Scotland)

Today we celebrate the feast-day of one of Ireland's and the Church's greatest sons. Little is truly known about him and, of course, because of this legend has grown around his memory. He may have been born in Dunbarton, Scotland, Cumberland, England, or in Wales. He called himself both a Roman and a Briton.

When Patrick was sixteen he and a large number of his father's slaves and vassals were captured by Irish raiders and sold as slaves in Ireland. Forced to work as a shepherd, he suffered greatly from hunger and cold. It was during his captivity that he experienced a conversion to Christ. After six years, Patrick escaped, probably to France, returning to Britain at the age of twenty-two. It is thought that he went back to France to study before being ordained to the priesthood. He was consecrated bishop at the age of forty-three. Patrick's great desire was to proclaim the good news to the Irish. In a vision it seemed 'all the children of Ireland from their mothers' wombs were stretching out their hands' to him. He understood the vision to be a call to do mission work in pagan Ireland. Despite opposition from those who felt his education had been defective, he was sent to carry out the task. He went to the west and north, where the faith had never been preached, obtained the protection of local kings and made numerous converts.

Because of the island's pagan background, Patrick was emphatic in encouraging widows to remain chaste and young women to consecrate their virginity to Christ. He ordained many priests, divided the country into dioceses, held church councils, founded several monasteries and continually urged his people to greater holiness in Christ. In his Confessio he laid bare his soul and charted his amazing journey from sinner to saint but always a sinner, with a profound grasp of God's mercy. We pray that Ireland would be encouraged and revitalized by the missionary zeal of St Patrick, the Apostle to Ireland. 'Christ shield me this day: Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every person who thinks of me, Christ in the eye that sees me, Christ in the ear that hears me.' (From 'The Breastplate of St Patrick')

Proper of Saints: Jer 1:4-9 • Ps 116(117) • (Ireland only) Ac 13:46-49 • Lk 10:1-12, 17-20

Proper of Season: Gen 17:3-9 • Ps 104(105):4-9 • Jn 8:51-59

Friday 18 March

Lenten Weekday • John 10:31-42

Jesus was the Man of Sorrows – he was despised and rejected by men, familiar with grief. Scholars can be quick to throw out the challenge: ‘Show me anywhere in the Scriptures where Jesus claimed to be God.’ For all their learning they seem blind to the fact that this is precisely what Jesus claimed. ‘It is not for a good work that we stone you’, said some Jews Jesus encountered in the temple, ‘but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God’ (v. 33). So offended and mortified by this claim were these men that they decided then and there to stone him to death as the law demanded (Lev. 24:16), but his hour had not yet come.

Jesus seized this moment of violence to point his detractors to the Hebrew Scriptures which spoke of him. In Psalm 82:6 the psalmist refers to judges, leaders and rulers as ‘gods’ because of their divine appointment (see Exod. 22:28; Deut. 1:17; 2 Chron. 19:6). Jesus’ thinking is clear: if Scripture can refer to human rulers in terms of them being ‘gods’, how much more so the One the Father has set apart as his own. Jesus’ proclamation of himself as being the Son is not without the evidence of signs, wonders and miracles (v. 37).

It is remarkable that in the midst of persecution Jesus was continually reaching out to his accusers, teaching, enlightening them and urging them to search the Scriptures and seek the light of God’s Word. If they were open, the Spirit would lead them to know the truth which would set them free to believe that he was God’s only Son. However, their hearts were closed and their minds fixed.

We do not know why some have the gift of faith and others do not. It is a mystery, but we should rejoice that we have received this gift, no matter how weak and fragile it is. We learn from today’s reading that one way we can grow in faith is by reading the Old Testament, for, in the words of St Jerome, it is ‘pregnant with Christ’. When we read the Old Testament we touch the rock of tradition from which the Father revealed his divine plan of salvation.

Lord, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit make my heart burn as I meditate on your sacred word in the Hebrew Scriptures and reflect on the promises of Christ once hidden but now fully revealed.

Jeremiah 20:10-13 • Psalm 17(18):2-7

John 10:31-42

Saturday 19 March

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

‘[Joseph] did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife...’ (cf. Matt. 1:24).

From the very beginning Joseph took loving care of Mary and gladly dedicated himself to Jesus’ upbringing. He is the shadow of the Father watching over the treasures entrusted to him. He played a key role in the drama of our salvation, faced as he was with the astonishing motherhood of Mary, his wife. The humanity of his predicament is not lost on us and he clearly sought a way out of this difficult situation.

His response, one of faith to the impossibly difficult situation he faced, is a living testament to the obedience of faith we are called to: “‘The obedience of faith” (Rom. 13:26; see 1:5; 2 Cor. 10:5-6) “is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,” and freely assenting to the truth revealed by him’ (Dei verbum 5). Joseph is then a unique and first guardian of the mystery ‘hidden for ages in God’ (Eph. 3:9). Along with Mary, Joseph was the first to believe and, like Mary, his assent to God’s plan was crucial as this nascent moment of our salvation unfolded. Joseph of Nazareth devoted his life to serving his holy family.

Joseph’s ministry as guardian and protector speaks to us today – especially to parents, clergy and religious. It is not easy raising a family today; it is not easy leading a Christian community and being a shepherd of God’s people. Joseph shines as one who strove to be close to God and to hear his voice. He walked and talked with God, and sought wisdom and light in the face of the challenges and difficulties he faced. We look to him as a perfect example of discipleship and fatherhood.

He was entrusted with earthly oversight of God’s greatest treasure and proved himself worthy. We too are entrusted with God’s greatest treasure, the divine life we received through baptism. We cherish this life both in ourselves and others, and devote our lives to entering into, as Joseph did, the mystery of the Incarnate Word and Christ Crucified.

We give thanks and praise to the Father for St Joseph and seek his intercession that we too would be faithful guardians and custodians of the grace entrusted to us.

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 or Luke 2:41-51

Sunday 20 March

(C) Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion • Luke 19:28-40

Today is Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord and the beginning of Holy Week. It is a sacred week, one in which we learn anew the language of the cross. It is a blessed week, one in which we learn anew to glory in the cross.

From the moment we fell away from God, his plan of salvation began. We fell away from God's grace by the wood of the tree; we are reconciled by the wood of the cross. Jesus' entire life, from conception to the empty tomb, was focused on the cross. It is forever the sign of God's love and the symbol of his mercy. To learn of God's love we contemplate the cross; to learn of his mercy we meditate on the cross.

How do we know what love is? How do we know what mercy is? John answers this question for us with piercing simplicity: 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us' (1 John 3:16 NIV). We need look no further to witness the perfect expression of love. We tend to think of love as something we do whereas love is something we receive. We did not first love God but God first loved us.

How can the brutal death of Jesus of Nazareth two thousand years ago on a hill called Golgotha (the Skull) be the greatest sign of God's love and mercy? From the moment Jesus was baptized and identified himself with sinners, he became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the Suffering Servant who gave his life as a ransom for many and, by so doing, reconciled us with the Father. No human being, no matter how holy, could bear the sin of us all. Jesus' death on the cross was and will forever be the most important death in human history because it opened up the doors of heaven, restored us to the Father, and conquered sin and death. In this sacred week in this extraordinary Year of Mercy we give praise and thanks to the Father of Mercy and we behold the Man of Mercy.

'Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty – he is the King of glory.' (Ps. 24:9-10)

Mass: Isa 50:4-7 • Ps 21(22):8-9, 17-20, 23-24

Php 2:6-11 • Lk 22:14-23:56

Monday 21 March

John 12:1-11 • Monday of Holy Week

Once again we find Martha serving and Mary at the Lord's feet (cf. Luke 10:38-42). Mary's devotion was costly (nard was an expensive fragrance) and unusual because she poured the oil on Jesus' feet (normally it was poured on the head) and used her hair to wipe his feet. Respectable women did not unbind their hair and foot-washing was reserved for bondservants, the lowest of the low. Mary humbled herself and, in anointing the Lord, prepared his body for burial. Her extravagant self-giving filled the room with a sweet aroma. Her devotion, recorded for all time, shines like a beacon of love and service, in stark contrast to Judas' cold and mean feigning of concern for the poor when all along he was a thief.

What do we take from today's reading? Perhaps there is something of both Mary and Judas in us all. Life often isn't as black and white as we try to make it, and we know there is an interior struggle within each of us: we want to do what is good but we often find ourselves doing the very opposite, an inner force tempting us to do what we do not want to do. This interior struggle or battle is spiritual and, as this war wages within us, we cling to Christ. We need God's grace to waste our lives on the Lord. For this is what Mary testifies to – a generosity of heart and profound desire to express her gratitude in a practical way.

What can we pour out on the Lord? Our greatest commodity is our time – time today is so precious and in scarce supply. If we give of our time generously in prayer, reading the Scriptures and serving others, God will bless us generously – we give and so we receive; we have received and so we give. The key to this kind of generosity, as we see in Mary, is the heart. A generous heart does not count the cost, gives itself unreservedly to its beloved and wastes what is precious in a gesture of love. Mary gave so generously because she had received God's mercy in a way that had impacted her life. We too have received the bountiful mercy of God. Today, waste yourself, your nard, on the Lord.

Lord, teach me to be generous, even lavish, with my time. I trust the past to your mercy, the present to your love and the future to your providence.

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

John 12:1-11

Tuesday 22 March

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

Today's Gospel presents us with two men whose lives, while similar in some respects, take very divergent paths. Both are disciples; both are loved by Jesus. Peter will deny; Judas will betray. Peter will repent; Judas will despair. Peter is impetuous; Judas is calculated. Both are flawed human beings; both let Jesus down. The Church is a Church for sinners – sinners are welcome, not despised. A church in the Bronx, New York had a sign erected outside it which read: 'Do come in – trespassers will be forgiven.' That's the point, isn't it? God's sun shines on the righteous and the unrighteous, believer and non-believer, the blind and those who see.

What made Peter different to Judas wasn't his moral life – they had both fallen short of the glory of God. What made Peter different was that his heart had been softened through the grace of repentance. In his moment of denial he touched the depth of his fallen condition and it moved him to weep bitterly. However, in the moment of his treachery, Judas's heart hardened.

We face the same choice – because a choice is always involved. God created us with the gift of free will: we can choose to obey him or we can choose to resist his grace; we can choose to follow him or to rebel against him. The choice is ours. Judas was not the helpless victim of fate, or simply overwhelmed by greed or his ideological convictions. He chose his destiny, just as Peter chose his and we choose ours.

Repentance involves an openness of heart and a certain courage, itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, to humbly acknowledge our sins and faults. The Holy Spirit is at work in our conscience, shining his light into the darkness, duplicity and delusions we entertain. Repentance puts us in touch with the reality that we are fallen sinners in desperate need of God's mercy. Jesus chose Peter knowing he would deny him, not once, not twice, but three times. He knew, too, that by God's grace Peter would turn back and strengthen his brothers. The gift of repentance fills us with joy because we learn that God is always forgiving, always merciful, always giving us the grace to begin anew.

Lord, in this most holy of weeks, may I draw near to the Father of mercy with repentance in my heart, knowing that I will receive the grace of forgiveness and a new springtime in my heart.

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

John 13:21-33, 36-38

Wednesday 23 March

Matthew 26:14-25 • Wednesday of Holy Week

The novelist E.M. Forster wrote: ‘If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I would have the courage to betray my country.’ Kim Philby was a British double agent during the Cold War: he held a high position in British Intelligence whilst simultaneously betraying his country’s secrets to the Russians. He said wryly of the art of treason: ‘In order to betray you must first belong.’

Judas’s betrayal is infamous, his name a byword for deceit, double crossing and treachery. However, he did not betray the Lord for much money – only, as the Americans might say, for a quick buck. Thirty pieces of silver (about a hundred denarii) was the equivalent of a day’s wages for a labourer. It is true that Judas was a pawn in the game being played by both the Pharisees and the prince of this world – the cosmic battle between good and evil. It is true, too, that his treachery was foretold. For example, Zechariah prophesied, ‘if one asks him, “What are these wounds on your back?” he will say, “The wounds I received in the house of my friends”’ (Zech. 13:6). The psalmist too spoke of this moment: ‘Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me’ (Ps. 41:9 NIV).

We will never know what was in Judas’s heart as he sank into the depths of despair; what we do know is that God’s mercy is always available to us, right up to our last breath. We can be sure that God does not wish that any of his little ones be lost and truly he knows that the devil is like a prowling lion looking for someone to devour. God’s mercy has no bounds, no limits; no one is excluded – not even Judas. The sobering truth is that we all have something of Judas in us – we share his humanity, we share his fallen nature. True, he lacked self-knowledge, he was greedy and loved money – sound familiar? His greatest sin, however, was one we all fall into: he lost sight of Jesus’ love and drifted far from him.

Lord, as we prepare to enter your most Holy Triduum, grant us the grace to understand that there but for your grace go we and to be always mindful of your love and mercy.

Isaiah 50:4-9 • Psalm 68(69):8-10, 21-22, 31, 33-34

Matthew 26:14-25

Thursday 24 March

Holy Thursday • John 13:1-15

Today, in churches all over the world – from St Peter's Basilica, Rome to your local parish church – the feet of parishioners will be washed in the foot-washing ceremony which forms part of the Maundy Thursday service. Jesus set the bar high when he instituted such a lowly task to be a sign of his love and service. In his day foot-washing was the duty of the lowest-ranking servant, and it was an extremely unpleasant task in the hot and dusty climate of the Middle East. Spare a thought for the Pope and your parish priest, and hope that those chosen to represent the disciples have cleaned their feet before the ceremony – it is supposed to be only symbolic after all!

Is it any wonder that Peter was scandalized by this act of abasement and complete service? The fisherman wasn't just indignant: he was deeply offended, adamant that he would not undergo this humble act of service by the Lord. 'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet' (v. 8 NIV). Jesus' response made it very clear that Peter could have no part in Christ unless he agreed (v. 8).

Do you understand what Jesus was modelling in washing the feet of his disciples? On one level it is clear: we are called to humbly serve each other, even down to the most menial of tasks. But there is also a baptism motif at play here. In the waters of baptism and the blood of the cross we are truly washed and cleansed. The stain of original sin is removed and we are clothed with the garments of salvation. When we come to the Lord in prayer and seek his voice, when we take time to read his holy word in the Scriptures, when we worship in awe before the Eucharist, we let Christ, once again, wash our feet and cleanse us from the stain of sin. When we humbly confess the dirt and grime of our sins in the sacrament of reconciliation, Christ himself washes our feet in the waters of repentance, contrition and conversion. 'Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them' (v. 17).

Lord, purify me, cleanse me, wash me and cover me in the grace so readily available in the sacraments, that I may taste and see that the Lord is good and in turn wash the feet of my brothers and sisters in the waters of charity and service.

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 • Psalm 115(116):12-18

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • John 13:1-15

Friday 25 March

John 18:1–19:42 • Good Friday, Celebration of the Lord's Passion

Rejoice, today is Good Friday. Not a day of doom or gloom but a day of bloom. For on this day the Saviour died and on this day the prince of this world was outwitted and defeated. The irony and the paradox are not lost on us: from death came life, from defeat came victory, from the darkness of Calvary burst forth the victory of the empty tomb.

Good Friday celebrates and commemorates a cosmic battle between good and evil, fought to the bitter end on a hill far away. Historically we are in first-century Israel, cosmically time stood still as the battle waged. The Prince of Peace engaged in the most crucial battle the world has ever seen: this was the battle of all battles and it could not be lost. The stakes could not have been higher, the drama could not have been more intense. This moment and this death were the most important in human history, past, present and future.

Good Friday is a day of paradox and contradiction. An instrument of death became the source of life. The ignominy of the cross became the glory of God. The darkness of death was subsumed by the light of Christ.

Good Friday is a day of mystery on which we are invited to enter, in reverence and awe, the mystery of the cross. For on the cross, the sinless, perfect man took upon himself the sin and darkness of the entire world. He who knew no sin, fulfilled his destiny as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Paul, that true lover of the cross of Christ, wrote: 'So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (1 Cor. 5:20-21). Today, we glory in the cross, rejoice in the cross, and give thanks and praise to Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who died that we might live.

Lord, on this sacred day, I kiss the foot of the cross. Count me among the lovers of your cross, and grant me the grace to boast that through it I was crucified to the world and the world to me.

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

Saturday 26 March

Holy Saturday • Luke 24:1-12

What happened to Jesus' soul when they took his dead body down from the cross? This is, of course, a great mystery, which only a grace of revelation can shed light upon. The Church, as mother and teacher, has taught since the very beginning that Jesus like all human beings throughout the ages experienced death in his body, and in his soul he journeyed to the realm of the dead. As we say when we repeat the Apostles' Creed, 'He [Jesus] descended into hell.' The Hebrew for this netherworld is Sheol – in Greek Hades.

Jesus descended into the bowels of the underworld to liberate the righteous who had died at peace with God but not in Christ. These souls were deprived of the vision of God, separated from the beatific vision. This did not mean they were all eternally damned but it did mean they were imprisoned and were paying the wages of sin, which is death. Jesus descended into hell to set free the righteous who were awaiting the coming of the Saviour.

We can only kneel and bow before this mystery of faith, seeking to reflect upon it in silent prayer. Only Jesus could make this journey; only he could resist sin and not be subject to death; only he could set the captives free. Jesus did not descend into hell to destroy it but to lead out the just souls who had been languishing there over the thousands of years prior to his advent. The Author of Life destroyed him who has the power of death, the devil. Through his death and resurrection Jesus truly holds the keys of death and Hades, and before him, only him, will every knee bow, every tongue confess and every heart give praise to him who is Lord of everything in heaven, on earth and under the earth.

'Today a great silence reigns on earth, a great silence and a great stillness. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. He has gone to search for Adam, our first father, as for a lost sheep...I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead.' (Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday)

Gen 1:1–2:2 & 22:1-18 • Ex 14:15–15:1 • Isa 54:5-14 & 55:1-11 • Ba
3:9-15, 32–4:4 • Eze 36:16-28
Mass: Rom 6:3-11 • Ps 117(118):1-2, 16-17, 22-23 • Lk 24:1-12

Sunday 27 March

John 20:1-9 • Easter Sunday

On Pentecost Sunday, the disciples were so filled with the joy of the Spirit it was as if they were drunk. ‘Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine”’ (Acts 2:11 NIV). On Easter Sunday, we too drink deeply of the wine of the profound truths of our faith, made available to us in the liturgy of Lent and especially in the rich feast of the Triduum. Today we celebrate the crowning truth of our faith. As the Byzantine Easter liturgy proclaims: ‘Christ is risen from the dead! Dying, he conquered death; to the dead, he has given life.’

The sign of the resurrection is an empty tomb. Admittedly, an empty tomb could be explained in many other ways, as, for example: the Romans took the body; the Jews took the body; the disciples took the body; Jesus wasn’t really dead; it wasn’t Jesus on the cross... We believe, of course, that the crucified Jesus was raised up by the Father. Death could not hold the Lord of Life.

The empty tomb is a signpost leading us to an encounter with the Risen Lord. We rely on the first witnesses of the resurrection, the disciples, who bore witness to the truth that Jesus’ resurrection was not simply a returning to life, a resuscitation if you will, as Lazarus’s had been, but a vanquishing of death, opening up a new way of life for those who believe. As Paul says, ‘Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father’ so that ‘we too might walk in newness of life’ (Rom. 6:4).

Although we have not seen the Risen Lord, as the disciples did, we trust in their witness and are blessed because we believe (cf. John 20:29). Our goal, in this Year of Mercy, is to know the power of the resurrection in our own lives – the power to overcome sin, the power to be a living and authentic witness that Jesus Christ is risen today. Jesus’ resurrection is the source of our own life to come, and as we draw near to him – in prayer, as we read Scripture, in the Eucharist – we are given a foretaste of the resurrection life.

I believe with all my strength and hope in Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered death, was buried, rose again from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He is risen! Alleluia!

Acts 10:34, 37-43 • Psalm 117(118):1-2, 16-17, 22-23

Colossians 3:1-4 or 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 • John 20:1-9

Monday 28 March

Acts 2:14, 22-33 • Easter Monday

Today we are invited to join the Holy Spirit on the adventure of a lifetime. The fantastic news is it's an adventure available to us every year through the liturgy or any time we choose to study and pray on the masterpiece we know as the Acts of the Apostles. Make no mistake, Luke is a genius storyteller; his words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, have spoken to every generation since he first set pen to paper or was it quill to parchment?

In order to feel the full benefit of reading the Acts of the Apostles, rather like taking a coat off before braving the cold weather again, we need to take off or put down a certain mindset. This mindset insists that what we have in the Acts of the Apostles is the Holy Spirit super-charging the nascent Church with signs, wonders and miracles to set it on its way. The Church teaches that the same grace, the same blessing, the same Holy Spirit is available to us today.

In today's passage we join the intrepid and fearless apostles as they set about conquering the world (as you do when you have the message of eternal life and have discovered the meaning of human existence). It seems fitting that the liturgy wastes no time in bringing us into direct contact with Peter, the Rock upon which the Catholic Church was founded. We meet not a cowering, timid wreck of a man whose word was not his bond and to whom denial seemed to come very naturally, but rather the towering figure of Peter. Bear in mind that Peter, although no doubt a capable fisherman (and therefore a businessman), was an ordinary, unschooled working man – unlike the apostle Paul who had received the best education of his day. He was rough, ready and tough as old boots but, my oh my, could he preach!

Today's sermon or homily, call it what you will, is a perfect example of the grace of proclamation. Peter simply proclaims the central truths of the Christian faith and points to Jesus: 'Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs – this Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death...' (vv. 22-24).

Holy Spirit, grant me a zeal and burning love for the purity and simplicity of the gospel message.

Acts 2:14, 22-33 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5, 7-11

Matthew 28:8-15

Tuesday 29 March

Easter Tuesday • Acts 2:36-41

We join Peter in full swing proclaiming the basic gospel message, calmly and with incredible clarity presenting the truths of the gospel. His hearers did what everyone does when the preaching pierces their heart: they asked, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ (v. 37). The answer is as powerful as the question: ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins’ (v. 38).

Through Peter’s preaching his hearers came into contact with the simple truth that the omnipotent Creator God in his boundless love sent his one and only Son, Jesus of Nazareth. So powerful was this message that that day 3000 people were added to the number of the believers. That was some sermon, wasn’t it? But if we break it down and examine it, the message Peter proclaimed was the simple yet life-changing truth that Jesus is our Saviour and that if we repent, believe and are baptized, we no longer need to live under the burden of sin and darkness.

Now, truth be told, we probably couldn’t just repeat that message to our friends, work colleagues and relatives – it would need unpacking or presenting in a way they could relate to. This is why it is important that we share from the heart about our own experience and understanding of God. The gospel isn’t a magical formula which we spout or repeat like a mantra. No, it is a life-giving message of bearing witness to our experience of the Living God. The Holy Spirit is able to help us speak to others personally and intimately, heart to heart, one to one, person to person. The people listening to Peter were cut to the heart because he spoke to their hearts.

The gospel speaks to the deepest needs of the human heart. Everybody thirsts to know God’s forgiveness and experience his mercy. St Augustine explained that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit to be enthusiastic and excited about the basic gospel message – we need a grace of repentance to turn away from cynicism or a certain despair which prevents us from embracing the simplicity and power of the gospel and sharing it simply and humbly with others.

Lord, help me to share the Good News with dignity and reverence for others, taking care that my heart speaks to their heart about the Father’s heart.

Acts 2:36-41 • Psalm 32(33):4-5, 18-20, 22

John 20:11-18

Wednesday 30 March

Acts 3:1-10 • Easter Wednesday

Jesus healed the sick and so did the apostles. They were literally Jesus' healing hands and continued his ministry. What is striking about today's healing, the healing of the man crippled from birth, is that the man was healed and restored to health in the name of Jesus. Peter with bold confidence prayed: 'I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk' (v. 6). It is no surprise that on being healed the man began to leap around and praise God (v. 8). Miracles have that effect! Peter knew as we all know that health is wealth and no amount of money can buy it.

Is this kind of healing available today? Yes, it is. The apostles died, but they passed on this healing ministry to the Church. Where is this healing available to us today?

Certainly, God has raised up men and women with a healing ministry, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: 'The Holy Spirit gives to some a special charism of healing so as to make manifest the power of the grace of the risen Lord' (para. 1508).

We also have the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, at which recipients can receive the healing ministry of Christ and the Church. The sacrament is administered to give us strength but also to heal and restore us. We tend to seek this grace in the face of serious illness or before undergoing a major operation, and this is right and proper. God has given the sacraments of the Church so that we can encounter the living mercy of God: don't be afraid to seek out the grace available through this sacrament. We pray that our clergy may be generous and merciful in praying for healing for those suffering and in need. Perhaps a blessing of the Year of Mercy will be an increase in the numbers of people availing themselves of the mercy and healing of God in the sacraments of healing.

Through the holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.

Acts 3:1-10 • Psalm 104(105):1-4, 6-9

Luke 24:13-35

Thursday 31 March

Easter Thursday • Acts 3:11-26

Peter was blessed with the gift of proclamation. He proclaims the gospel message with piercing and striking clarity numerous times in the Acts of the Apostles (see 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43; 13:26-41). Each of these proclamations has a common thread encapsulated in the following two scriptures: 'The God of our fathers glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him' (3:13) and 'The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree' (5:30).

Peter's proclamation, containing as it does the power of the kerygma, the basic gospel message, convicts us all of falling short of the glory of God. We all reject and resist the law of love by which God wants all human beings to live, and it was our sin and rebellion that took our Lord Jesus to the wood of the tree, the cross. Some today will protest that this is a rather outdated spirituality and that we have somehow moved on from this notion that we crucified the Lord. In this way of thinking Jesus is seen less as a Saviour and more as our loving Brother. Of course, Jesus is our loving Brother but he is first and foremost the Saviour, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

The gospel proclaims that God is near to us and accompanies us through our lives. As Pope Francis has said: 'God walks with all of humanity, the good people and the evil people because in this list [see Matt. 1:1-17] there are saints and there are criminal sinners as well. There's so much sin here. But God is not frightened by this: he accompanies us. He walks with his people.'

Jesus walks with us when we turn to him in contrition. For this to happen our hearts need to be soft and open to the message of repentance and conversion. There need to be stirrings of sorrow for sin and a sense that we are not living as God wants us to live. This movement in our conscience prompting us to examine our lives is a grace of the Holy Spirit. God seeks out and blesses sinners, and the cross gives eloquent testimony to the truth that God so loved sinners that he sent his only Son to die on the cross.

Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.

Acts 3:11-26 • Psalm 8:2, 5-9

Luke 24:35-48