

We know very little about St Joseph. The Gospels of Mark and John make no mention of him whatsoever. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke do refer to him but only on a very few occasions. In Luke's Gospel Joseph is mentioned in his account of the nativity, the presentation of Jesus at the temple and the occasion when the boy Jesus went missing and, after a period of great anxiety, was found by his parents talking with the elders of Israel. In Matthew's account of the nativity he presents the dilemma with which Joseph was faced on hearing of Mary's pregnancy and God's clear direction through a dream. Matthew is the only Gospel writer who records the massacre of the innocents and Joseph leading his family to the relative safety of Egypt.

The Greek word used to describe Joseph's occupation is *tekton*, which meant not simply a carpenter but an artisan or expert builder proficient in both wood and iron. Joseph faced the news of Mary's pregnancy with great courage and sensitivity, being prepared to divorce her quietly so that she would not have to suffer any public disgrace. The fact that God spoke to him through a series of dreams to direct him in his care of his

young family shows that he was a man open to God's leading and direction.

Tradition has it that Mary was a widow for most of her life, but it is silent on how Joseph died. What we do know is that God entrusted to Joseph his most precious treasures – Jesus and his mother Mary. Despite the paucity of reference to Joseph, his witness has been revered and cherished from the very beginning. We can enter the mystery of the incarnation more deeply through reflecting on Joseph's humble way of serving and his mature participation in God's plan of salvation. Like Mary, the Mother of the Incarnate Word, he shared wholeheartedly in the mystery of faith as it was unfolding before his very eyes. He was involved in the same salvific event and was the guardian of the same powerful love through which the eternal Father 'destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ' (Eph. 1:5).

Heavenly Father, on this holy feast-day, may St Joseph obtain for the Church and for the world, as well as for each of us, the blessing of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Acts 15:1-6 • Psalm 121(122):1-5 • John 15:1-8
Proper of Saints: Matthew 13:54-58

Our faith is well and truly grounded, rooted and immersed in the soil of human history. Our faith is centred on the fundamental and overarching revelation that God, the Eternal Creator, entered human space and time and became a human being. He was revealed not as an idea or a concept but as a person who lived, breathed and moved among us – the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We could say that God united himself or, better still, exposed himself to the messiness and complexity of being both human and divine at the same time. This is a truly marvellous mystery of faith which we are encouraged through prayer to, if you will excuse the phrase, get our heads around.

Something else that we are called to get our heads around is the messiness, complexity and humanity of the early Church as the first believers worked out what it meant to be Christian. We can see from today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles that there were some nitty-gritty issues to face and some difficult problems to thrash out.

One of these was the need to understand whether the new faith was a fulfilment of Judaism, a

development of it or a separation from it. In one sense, it was all three. The early church leaders saw for themselves that God worked far outside their own thinking and perception and in doing so challenged them profoundly. The big question for the early Church was: should the male Gentile (non-Jewish) believers be subject to the ritual of circumcision? The Council of Jerusalem judged that this external ritual was no longer required because in Christ baptism was the way believers, regardless of heritage, entered the Christian life and it was so much greater than circumcision.

The gospel reveals a righteousness beyond the law. In fact, this righteousness superseded the law and ushered in the revelation that we are justified and made holy only by grace – not by our own merit or strength. This first Council was persuaded that God was doing something new, life-changing and momentous among them.

Lord, may we be open to the new things you are doing before our very eyes. Teach us to revere the tradition and the teaching of the Church, and always to seek to discern the voice of the Spirit and the signs of the times.

Acts 15:7-21 • Psalm 95(96):1-3, 10
John 15:9-11

Today we celebrate the feast-day of two great sons of the Church – SS Philip and James (son of Alphaeus). We know nothing of this James except his name, and of course the fact that Jesus chose him to be one of the twelve pillars of the New Israel, his Church. He is not the James of Acts, son of Clopas, ‘brother’ of Jesus and later bishop of Jerusalem and the traditional author of the Letter of James. James, son of Alphaeus, is also known as James the Lesser to avoid confusing him with the apostle James, the son of Zebedee, who is known as James the Greater.

Philip came from Bethsaida in Galilee, the same town as Peter and Andrew. Jesus called him directly, and he in turn sought out Nathanael and told him of the ‘one Moses wrote about’ (John 1:45 NIV). Like the other apostles, Philip took a long time coming to grasp who Jesus was. On one occasion, when Jesus saw the great multitude following him and wanted to give them food, he asked Philip where they should buy bread for the people to eat. Philip answered, ‘Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite’ (John 6:7 NIV). John’s story is not a

put-down of Philip. It was simply necessary for these men who were to be the foundation stones of the Church to see the clear distinction between our helplessness apart from God and the human ability to be a bearer of divine power by God’s gift.

On another occasion, we can almost hear the exasperation in Jesus’ voice. After Thomas had complained that they did not know where Jesus was going, Jesus said, ‘I am the way...If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.’ Then Philip said, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.’ Enough! Jesus answered, ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father’ (see John 14:6-9 NIV).

After the coming down of the Holy Spirit Philip and James were transformed men. The Holy Spirit had revealed to them who Jesus is. People are searching for the way, the truth and the life, and in Jesus of Nazareth this is finally and perfectly revealed.

SS Philip and James, pray for us.

*1 Corinthians 15:1-8 • Psalm 18(19):2-5
John 14:6-14*

One thing that we can be sure about as Christians is that we can’t escape blood: first the blood of Jesus and then the blood of the martyrs. How true are the words of the second-century theologian Tertullian that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. It is certainly the seed of the faith of those of us who today enjoy freedom to worship.

During the reign of Elizabeth I Catholics were ruthlessly and brutally persecuted for their faith. At that time Catholics could literally lose their lives for professing their faith. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews said, ‘the world was not worthy of them’ (11:37 NIV). It was during this bloody period that God raised up the forty martyrs, who were canonized by Pope Paul VI in 1970. The forty martyrs were previously celebrated on 25 October alongside the eighty-five beatified martyrs of the Reformation and the other martyrs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

This significant group of saints includes St Margaret Clitherow, a butcher’s wife from York, who, having become a Catholic at the age of eighteen, was arrested for harbouring a priest. She was crushed to death under a large

door loaded with weights. It also includes the Carthusian monks St John Haughton, St Robert Lawrence, St Augustine Webster and St Richard Reynolds, who were executed at Tyburn on 4 May 1535. Also martyred was St Cuthbert Mayne, a young man from Devon who was converted to Catholicism at St John’s College, Oxford, in the late 1500s. Fearing arrest Cuthbert fled first to Cornwall and then to the English College at Douai, where he was ordained a priest. On his return to the English mission he was discovered, tried at Launceston and sentenced to death by being hung, drawn and quartered.

These martyrs spilt their blood so that we might practise our faith. We pray for the same courage to stand up for our faith today. While we may not be martyred for our faith – thank God! – in order to witness to our faith, stand up for what we believe in and defend the Holy Catholic faith we need to ask God for the same courage and fortitude as these brave martyrs of Christ displayed.

Our Lady of the Precious Blood, pray for us. Our Lady, Queen of Martyrs, pray for us. Forty Martyrs of England, pray for us.

*Proper of Saints: Acts 7:55-60 • Psalm 30(31):3-8, 17-21 • Matthew 10:17-22
Proper of Season: Acts 16:1-10 • Psalm 99(100):1-3, 5 • John 15:18-21*

Two things dominate the human condition: war and fear. The opposite of war is peace; the opposite of fear is courage. Peace, as the bishops at the Second Vatican Council taught us, is not just the absence of war but an inner tranquillity, the fruit of knowing we are reconciled with God and justified by the blood of Christ. This peace transcends our understanding and can, if we let it, rule our hearts (Col. 3:15).

Jesus taught that two significant fruits of being his disciples would be peace and courage. We can know these two blessings in our lives in a real and tangible way. This must be true because Jesus promised: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid' (John 14:27). Well, that's the teaching and there's the promise, but what of the reality?

Even a cursory examination of our lives can bring to light not peace but an inner turmoil and not courage but timidity. So what is going on? Why is it like this? Jesus promises peace and tells us simply not to be afraid. Why isn't this good enough and why doesn't it work? Well, the truth is it is good enough and it does work –

however, we play a part. Our faith isn't magic: it's faith. The key is the Holy Spirit: 'But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you' (John 14:25).

But we can't be reminded of what Jesus said unless we read the Scriptures. So there is a way in which our peace and courage has a relationship with our reading of Scripture. The Spirit counsels us to immerse ourselves in his life-giving Word. Remember this: 'Bibles that are falling apart are often read by people whose lives are not.' Now, that does not mean that those who read the Scriptures do not give in to fear or at times lose their peace, but, because they remind themselves frequently of what Jesus said, the Spirit is able to lead them back to peace and give them courage.

Lord Jesus, peace, perfect peace is the gift of God above. Courage, perfect courage is the gift of God above. Lord, grant me these gifts in abundance.

*Acts 15:1-2, 22-29 • Psalm 66(67):2-8
Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23 • John 14:23-29*

How blessed we are to have two Popes! Who would have thought that such a thing was possible a few months ago? Of course, we only have one Pope as the Supreme Pontiff, but Pope Benedict is our Pope Emeritus and because of this we hold him in great affection and esteem as he lives out his life of meditation and prayer. One of the blessings of his papacy is that we are still living through the Year of Faith he declared last October and this time of grace is bringing many blessings as each of us grows and deepens our faith in the Risen Lord.

In preparing us for the Year of Faith Pope Benedict wrote the Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei* (Door of Faith), in which he drew our attention to the example of Lydia, whom we encounter in today's reading from Acts. For Pope Benedict Lydia is a perfect example of one who 'opened her heart' to the Lord and the gospel message.

The heart is a sacred place deep within us, the core of our being, if you like, where God speaks to us personally and intimately. It is here in our hearts that authentic change and conversion occur. The Holy Spirit speaks to our heart and moves us to believe and confess with our lips that Jesus Christ is

Lord. *Porta Fidei* says: 'The heart indicates that the first act by which we come to faith is God's gift' (para. 10). So there is a close and intimate relationship between our hearts and our faith.

However, one of the things about our hearts is that they can become hard and calloused: resistant to change, slow to repent. It is the warmth and fire of the Holy Spirit that melts our hearts, making us shed tears of repentance and draw closer to God. We need to guard our hearts against this hardness and co-operate with the Holy Spirit so that we are believers with soft hearts towards God, kind hearts towards others and an open heart towards our own sin and failures. A soft, kind and open heart prays with conviction and authenticity: 'Lord, have mercy upon me a sinner.' This is the heart of the true believer and in this Year of Faith we ask God to give us such a heart.

Lord, purify my heart. Make me ever true to you and your teaching but above all soften my heart, making it humble and repentant.

*Acts 16:11-15 • Psalm 149:1-6, 9
John 15:26-16:4*

The Acts of the Apostles is perhaps the most action-packed, fast-moving, thrilling and exciting adventure in the entire Bible. It is a 'hold onto your seat' kind of ride (so to speak). If only Hollywood or the British Film Institute could be persuaded to make a movie of it – it would be as hugely successful as Mel Gibson's brilliant *The Passion of the Christ*.

The story of God's intervention in human history is, as we know, the greatest story ever told. Perhaps every Vocations Director in the world should arrange for a copy of Acts to be given to every seminarian and every candidate for the diaconate, to show them the exciting and wonderful life to which they are called. Or how about this for another idea? Perhaps every parish priest in the world should give each of his parishioners a copy of this fantastic book and invite them to read it during the season of Eastertide. By God, there would be a revolution as the fire of the gospel burnt in people's hearts.

Now, of course, those of a more cynical bent will say, as many do, sadly especially clergy: 'The happenings recorded in the Acts of the Apostles were given to get the Church on its way – we can't expect the Church to be like this

today.' Maybe they are right, for in most parishes we don't tend to see amazing signs, miracles and wonders of the kind we find in Luke's masterpiece. That is not to say that we don't see small miracles and great works of God but let's talk early church miracles – powerful conversions, amazing acts and wonders, showing how God intervenes directly in human history. You can't get more of an intervention than a jail being shaken to its very core by an earthquake and the prison warden being led to conversion followed by baptism. Nevertheless, each conversion, each act of the Spirit, each movement of God is a dramatic and powerful intervention by him.

Perhaps God doesn't intervene in our lives more because we don't desire it or long for it or more importantly pray for it. Be assured of this, however: God is a God of intervention, a God who enters human history, immerses himself in our condition and understands our wants, our needs and our prayers.

Father, we praise your name for the way your gospel and your Spirit transform our lives, our families, our workplaces and our culture.

Acts 16:22-34 • Psalm 137(138):1-3, 7-8
John 16:5-11

The apostle Paul was an irrepressible evangelist. He simply could not be silenced. Many tried to do so by force, by violence and by calumny, but this master of evangelism resisted all attempts to crush or defeat him. Paul was the Church's greatest evangelist and he shows us how to give away our faith. What is interesting about him is that he did not miss an opportunity to do so, and in today's reading from Acts we are given a kind of masterclass on how to fulfil our vocation.

Paul's first strategy when he reached out to the men of the Areopagus (a gathering of the intellectual elite of the city of Athens) was to stir up questions in their minds (v. 20). Questions are catalysts which set the mind thinking and reasoning and probing. Why were we created? What is the meaning of life? What happens when we die? Is there a God? Who was Jesus? Why did Jesus die on the cross?

Evangelism begins in the human heart the moment these questions are pondered and considered. The problem so often is that they are not even asked. Paul demonstrates, the task of the evangelist is to promote this wondering, this examination and this analysis.

Second, Paul acknowledged the traditions and culture of his audience. We must do the same. We must respect people's backgrounds and cultures and try to understand them. Furthermore, we must love the people with whom we are seeking to share the gospel – without love in our hearts evangelism is impossible. Third, Paul presented the gospel message with grace, eloquence, wisdom and sensitivity. There can be no evangelization unless the promises of Christ are proclaimed, unless the message of repentance and conversion is held out.

The final quality we see in Paul is that he was not ashamed of the gospel. The truth is that while we aren't ashamed or shy about the social action elements of proclaiming the gospel or standing up for the human rights of others, etc., we can be very reluctant to open our mouths and speak about what we believe. To not be ashamed of the gospel is to talk about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the sacraments of the Church, forgiveness and reconciliation, and allow others to see our joy, hope and love in the Lord.

Lord, may I always be prepared to share my faith, in season, out of season.

Acts 17:15, 22-18:1 • Psalm 148:1-2, 11-14
John 16:12-15

The Encyclical Letter *Porta Fidei* proclaims: 'In rediscovering [God's love] each day, the missionary commitment of believers attains force and vigour that never fade away' (para. 7). Luke tells us that 'Every Sabbath [Paul] reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks' (v. 4 NIV). In other words, Paul was committed to selling and marketing the gospel. Of course, some people might be offended by this idea – the gospel is after all not a commodity but a message. But that is precisely what many organizations do: they sell and market a message. Their message may be that a certain bank is the way, or that a chocolate bar is the truth, or that their holiday company is the life. The message we proclaim is that Jesus Christ, God made man, is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6).

We tend to think that bishops, priests, deacons and religious are the gospel salespeople. It is their job to teach and proclaim the gospel – our job is to get on with our lives in the world. This, however, is a wrong way of thinking, which by God's grace needs to change. Paul stayed in the city of Corinth for eighteen months, preaching, teaching and proclaiming the word

of God. He wanted to persuade as many as he could that Jesus was the Son of God.

Everybody has the right to hear the gospel. We need to share our faith with real and genuine respect for the people we are speaking with. We need to find creative but also persuasive ways to help people work through their doubts and questions about the gospel. For example, if someone is sincere in seeking God you could invite them to make this prayer: 'Dear God, I am not sure I believe in you but I promise to read parts of the New Testament, especially the Gospels, and ask you to reveal yourself to me.' God promises that those who seek him will find him. Surely God will help us win others to Christ and we must pray that people will be open to hearing and responding to God's voice.

Lord, by the power of your Spirit and strength of your grace, help me not to give in to fear or be overwhelmed by the task of evangelizing and sharing my faith.

Acts 18:1-8 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

John 16:16-20

How clearly do you hear the Holy Spirit speaking to you? The truth is that most of us don't hear the Holy Spirit's voice as clearly as we should. This isn't because we are resisting this grace but has more to do with us not practising it. Does the idea that we need to practise grace sound rather strange to you? What does this mean?

Well, just as we need to practise the presence of God as we move through our day, so too we need to practise hearing God speak to us. We need to recognize the voice of the Shepherd. Some may say that to expect God to speak to us is arrogant and shows we have too high a sense of our own importance! On the contrary! In fact, those who believe the Holy Spirit can speak to them are simply responding to the grace of their baptism.

So how do we learn to recognize the Spirit speaking to us? We can learn from seeing how the Spirit spoke to Paul. For instance, when Paul was in Corinth, the Spirit said to him: 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city' (vv. 9-10). How incredible that the Holy Spirit should be almost teaming up with

Paul! They were working together strategically to win souls for Christ.

God is urging us also not to be afraid and not to keep silent but to keep witnessing because there are many people on God's side in our village, town or city. If we are serious about sharing our faith, how about putting this idea into practice? When you get up tomorrow, say to God, 'Lord, show me whom you want me to share my faith with today. In fact, Lord, if you create an opportunity for me, I will witness as to why I have the hope and joy that I have.' Of course, we must be careful what we pray for because, if we have faith, God the Holy Spirit will create just this kind of opportunity for us!

Lord, grant me a new confidence in the power of the gospel, especially the way faith and reason work together in harmony and symphony, leading us to the truth.

Acts 18:9-18 • Psalm 46(47):2-7

John 16:20-23

Luke tells us that Apollos knew only the baptism of John. This means that his baptism, his immersion, was only for repentance. Nevertheless, there is not a bishop or parish priest in the land who would not want Apollos in their parish – despite having only received the baptism of John he had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures, he spoke about God with great fervour and he taught about Jesus accurately. He was also remarkably bold and courageous. By all accounts Apollos was leading an exemplary life and clearly was called to be an evangelist.

What is remarkable then is that Priscilla and Aquila (good friends of Paul) invited Apollos back to their home in order to teach him the way of God more adequately (v. 26). We are not told what this entailed and it would appear that after this he went on doing pretty much what he was doing before, proclaiming the gospel and engaging in public debate to show from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

So what was missing in Apollos' life? What did Priscilla and Aquila discern was lacking and needed to change? John's baptism for repentance was only the first stage in the process of conversion: full conversion always involves receiving

the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Apollos was like a car without a full tank of petrol. He needed to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. We receive the fullness of the Spirit at baptism and a further strengthening of the Spirit when the bishop anoints us with oil and prays for us to receive the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Spirit is what makes all the difference to our living the Christian life. Those who live in the Spirit move in the Spirit, think with the Spirit and are led by the Spirit. This is not an outlandish or unusual way to think: this is the normal Christian life. Atheists and those who oppose the Christian life often say that they don't need a crutch or a support in life because they rely on themselves. Christians acknowledge humbly and simply that they need God and understand that he has sent them a Counsellor, a Friend and an Advocate in the Person of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Come, Holy Spirit, renew and refresh these dry bones and raise me up to live out my days in total dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

Acts 18:23-28 • Psalm 46(47):2-3, 8-10

John 16:23-28

The Christian faith is rooted in the revelation of God's intervention in human history. The times when God has intervened in human history have become the central doctrines which form the cornerstone, the bedrock of our faith. They are the incarnation, the resurrection, the ascension and the final one, which we look forward to, the second coming. There is a symphony and interlocking of these truths which constitute the mystery of faith we live and celebrate. Today we focus on Jesus' penultimate intervention: his ascension into heaven.

There is a very close correlation between Jesus' ascension and his return, his second coming. We believe that Christ will come again. Jesus himself promised this and it has been the hope of Christians from the very beginning. As the Lord ascended into heaven the angels announced: 'This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). There is a way in which on this holy feast we celebrate and look forward to the future of humanity. The blessed hope of the Church is that we will be redeemed body and soul. On the last day our bodies will be reunited with our souls and we

will enjoy forever the beatific vision – the sight of God, holy, beloved and adored. In this new reality we will enjoy the eternal bliss of being in God's presence for eternity.

Today, then, we celebrate with joy and confidence our future destiny: Christ in us the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). Jesus' ascension gives us, if you like, a glimpse into our future destiny. We don't often admit it but there is within each of us a desire and longing for permanence and a sense of not quite belonging on earth, a sense that our future lies beyond the grave. We resist the darkness that death is the end and cling to the hope of eternal life. The feast of the Ascension is an opportunity for us to deepen this understanding and appreciate in a new way that God is calling us to live with him forever and become partakers in the divine nature.

Lord, this holy feast of the Ascension declares that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Teach me to hold close to my heart the wonderful truth that my future destiny is to live forever in your kingdom.

Acts 1:1-11 • Psalm 46(47):2-3, 6-9

Hebrews 9:24-28; 10:19-23 • Luke 24:46-53

We can sometimes be like the disciples at Ephesus who said to Paul, 'we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit' (v. 2). In fact, we can live our lives as if there is no Holy Spirit. We do this when we rely on our own strength and ability. We can forget that in the sacrament of baptism we received the fullness of God's Spirit and in the sacrament of confirmation we received a special anointing of the Holy Spirit, a strengthening or fortifying, if you like, enabling us to witness with power, confidence and authority.

There is a real problem here and it has to do with a spiritual/secular divide. We understand readily enough that when we go to church and celebrate Mass we do holy things: we pray, we kneel, we recite the Creed and supremely we receive the Eucharist. But the minute or even second we leave church we figure we are out in the real world and need to get on with our lives. It's as if we have two different people living in us – the one that goes to church and the one that gets on with daily living.

Yet the fact is that the Holy Spirit was given to us to help us live our lives in the real world. He actually lives in us. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. We need to undergo

a kind of spiritual revolution or Holy-Spirit-led personal revolution whereby we come to understand that we can turn to, trust in and rely on him to help us live our lives every minute of every day.

Sadly, this lack of reliance upon the Holy Spirit can be seen in many Church ventures or events. Shocking as this may seem it is true. The Holy Spirit is often the last person invited to a committee or church function. We adopt the kind of stoic attitude that says: 'We just need to get on with the job, and use our heads and the talents God has given us.' Well, it is true that we do need to press on and use our God-given talents, but God never intended us to do his work in our own strength – only in his.

Lord, help me to start a revolution: first, in my own life, by calling upon the Spirit and, second, in my parish by calling upon the Spirit in living out our communal vocation.

Acts 19:1-8 • Psalm 67(68):2-7

John 16:29-33

We are rightly shocked by the scandals hitting the Church today – be it the child abuse that has shaken us all to the core, or the financial impropriety that is a terrible abuse of position, or the abuse of power that can occur through emotionally immature clergy or lay people inflicting all manner of hurt and offence on those who get caught up in their power plays. But the tragic truth is that throughout history the Church has been hit by scandal.

The classic example of this was Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord. Yet it is also worth bearing in mind that Peter too betrayed his Lord – the difference being that the fisherman repented of his sin. In truth we don't know if Judas repented. However, since we know that he took his own life (Matt. 27:5), it is likely that the balance of his mind was disturbed. Judas's eternal destiny has often been a point of discussion, but the Church in her wisdom has always declined to pronounce on who is in hell – because all judgement belongs to the merciful God.

In the early days following Jesus' ascension steps were taken by the eleven remaining disciples to choose a replacement to take over Judas's apostolic ministry. Two men, Justus

and Matthias, were put forward for election to the College of the Apostles, and, after prayer and the casting of lots, Matthias was chosen. We are celebrating his feast day today.

Whoever we are – bishop, priest, deacon, religious or lay person – like Matthias we are called to be a confident witness to the resurrection. This central truth is at the core of our faith because, if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then faith is futile (1 Cor. 15:14). The Holy Spirit desires to make this truth burn in our hearts.

Why don't you resolve this week to share with someone – a member of your family, a neighbour or work colleague – the reason you believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? To do this, we need the help and wisdom of the Spirit. The signs of the resurrection were an empty tomb and transformed lives – previously cowed, timid and uneducated men were prepared to stake their lives on the truth that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead.

Hallelujah, Christ is risen!

Acts 1:15-17, 20-26 • Psalm 112(113):1-8

John 15:9-17

Our largely urban society has lost its connection with the role of the shepherd, but nevertheless we understand that the shepherd guards and protects the sheep and ensures that they have good pastureland. Paul showed by his life that he had all the qualities of a good shepherd of God's people. He was constantly concerned about and praying for those in his charge. He was acutely aware that faith could be undermined, shipwrecked and taken off course, and warned the elders of the church at Ephesus that 'savage wolves' would try and distort the truth of the gospel and so they must be on their guard. This is strong language but it reveals clearly how passionately protective Paul felt towards the believers in his care.

Who or what are the 'savage wolves' among us today? Perhaps they are ways of thinking and philosophies which go against the gospel and undermine faith. There are many of these at work in our contemporary world. For example, we have the wolf of relativism. This is a way of thinking which posits that there is no moral right or wrong, that truth is relative – it is not a sacred reality but a shifting sand. Another 'wolf' is secularism, which drives faith and religion to

the margins of thinking. Secularism is a bedfellow of militant atheism, which is strident and aggressive towards those with any faith but especially towards those of Christian faith.

In today's perilous and challenging times we need good shepherds who will keep vigilant watch over God's people and help them to discern his voice; leaders who adhere to Scripture and to the teaching of the Church faithfully and teach with confidence, conviction and authority. This type of caring, committed and proactive leadership is also needed in our homes, our schools and our communities. We need diligent and loving parents, teachers and youth workers who are prepared to go the extra mile to take great care of those entrusted to them. They do this by good example, sound teaching and by leading them to the Good Shepherd, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Lord, help us to stand firm in faith, relying on the Spirit and the teaching of the Church to guide us and keep us on the right path. Help us to be on our guard and to look out for the weak and vulnerable amongst us.

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

In the Acts of the Apostles the apostles display a remarkable ability to testify to Jesus with great courage and boldness. This is especially true in the case of the apostle Paul. But it is a mistake to think that this was due to a special charism given to him.

We have received the same Holy Spirit as Paul and we too can learn to witness and testify with the same boldness and clarity. Jesus promised that in situations where we might feel we would lack the wisdom or clarity the words would be given to us to speak about him. Furthermore, in these situations we would know the Spirit of God the Father speaking through us (Matt. 10:19-20).

Despite being kicked and punched in the mouth Paul knew exactly what to say and how to say it. We can find testifying to our faith difficult and challenging; we can be afraid of how people will react and what we will say. We need to learn to trust in the Lord and in the Spirit of the Father, who will speak through us and give us the grace and confidence to be convincing and authentic witnesses. Like Paul we can hear the Spirit say to us: 'Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem,

so you must bear witness also at Rome' (23:11).

We can sometimes feel a sense of embarrassment or awkwardness in talking to others about our faith. However, the Spirit is the One who helps us do so in an easy-going and natural way. The Spirit is also the One who creates the opportunity and opens up possibilities and situations for us to share our faith. People are a lot hungrier and a lot more eager to know about God than we often give them credit for. The Holy Spirit can change the way we think about this and can help us to learn to witness in a way which wins people over. Often it is about planting seeds: a word here, a proclamation of Jesus' Lordship there, a sharing of Jesus' teaching or an unpacking of one of his parables.

Lord, blessed are the feet of those who bring Good News. Help me never to be afraid to be a witness, a martyr, for the truth of the gospel, and lead me to those who are open to hearing about your saving grace.

Acts 22:30; 23:6-11 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5, 7-11
John 17:20-26

Paul was a Roman citizen and as such had certain rights conferred upon him by the Roman state – in essence, he had protected status and legal privileges under Roman law. Paul was, as we know, a deeply spiritual man, but he was also pragmatic and realistic. He was prepared to use everything at his disposal in order to ensure that he had the best possible platform from which to proclaim the gospel. Paul was totally and utterly irrepressible, and he was profoundly committed to witnessing to his faith before the great, the good and the powerful. Paul used everything and anything available to him to proclaim the gospel and we are called to do the same.

We live in a society and culture which is not that different from the one Paul lived in. Then as now Christian values were objected to, resisted and mocked both in the public square and also by governments. Despite our western civilization being founded upon the bedrock of the Christian faith there exists a dark agenda at work undermining and eroding Christian values, principles and influence at almost every level of society. It is as if the agenda is to drive the Christian faith to the very margins,

the outskirts of society, where it can no longer raise its voice and be heard.

We must take a stand and make our voice heard for the gospel of life and the truth of Jesus Christ and his Church. In the same way that Paul was a Roman citizen with certain rights, we are citizens of our own country and under the law we have certain rights and privileges. One of these is the right to be able to protest, to write to our MP and to object to legislation which we regard as threatening our Christian values.

We can be reluctant to be as proactive as this – worried perhaps of appearing extreme or not having the eloquence to explain or unpack our thinking. Don't be afraid to seek help from those with some experience – enlist the help of your parish priest or even your bishop. We can defend and present our faith without 'ranting' or coming across as extreme. The Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom, the courage and the words to be a witness for the truth of the gospel.

Lord, teach me not to be afraid, but to be bold and courageous and to be a passionate but winning defender of the faith.

Acts 25:13-21 • Psalm 102(103):1-2, 11-12, 19-20
John 21:15-19

Paul was perhaps the greatest Christian who has ever lived. He is a hero of the faith and stands alongside Peter as one of the most outstanding Christian leaders of all time. In fact, we suggest that every Christian, by definition of simply being a Christian, is called to have a special regard for Paul.

Of course, such a view can be unpopular today as he is often blamed or accused by those both within and outside the Church of being responsible for many wrongs and woes: he is accused of getting it wrong about sex; he is accused of having a low opinion of women; he is accused of being homophobic; and he is accused of having failed to condemn slavery. To top it all, people say that his teaching is too deep and complex to understand. Nothing could, however, be further from the truth because, although he could not have known it, his letters are part of the canon of Scripture. In short, they are the inspired Word of God. Paul was neither homophobic nor a misogynist but one who gave his entire life to love and serve his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We join him today under house arrest – one of the privileges of being a Roman citizen! Despite this infringement of his freedom

he continued to preach the gospel. The Bible does not tell us how Paul died, but tradition tells us that he was beheaded (another so-called privilege of being a Roman citizen!) and that his tomb is located in the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls in Rome. We owe Paul a great debt of gratitude for his selfless laying down of his life in preaching and proclaiming the gospel.

We in turn could dedicate our lives to reading and studying his writings, which make up so much of the New Testament. He leads us to penetrate ever more deeply the mystery of Christ. It was Pope Benedict who called for a year dedicated to Paul and also this Year of Faith which we are still living through. Paul is the apostle of faith: a man intoxicated and full of God's love with a driving passion to share his faith and win others for Christ.

Lord, as we stand on the eve of the great feast of Pentecost, may your Spirit come down upon us so that we may no longer live for ourselves but for Christ who died for us.

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

Today we celebrate one of the key feast-days in the liturgical cycle, alongside Christmas Day (the incarnation), Good Friday (the cross) and Easter Sunday (the resurrection). Today we celebrate Pentecost, the birth of the Church.

The first believers were in Jerusalem awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit – the gift from on high which Jesus had promised. It is sobering and noteworthy to realize that, until the coming of the Spirit and despite having witnessed the Risen and Glorified Lord, the apostles remained afraid and impotent. They had the message but lacked the power. To use an analogy, they had the car but didn't have the petrol. The car was, to develop the analogy further, parked in the garage and hadn't yet been taken out onto the road. The pouring out of the Spirit on the feast of Pentecost is, then, a vital, nay crucial ingredient in the birth and life of the Church. For on that day an event happened which not only changed the lives of those gathered in the Upper Room but changed the world forever.

The Day of Pentecost was, if we can express it like this, a naked outpouring of the Spirit of God. By this we mean that the Spirit was not

ministered through the institution of the Church in the sacraments and through the mediation of a priest but rather came down from above and revealed himself – and, my, did the sparks fly! Even a superficial reading of the account of the event in Acts highlights many signs, wonders and manifestations we find strange and even 'off the wall', so to speak: the blowing of a violent wind, tongues of fire, people speaking in tongues and being accused of being drunk at only 9 o'clock in the morning (2:15).

Such things probably won't happen at Mass today but, if they do, you could be forgiven for thinking that it was the Holy Spirit at work again! However we interpret these things, what is clear is that after Pentecost the apostles were transformed men. We can expect the Spirit to transform us too. We cannot box the Spirit in or constrain or limit the work of God because the wind of the Spirit blows where it wills. We pray for a new Pentecost, a new outpouring of the Spirit upon ourselves and the whole Church.

Come, Holy Spirit, come and renew the face of the earth.

Acts 2:1-11 • Psalm 103(104):1, 24, 29-31, 34

1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13 or Romans 8:8-17 • John 20:19-23 or John 14:15-16, 23-26

Every age has needed wisdom but our era, the modern era, according to the bishops of the Second Vatican Council, needs wisdom more than ever before: 'Our era needs wisdom more than bygone ages if the discoveries made by humankind are to be further humanized. For the future of the world stands in peril unless wiser people are forthcoming. It should also be pointed out that many nations, poorer in economic goods, are quite rich in wisdom and can offer noteworthy advantages to others' (*Gaudium et Spes* 15). Isn't it an amazing observation that the future of the world is in peril unless wiser people come forward to lead and guide us?

The Wisdom books contained in the Old Testament of the Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures, provide us with a great source of wisdom. In the following days we will reflect on the teaching of one of these sages, Sirach, and the book we call Ecclesiasticus. Interestingly, Martin Luther and the Protestant reformers vetoed its inclusion in the canon of Scripture, but thankfully it was affirmed at the Council of Trent as the inspired Word of God and since then has been considered part of the canon. Today we sit at the feet of the sage and learn from him.

How do we get wisdom? How do we live wise and prudent lives? The key to wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Ecclus. 1:12) and we learn to fear the Lord by acknowledging God as God. This is the basic message of today's reading. We learn that the wise bow down before God and recognize him as the source of wisdom and light. The sage proclaims: 'All wisdom comes from the Lord' (v. 1). It is often said that with age comes wisdom, but this is not true. There are many elderly fools and wise young people, just as there are many wise elderly people and many young fools. Wisdom is a gift from God, a fruit of the Holy Spirit, but it also requires effort and application on our part. We cannot be wise unless we pray, read the Scriptures and study the teaching of the Church. We cannot be wise unless we humbly go to God for wisdom. God is the source and the fount of wisdom.

Lord, to all who ask you for the grace and gift of wisdom you give generously without finding fault. I need your wisdom to live a wise life.

Ecclesiasticus 1:1-10 • Psalm 92(93):1-2, 5

Mark 9:14-29

Here's the thing about following God: bad, difficult, challenging, terrible and sometimes tragic events and situations can overwhelm and impact our lives. There can be a naive assumption that bad things don't happen to good people but only to bad people. In the cold light of day we know this is nonsense, but it can be an undercurrent in our thinking and a reason why, when horrible and awful events and situations overtake us, we give in to despair and become angry with God.

Wanting to spare us this heartbreak, the sage offers us the benefit of his wisdom – the wisdom of the inspired Word of God. He is under no illusion that if we set out to serve the Lord we need to prepare ourselves for trials and hardship. We could say that it comes with the territory. He counsels a resignation to God's will and an acceptance of all that comes our way, sure in the knowledge that God is with us and that he is not vindictive or uncaring but rather full of compassion and loving kindness, and in our time of distress gives us strength and salvation.

Of course, in the heat of battle, when our trials are intense or debilitating, we can find ourselves

giving in to the temptation to think that God does not care and that it makes no difference whether we follow God or not, whether we do the right thing or not. In the New Testament, especially in the Letter of James, we see a radical approach to trials and hardship – we could call this the logic of the kingdom. In his letter to Christians who were undergoing intense persecution, James writes: 'Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials' (1:2). This is the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Suffering of any kind, when approached and embraced correctly, in the power of the Spirit, builds our character, producing the godly quality of perseverance in us. Interestingly, James counsels his readers to ask God for wisdom because in the midst of our suffering and hardship this is clearly what we need more than anything else: 'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him' (1:5).

Lord, in faith I ask for the gift of wisdom, without doubting but full of hope and joy that you give good gifts to your children.

*Ecclesiasticus 2:1-11 • Psalm 36(37):3-4, 18-19, 27-28, 39-40
Mark 9:30-37*

Many dedicate their lives to acquiring knowledge and information. We esteem professors and those who possess PhDs and are doctors of one kind or another – medical or academic. Learning and expertise has always impressed and, of course, rightly so. We rely on experts with a competency borne of many years of devoted study and application. However, we don't need academic qualifications to get into the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, Paul, who without doubt was a leading intellectual of his day, wisely observed that 'knowledge puffs up but love builds up' (1 Cor. 8:1).

Sadly, knowledge can make those who possess it feel superior to others and relate in a rather aloof manner. They can be curt and sharp with those they consider their inferiors and intolerant of mistakes or slowness. These qualities are particularly unpleasant in churchmen who carry their learning rather 'heavily' so that no one is in any doubt of their academic prowess. This can often be the case with clergy who were members of a profession before entering the priesthood. They carry their former profession rather loudly and are keen that people are in no doubt that they had prestige and status

before entering the religious life. Indeed, the same sense of self-importance can overflow into the religious life. So we can agree with Paul that knowledge puffs up but love builds up. We can also agree with Sirach that far better than mere knowledge or information is wisdom and wisdom is God's gift to all who seek this grace and blessing.

So how do we set about getting wisdom? Sirach gives us the key: 'Whoever loves [wisdom] loves life, and those who seek her early will be filled with joy' (v. 12). Prayer, then, is the gateway into wisdom, for it is in sitting at the Lord's feet in quiet prayer and adoration that wisdom is imparted to us. The wisdom we seek comes from the grace of revelation – insight into the mystery of God. And this true wisdom is given by God to the poor, the humble and the needy, not the high, mighty and arrogant. As the great English poet William Wordsworth said, 'Wisdom is oftentimes nearer when we stoop than when we soar.'

'Let your old age be childlike, and your childhood like old age; that is, so that neither may your wisdom be with pride nor your humility without wisdom.' (St Augustine)

*Ecclesiasticus 4:11-19 • Psalm 118(119):165, 168, 171-175
Mark 9:38-40*

The book of Ecclesiasticus contains the wisdom of the ages and speaks a powerful word to us. Today the sage addresses an attitude of the heart which we could call 'presumption'. It is a certain disposition of the heart which makes an assumption about God and inclines to cling to an illusion and not the truth. The sage, like an expert psychiatrist, gets to the inner thoughts of the heart and exposes them. Today's reading provides an excellent examination of conscience for us to see what traps we may fall into in the course of our day. Do you ever find yourself thinking, 'I have enough' (v. 1). In a way, this thought is at the very heart of the reason we fell away from God.

The sage makes a remarkable and incisive diagnosis about the inner workings of our hearts, identifying several areas of presumption. A major one is the presumption of riches and wealth and what they secure. Money impresses and, of course, there is a way in which riches, wealth and money compound our sense of self-sufficiency.

Another is our desire to do our own thing in life. We say, 'Who will have power over me?' or 'I sinned and what happened to me?' We find

it hard to be accountable to God; we resist, we fight, we object and we are often deluded in this respect, for we reap what we sow.

Perhaps our greatest area of presumption is taking God's mercy and forgiveness for granted. God is infinitely merciful and forgiving, but when we presume upon his mercy and forgiveness we adopt a position of pride and arrogance, and God resists the proud of heart but gives grace to the humble.

Learning how to live well before God and others is a life-long challenge. We learn from the wisdom writings that what is required is a certain attitude of heart or mind which predisposes us to walk with God and serve others. Take to heart the teaching of the wise offered to us today. Appropriate it, make it your own and commit yourself to live by the wisdom of the Spirit, the wisdom of the ages.

Lord, may I remain firm in my convictions and be consistent in my speech. Make me always ready to listen and to know how to wait before I reply. In short, teach me to listen to the Spirit and learn the art of wisdom.

Ecclesiasticus 5:1-8 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6

Mark 9:41-50

How good are you at making friends? How developed or finely tuned are your skills of relating and working alongside others? We all have different personalities and characters; we have all had different experiences which have contributed to form us into the person we are today. Thankfully, we are all different – each of us has a unique set of fingerprints and a unique DNA. That said, we all need to learn to relate to other people and get on with those we live with and work alongside. We all need, if you will forgive this idea, to know how to win friends and influence people.

One of the scandals of Church life today is that Christians are often not that much better at relating to each other than non-Christians. In fact, if you get close to the underbelly of most parishes or Church organizations, you discover all manner of not very enlightening ways of relating with each other. Some years ago a special campaign was launched to make our parishes places of welcome and friendship, but still today most can actually be really quite unwelcoming and most clergy not especially strong on social graces or the art of making people feel embraced, accepted and welcomed. Before we get inundated

with letters refuting this, of course, there are many notable exceptions amongst both clergy and parishes!

One way to begin to change this situation is by studying today's first reading closely, because the sage, true to form, holds out wisdom and insight into precisely this question of how to win friends and influence people. The truth is that we have to cultivate a kind of 'genius for friendship' and learn the art of 'getting along', and the sage identifies a key principle: 'Pleasant speech multiplies friends, and a gracious tongue multiplies courtesies' (v. 5 NRSV). Our tongues can cause great hurt and wounds, and so for the sage the beginning of wisdom and friendship is the ability to control our tongues – to use them to build others up, and offer hope and consolation, not to gossip, complain and run others down. This we can only do by God's grace and by examining our conscience and repenting of our sin.

Lord God, by the grace of your Holy Spirit teach me to be a friend and ally to all I meet. Give me the grace of a gentle tongue which brings healing and reconciliation, not hurt and rancour.

Ecclesiasticus 6:5-17 • Psalm 118(119):12, 16, 18, 27, 34-35

Mark 10:1-12

Today we celebrate the feast of one of England's greatest saints: St Bede, known as the Venerable Bede. He was born in Monkton, Jarrow, in the year 673 AD. At the age of seven he was sent to live at St Peter's Monastery in Wearmouth and later moved to the new foundation of St Paul in Jarrow. He remained there for the rest of his life, travelling no further than Hexham, Lindisfarne and York.

St Bede's scholarship was renowned throughout Europe. St Boniface wrote that he 'shone forth as a lantern in the Church'. St Bede himself tells us that he always 'took delight' in learning and teaching. His most famous work is his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Still widely read, the work is one of the most important primary sources for the history of Anglo-Saxon England. His other works include scriptural commentaries, two Lives of St Cuthbert, books on chronology and nature, and the first martyrology. He was the first writer to adopt the AD dating system. A touching account of St Bede's death in 735 AD exists in a letter by Cuthbert, who became Abbot of Jarrow. He is buried in Durham Cathedral. St Bede was a wise man.

He lived a life similar to the one outlined by the sage in today's first reading. He devoted his life to loving God and serving his neighbour. Sirach could have been describing St Bede when he wrote: 'He bestowed knowledge upon them, and allotted to them the law of life' (v. 11). St Bede received many graces of revelation from the Lord. He once prayed: 'And I pray thee, loving Jesus, that as thou hast graciously given me to drink in with delight the words of thy knowledge, so thou wouldst mercifully grant me to attain one day to thee, the fountain of all wisdom, and to appear forever before thy face.'

St Bede loved the Scriptures and the Divine Office, and gave his life wholeheartedly to the adventure of entering ever more deeply into the mystery of God. He said: 'I have devoted my energies to the study of the Scriptures, observing monastic discipline, and singing the daily services in church; study, teaching and writing have always been my delight.'

'Christ is the morning star, who when the night. Of this world is past brings to his saints. The promise of the light of life and opens everlasting day.' (St Bede).

Ecclesiasticus 17:1-15 • Psalm 102(103):13-18
Mark 10:13-16

It is common knowledge that many clergy struggle to prepare a sermon for Trinity Sunday. It is as if they collectively throw their hands up and say in frustration: 'The Trinity – it's a complete mystery to me.' Well, I guess that is the point: the Holy and Blessed Trinity is a mystery which is beyond the human mind to fathom. Where do you start? Where do you end? God has no beginning and no end. Which is why, as Sirach the sage would say, we need 'revealed knowledge'.

Although we speak of the mystery of the Trinity, the word 'mystery' does not imply that nothing can be said. Consider this wisdom and light from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: '[The Trinity] is the source of the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the 'hierarchy of truths' (para. 234).

It is, however, a truth that cannot be accessed by reason alone. It is hidden in God and could not be known unless revealed by God. Although the Trinity was hinted at in creation and in Israel's history, this mystery only became explicit with the incarnation of God's Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

The teaching quoted earlier from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides us with a golden key to open up our understanding of Scripture: it encourages us to see all its teaching in the light and context of the Trinity. Through the Scriptures God progressively and gradually reveals that he is Three Persons in One God, culminating in the sending of his One and Only Son. The secret kept hidden for many ages is that God is God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. When we make the sign of the cross we proclaim our faith in God as Trinity: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

There can be no doubt that the Church's greatest minds have grappled with the revelation of the Trinity. The most important truth we need to grasp is that the Blessed Trinity is three divine Persons and we are called into a relationship with each one.

'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.'

Proverbs 8:22-31 • Psalm 8:4-9
Romans 5:1-5 • John 16:12-15

Luke is the only Gospel writer who records the appointing and anointing of seventy-two disciples to go and win souls for Christ (v. 1). The Lord's words ring true for every time and every generation: 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.' Jesus spoke these words in the context of the rural society in which he lived. We now need to interpret and understand them in terms of our own age – an age of social media, Facebook, Twitter, texting, mobile phones, laptops, iPads, iPhones and so on. The world has changed but the need to hear the gospel proclaimed remains the same.

Historically, much to our shame, we have understood the idea of harvest-field and workers as referring primarily to vocations to the priestly or religious life. There is a mentality among Catholics in particular that the call to be a priest or a religious sister is the highest call and that the lay vocation matters less. This mentality has been hugely destructive and, frankly, is not just wrong but is sinful, because it denies the call of each and every one of us.

We are all called to be workers

in the harvest-field: in fact, lay people tend to be better placed to win people for Christ because of the opportunities afforded them by their workplaces and communities. Perhaps the role of the clergy in this sense is to encourage people to evangelize, and to give teaching and input about the basic gospel message, because in a very real sense this is what is missing in our evangelism. We don't always know how to proclaim the gospel – what the Church calls the 'initial proclamation' – and it is this that we need to become familiar with and competent at communicating.

This is why courses like Alpha are so popular because they help people get to grips with the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Proclamation of the gospel message often leads to either a first conversion in the case of those who have not been baptized, or a second conversion or new awakening in the case of those who have already been baptized but have lapsed from their faith for some reason.

St Augustine of Canterbury, pray for us. Apostle to the English, pray for us. Set our hearts aflame with the message of the gospel that we might win souls for Christ.

In the ancient pagan religions and indeed Judaism the idea of sacrifice to appease the deity was, and remains to this day, an important principle of their worship. However, in Psalm 40 the psalmist began to examine the idea that burnt offerings and sacrifices were less pleasing to God than a humble and contrite heart eager to do God's will. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews sees in the coming of Jesus the fulfilment of this psalm: 'Therefore when Christ came into the world he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am – it is written about me in your scroll – I have come to do your will, O God' (10:5 NIV). Jesus transformed our understanding of sacrifice and offerings.

We see in today's reading from Ecclesiasticus that, centuries earlier, the sage had already been enlightened by the Holy Spirit to explore and examine this principle. He would not have known it but he was pointing to the coming of Jesus. Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it, and he fulfilled it perfectly by dying on the cross. The truth is that God does demand

sacrifice but, ultimately, one holy and perfect sacrifice, the sacrifice of his Son, God made man, Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus' sacrifice on the cross we died with him and we rose with him. Now there is no longer any need for sacrifice, oblations or burnt offerings.

Jesus completely transformed and changed forever the way we approach God and the way we approach and relate to one another. The sacrifice we now offer God is the sacrifice of laying down our lives to live the life in the Spirit. This means loving and serving others practically and from the heart – being, in the words of the sage, the one who returns a kindness, gives alms, forsakes sin and is generous of heart (vv. 3, 4, 5, 10).

'The law that is perfect because it takes away all imperfections is charity, and you find it written with a strange beauty when you gaze at Jesus your Saviour stretched out like a sheet of parchment on the cross, inscribed with wounds, illustrated in his own blood. Where else is there a comparable book to read from?' (Jordan of Saxony)

One of the strange things about faith is that believers often think that God is easily aroused to anger or is cross with them if something bad happens in their lives. This way of thinking has more to do with superstition than revelation. For God has revealed himself both in the Hebrew Scriptures and supremely in the New Testament as the God of mercy, compassion and kindness. The truth is that we often have a wrong or distorted understanding of who God really is because we don't study and read the Scriptures enough. But the more we come to know God, the more in touch we become with God's mercy, compassion and pity for us personally, for the human race and for the human condition.

Interestingly, mercy is not necessarily the quality that we Christians are most known for. We can be associated more with a certain quickness to judge and condemn, and we are often caricatured in the media as being rather reactionary and prudishly indignant. Of course, like many words or caricatures spoken in jest, there is an element or trace of truth. Mercy belongs to God because mercy is a divine attribute. As the sage prays: 'Have mercy upon us, O

Lord, the God of all, and look upon us, and cause the fear of thee to fall upon all the nations' (vv. 1-2). Blessed Columba Marmion said once: 'It is not our perfection which is to dazzle God, who is surrounded by a myriad of angels. Nor is it our misery, our wretchedness avowed which draws down his mercy.' To know God then is to have a glimpse of his great compassion and mercy for every living thing. Perhaps the simple truth about holiness is that, the holier we become, the more aware we are of the mercy of God.

St John Vianney, who is the Patron Saint of parish priests and was one of the holiest men who ever lived, once said: 'Our sins are nothing but a grain of sand alongside the great mountain of the mercy of God.' In this Year of Faith we can all commit ourselves to growing in our understanding of God's great mercy and forgiveness and putting it into practice in our own lives. Why don't you practise shocking people with the depth of your mercy and forgiveness?

'The mercy of God may be found between the bridge and the stream.'
(St Augustine of Hippo)

Ecclesiasticus 36:1, 4-5, 10-17 • Psalm 78(79):8-13
Mark 10:32-45

Today the sage sings a hymn in praise of the beauty and the gift of God's creation. As Christians we identify within creation, the cosmos and the universe an order or symphony or intelligent design which we attribute to the good Creator. Militant atheists, however, prefer to attribute the beauty and order of creation to chance and randomness, with a fair bit of evolution and natural selection thrown in. Paul taught that God's existence can be seen in the beauty of the created world: 'Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse' (Rom. 1:20).

Of course, a problem today is that people love nature and the natural world but don't acknowledge God as the Creator. The great naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough – national treasure that he is – says that he doesn't have faith in God, but he wishes he could. It is amazing that a man who has dedicated his life to filming the natural world so powerfully cannot recognize the good Creator. St Augustine wrote about this age-old problem back in the fourth century:

'Thus does the world forget you, its Creator, and falls in love with what you have created instead of with you.' Of course, the probability of life originating by accident is comparable to the probability of the unabridged dictionary resulting from an explosion in a printing shop. At the heart of the desire to give God the praise and adoration he deserves as the Creator is the humble acknowledgement that we are mere creatures – we did not create ourselves. If God stopped thinking of us we would cease to exist.

Our task then is to grow, deepen and mature in our understanding of who God is. Blessed John Henry Newman said: 'We are not our own, any more than what we possess is our own. We did not make ourselves; we cannot be supreme over ourselves. We cannot be our own masters. We are God's property by creation, by redemption and by regeneration.' We learn today from the wisdom of the sage and give God glory and praise for the beauty of the created world and the wonderful dignity of humankind created in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26).

'I will now call to mind the works of the Lord, and will declare what I have seen.' (Ecclus. 42:1)

Ecclesiasticus 42:15-25 • Psalm 32(33):2-9
Mark 10:46-52

‘In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah’ (v. 39).

The feast of the Visitation recalls to us the following great truths and events: the visit of the Blessed Virgin Mary to her cousin Elizabeth shortly after the Annunciation; the cleansing of John the Baptist from original sin in the womb of his mother at the words of Our Lady’s greeting; Elizabeth’s proclaiming of Mary – under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – as Mother of God and ‘blessed among women’; and Mary’s singing of the sublime hymn the Magnificat (‘My soul doth magnify the Lord’), which has become a part of the daily official prayer of the Church. The Visitation is frequently depicted in art and was the central mystery of St Francis de Sales’ devotions. Today we salute her who in her womb bore the King of heaven and earth, the Creator of the world, the Son of the Eternal Father, the Sun of Justice.

Today’s feast is of medieval origin: it was kept by the Franciscan Order before 1263, and soon its observance spread throughout the entire Church. How many women, if they were expecting a child, would hurry over the hills on a visit of pure kindness? Rather

they would say they had a duty to themselves and to their unborn child which came before anything or anyone else. The Mother of God considered no such thing. Elizabeth was going to have a child too, and, although Mary’s own child was God, she could not forget Elizabeth’s need –almost incredible to us, but characteristic of her. She greeted her cousin Elizabeth, and at the sound of her voice John quickened in his mother’s womb and leapt for joy. Even before Jesus was born his presence gave life (cf. John 10:10).

Today read Luke 1:39-56 and meditate on the words of the Magnificat and the Hail Mary, two prayers from this feast. Today we are reminded to be charitable to our neighbours. Try to assist some mother (expectant or otherwise), visit the elderly or sick, make a dinner for someone, etc.

Almighty, ever-living God, you inspired the Blessed Virgin Mary, when she was carrying your Son, to visit Elizabeth. Grant that, always docile to the voice of the Spirit, we may, together with Our Lady, glorify your name.

Zephaniah 3:14-18 or Romans 12:9-16 • Isaiah 12:2-6

Luke 1:39-56
