

Writing more than one hundred years ago Bishop Ullathorne, the first Bishop of Birmingham, said: 'In this restless, ostentatious, loud-mouthed and self-commending age, the faithful believer has especial need of such a patron and example as the silent, patient, industrious and discreet St Joseph.' It seems that not a lot has changed in our society! Our culture is obsessed with wealth, consumerism and acquisition (in whatever form that may take), and we look to celebrities as role models and not the saints and heroes of faith. Today, however, we celebrate the feast-day of St Joseph, one of the towering figures of the Bible – towering because of his humility, faith and embrace of God's plan for his life. St Joseph is truly a model of peace, personal holiness and stability. We are invited today simply to meditate on his life and allow the Holy Spirit to show us how every believer walks in the shadow of this great saint of the Church.

All that we know about St Joseph is the little we glean about his life from the Gospel-writers. What is striking about him is his strength of character, his courage and his

willingness to do God's will. The great Pope John XXIII had a special devotion to St Joseph, as did Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict. It is as if through his intercession and presence St Joseph steers the Church through the ocean of time. He was at the helm of Mary's life; he is at the helm of the Church's life. Perhaps each of the popes saw in him one who understood the burden of office and the responsibility they must shoulder in leading and guiding the Church.

Today, ponder and reflect on the following words of insight and wisdom from Pope John XXIII: 'St Joseph was present discreetly yet actively, humbly yet with authority in the course of the Lord's birth and infancy. St Joseph said little but lived intensely. He does not back away from responsibility but provides an example of one who was always willing to do God's will. He is the perfect example of the man of prayer, the man of humility and the man of service.'

Lord God, teach me to imitate the hidden interior life of St Joseph, who dedicated his life to raising Jesus in such a humble and self-effacing way.

Acts 5:27-33 • Psalm 33(34):2, 9, 17-20 • John 3:31-36
Proper of Saints: Matthew 13:54-58

Today we focus on two giants of the Catholic Church: St Paul and St Athanasius. We do so through the light of the Scriptures and the wisdom of tradition. St Paul is the subject of our first reading and today we celebrate the feast-day of St Athanasius. What was striking about both these men was the quality of their conviction and courage. Both were called to speak out boldly on behalf of the gospel; both were called to display enormous courage in the face of intense opposition and persecution.

Paul was a man intoxicated with Christ. His mission in life was to proclaim and witness to Christ – whatever the cost, wherever it would take him, even unto death. The Spirit reassured Paul with these words: '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 the city' (Acts 18:9-10). This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. The beauty and the wisdom of the liturgy is that this same word from the Spirit was spoken to Athanasius and to everyone who stands up and proclaims the gospel. This word must burn in our hearts as it burnt in the hearts of Paul and Athanasius.

Athanasius was born in Alexandria in Egypt towards the end of the third century. Although little is known of his early years, it seems certain that Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, became his patron and took him into his home, where he employed him as his secretary. Athanasius later accompanied the bishop to the Council of Nicea (325). Gifted with a fine intellect and a lucid grasp of Christian revelation especially concerning the incarnation, he defended the true faith against the Arian heresy, which taught that Jesus was exceptional but not God. It is hard for us to appreciate just how severe the attack on the truth of the incarnation was at this Council. Without Alexander and Athanasius the world was in danger of losing sight of this key teaching of Christian revelation that Jesus is true God and true man, consubstantial with the Father, begotten and not made.

Lord Jesus, thank you for St Athanasius, who as a servant and defender of the truth was a great gift to the Church. May we too be bold and courageous in defending and witnessing to our faith.

Acts 5:34-42 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14
John 6:1-15

What is the Christian faith? Why do you go to church? Why do you believe? Questions, questions, questions! It is good to be always examining ourselves – our hearts and our motives – asking ourselves why we do the things that we do. Otherwise we do things simply out of duty (and before anybody writes in, duty is a good thing but it merely falls short, surely). At the heart of the Christian faith is a relationship: a dynamic and personal relationship with Jesus of Nazareth, who is risen from the dead. He is the Lord and the Creator, the Master and the King, and the One in whom the Christian revelation is rooted. It really is as simple as that.

We believe that Jesus of Nazareth is God made man. This, of course, is repulsive to Jews and heresy to Muslims. The Islamic faith recognizes Jesus as a great prophet; the Jewish faith regards him as a charlatan and imposter. The very notion or idea that God could become human is, to draw on language from the Council of Trent, anathema. However, if we break it down, if we just focus on the essentials, the proclamation that Jesus rose from the dead and

is the Lord transformed the world. This is the most revolutionary and transformative message the world has ever heard. If we follow Jesus we are following the world's greatest revolutionary, the world's greatest activist and the world's greatest human being – except Jesus was truly human but also truly God. No wonder we bow down and worship, for this is the only right and proper response.

Today, on the feast-day of two great evangelists SS Philip and James, the liturgy of the Word holds out to us a key Scripture which we would do well to commit to memory and to our hearts: 1 Corinthians 15:1-3, containing what is referred to as the kerygma, the core or central message of the gospel. It is this truth which has changed the world. In AD 56 Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth to remind them of this truth: Christ died for our sins, he rose on the third day and he will come again.

Lord, create in me a love for the kerygma, the basic gospel message. May it burn in my heart, penetrate my mind and light up my life, so that I, like SS Philip and James, may spread the gospel, the Good News.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8 • Psalm 18(19):2-5

John 14:6-14

The story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus is unique to Luke's Gospel. In fact, it contains the fullest post-resurrection account of Jesus' encounter with the disciples of all four Gospels. For Luke faith is a form of sight: seeing with fresh spiritual eyes (cf. Luke 9:45). This gift of new sight reaches its pinnacle when Jesus opens their eyes to understand the Scriptures which had spoken about him. Bear in mind, of course, that these Scriptures were from the Old Testament. Luke writes: 'And their eyes were opened and they recognized him...[T]hey said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?"' (vv. 31-32). Over two thousand years later we walk with the Lord along the road of our lives and on this journey he opens up the Scriptures for us too.

We are called, if you like, to be contemplatives: men and women who treasure and cherish the Word of God. For this is where God speaks to us in the most powerful way. Pope Gregory the Great said, 'The Bible is a letter from Almighty God to his creatures.' Therefore, if we want to find out the mind of

God, we must read the Bible and become increasingly familiar with the sacred text. Think of it this way: just as the Holy Spirit made the disciples' hearts burn, so too he will make ours burn with the light and flames of God's love. Because reading the Bible without love is simply a chore. Reading the Bible with love in our hearts is the way into a deeper understanding and knowledge of the love of God.

The bishops at the Second Vatican Council had hearts that burned with love for God's Word, and out of that love they recorded these compelling words which are still deeply relevant to the Church today: 'The Church has always venerated the divine scriptures just as it venerates the Body of the Lord, since from the table both of the Word of God and of the Body of Christ it unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the Bread of Life. It has always regarded the scriptures together with the sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so' (Dei verbum 21).

Lord, make my heart burn with the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:14, 22-23 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5, 7-11

1 Peter 1:17-21 • Luke 24:13-35

The quotation attributed to the second-century author Tertullian, 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church', is as true today as it was when he uttered it. Christians are still being persecuted in many countries around the world. The Church has always venerated the martyrs because they pay the ultimate price for their faith – the laying down of their lives.

When we think about the martyrs we can easily feel intimidated. They seem so utterly 'other' in terms of courage, faith and bravery that they tower over us, dwarfing our feeble efforts to live the Christian life. One story which exemplifies this perfectly is that of St Pancras, aged only fourteen when he was condemned to die in the bloody and relentless Diocletian persecution. He addressed the Emperor Diocletian directly, saying: 'In body I am a child but I bear a man's heart, and by the grace of my Master Jesus Christ, your threats seem as vain to me as this idol which stands before me.'

Rather than be overwhelmed or intimidated by the martyrs, we can be encouraged and uplifted by them. For we stand on the

shoulders of these incredible men and women of whom the world was not worthy. It was God who gave them the strength and courage they needed in order to face their ordeal, and he will give us strength and courage to stand up for our faith in a bold, confident and attractive way.

We could say that what we need today is an outpouring of the Spirit to make us prepared to die for our faith. This is why the cardinals of the Catholic Church wear red – it signifies their willingness, as apostles, to lay down their lives for the Church, the bride of Christ. St Stephen was a man on fire with the love of God and it was love that made him a martyr. This love is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, burning away our selfishness and narrow vision so that we can serve the living God. If God considers us worthy to suffer for his name, he will also equip us with every grace, blessing and spiritual gift to do so.

'God's love never imposes itself. It has to be discovered and welcomed. All God gives us is his love; and this love becomes tangible, a burning of the soul; it sets us on fire to the point of forgetting ourselves.'
(Brother Roger of Taizé)

Acts 6:8-15 • Psalm 118(119):23-30
John 6:22-29

In an extraordinary way the martyrdom of Stephen mirrored the death of his Lord and Master. Although the means of execution differed, the similarities in the manner of their death are, as Luke highlights, incredible and a study in and of itself. It was as if becoming like Jesus in his life, Stephen became like him in his death. As the life drained from his crucified body Jesus cried out to his Father to receive his spirit. In the same way, as his body was being pounded with stones, Stephen cried out: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (v. 59). Just as Jesus forgave his executioners, so did Stephen: 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (v. 60). Jesus set the royal standard of courageous suffering and poured out his Spirit, so that we could witness to God's love in the same way.

Through Stephen's witness we get a glimpse of the truth that this world is passing away. Through Stephen's witness we begin to understand that the holier we become, the more heavenly minded we also become. In other words we develop and cultivate a heavenly vision. It is as if Stephen had developed such a

clear understanding of the world beyond this world that, in those final moments, he could see it and almost touch it. 'But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven... and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God"' (vv. 55-56). It was this vision that gave him the strength and courage he needed.

We too are called to cultivate an eternal vision, a view of the world and our lives which understands that what matters most is our faith, and that no matter what struggles or hardships we face, they will pass. Over each of the three doorways into Milan's cathedral there is an inscription spanning each magnificent arch. The first reads, 'All that passes is but for a moment', the second reads, 'All that troubles is but for a moment', and the third and main entrance reads, 'Only that is important which is eternal.'

Lord Jesus, you are the reason to live and the reason to die. Help me to have an eternal vision which looks beyond this life to the life to come in the Father's home, where truth, joy and happiness reign.

Acts 7:51-8:1 • Psalm 30(31):3-4, 6-8, 17, 21
John 6:30-35

If we are to call a spade a spade, so to speak, and cut to the chase, it would be fair to say that Saul of Tarsus was without any shadow of a doubt an enemy of the Church. Some scholars suggest that so brutal was his quashing of the early believers that in a similar situation today the perpetrator would be indicted for crimes against humanity. We do not know how many killings he oversaw but he certainly oversaw the stoning of Stephen to death. What kind of man does this? What kind of self-belief or delusion do you have to cling to in order to put to death another human being?

Paul answers these questions himself: 'Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief' (1 Tim. 1:13 NIV). Bear in mind that this brutal and violent man (he said it) was also a Pharisee, part of the social elite of Israel and a devout and zealous Jew. He was a sort of thug but a cultured and refined one – small mercy! Yet the enemy of Christ, this vicious and cruel persecutor of God's people, became perhaps the greatest and most committed believer of all

time – no one could ever doubt his utter commitment to Christ and the transformation that occurred in him. The persecutor, however, in time became the persecuted. The suffering and trials poured out upon the first believers were truly terrible, moving Paul to write, 'we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things' (1 Cor. 4:13).

Today we thank God for the witness of Paul and of countless thousands upon thousands of men and women throughout history who have suffered for their faith in Christ. Most are lost to history: they died in anonymity but are dear and close to God. Refusing to be cowed or crushed they stood firm in faith. St Jerome said, 'The Church of Christ has been founded by shedding its own blood, not that of others. Persecutions have made it grow; martyrdoms have crowned it.' Today we salute them, we remember them, and we give thanks and praise to God for them.

Lord Jesus, they laid down their lives like grains on the earth, but you will raise them up on the last day, radiant and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Acts 8:1-8 • Psalm 65(66):1-7
John 6:35-40

Pope Francis is calling us to be Spirit-filled evangelizers. It is worth asking yourself the tough but honest question: 'Am I a Spirit-filled evangelizer?'

Most of us don't feel we are. The truth is we are embarrassed easily when talking about faith and reduce it to doing good works, and part of us wishes Pope Francis would go easy on the evangelism front! Catholics are good at many things – liturgy, service of the poor, building hospitals and reaching out to the marginalized. Clever clergy will point out that all these ministries are really evangelization and that the way evangelicals go about it isn't very Catholic and not what we do – you know, that 'Are you saved?' kind of approach. The funny thing is, try as hard as we might, we can't escape the fact that evangelism sooner or later involves us sharing with others about who Jesus is and what our hope in Christ means to us.

Evangelism also means being open to the Spirit – being led, directed and guided by him. We see a perfect and rather breathtaking example of this in today's reading. It is almost as if the Spirit hands Philip a map and co-ordinates to

locate the eunuch: 'Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza' (v. 26). He gives Philip very direct and specific instructions: 'Go up and join this chariot' (v. 29). This level of precision can make us uncomfortable – we don't tend to experience the Spirit in our lives saying, 'Go here', 'Go there' and so on. In our case it is more a feeling or an intuition. Guided by the Spirit, Philip comes upon the traveller at the very moment he is reading a passage from the book of Isaiah and is struggling to understand its meaning. Seizing the opportunity, the apostle is able to unpack the Scriptures and explain the good news of Jesus.

We have before us in the Acts of the Apostles a kind of blueprint for evangelization. Our task is to be like Philip and listen attentively to the voice of the Spirit so that we can respond in obedience. God wants us to lead others to Christ – this is our call, our vocation, our dignity and our destiny.

Lord Jesus, teach me to be open to the Holy Spirit and responsive to his leading. May I never be ashamed of the gospel and the promises of Christ.

Acts 8:26-40 • Psalm 65(66):8-9, 16-17, 20
John 6:44-51

The conversion of Paul is probably, truth be told, the most famous in history. It is so famous that we talk of 'a Pauline conversion' or 'road-to-Damascus experience' to express the idea of a radical change in direction. His conversion was a 180-degree about-turn. He was going in one direction and then turned around and started going in the completely opposite one. You cannot get a more radical turnaround than one minute organizing the persecution of the early believers to becoming their primary spokesman and leading evangelist. Paul clearly did not do things by halves! So here is the thing: we tend to read the story of Paul's conversion and think how wonderful it was and what a good thing that he eventually saw the light – end of story. However, the Church's teaching on conversion is really very radical and a topic we do not hear discussed too often.

Where does the power to change come from? There is a whole industry of self-help books and DVDs built on a very basic desire that many people feel to change and improve themselves. We are not happy with ourselves and know we need to change in this or that area but often don't know

how. Now self-help gurus say the power to change can be derived from positive thinking or following through on steps they recommend, etc. Yet the kind of change we see in Paul does not come from within, from natural human strength – it comes from God.

The teaching of the Church is that change or conversion is a lifelong task. We make a decision to follow Christ and that decision is worked out over the course of our lives. In this sense we are never really truly converted. What we seek and need is ongoing conversion of our hearts because they easily become cold and hard towards God and our neighbour. Conversion, though, is not just a human work – our wills can only be softened and enlightened by God's grace. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* so beautifully expresses it: 'This endeavour of conversion is not just a human work. It is the movement of a contrite heart drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first' (para. 1428).

Lord, help me to turn back to you with all my heart and be refreshed in my inner spirit by your love and mercy.

Acts 9:1-20 • Psalm 116(117)
John 6:52-59

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord' (v. 31). Sadly, this is not a situation we see being replicated very often nowadays. We don't even tend to think of our parishes as evangelizing communities. We tend to think of them being maintained but not necessarily flourishing and inviting new people in. The truth is – and this comment will certainly generate a reaction or two – our clergy are not trained or especially inspired to grow their parishes. The trend right across the country is the shutting-down and merging of parishes. Many parishes also are not havens of peace and welcome but rather divided and inharmonious in one way or another. Reaching out with the gospel, street evangelism, sharing our faith, and being creative and lateral will, it seems, have to wait for another day!

Unless we do something truly and utterly radical, such as reading, studying and praying on Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, the Gospel of Joy! For in it he, rather like a highly trained surgeon, pinpoints

the weaknesses and failures of our parish life and urges us to repent and turn back to God. This is why we need to pray for our clergy and especially parish priests, because as shepherds they are charged with leading God's people to the liberation of the joy-filled life rooted in conversion and repentance. They are to be, if you like, examples of conversion and repentance so that they can in turn lead others in the way of Christ. They are to be peacemakers not warmongers, and to strive continually to build bridges and facilitate the wide and diverse expressions of God's life in a parish setting.

Our clergy face many challenges and they truly need our prayers – but God has poured out upon them the sacrament of Holy Orders and they have received every spiritual blessing and grace to enable them to live out their vocation. For it is when we all, clergy and laity alike, live joyful and happy lives, radiating the life of Christ, that we attract others to the transforming message of the gospel.

Lord, may I be filled with the peace and strength of Christ so that I may be a witness of joy, hope and love.

Acts 9:31-42 • Psalm 115(116):12-17
John 6:60-69

Today's Gospel reading contains one of the verses in the Bible that every Christian should know. John 10:10 sums up the essence of the Christian life and why Jesus came: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (NIV). But what does this mean? It means that we should be filled to the brim with the fruits of the Spirit, and it is Spirit-filled lives which will make others want to become Christians. It is as simple as that.

A popular caricature, however, of Christians is that we are far from happy. Actually out in that rather unsavoury world of the blogs, where so-called Christians are hard at it – at being indignant, shocked, horrified, defending the Pope (as if the Pope needed defending: he is quite big enough to look after himself and anyway he has a Swiss Guard to do that!) and so on – it is as if there is a perception that Christians are easily offended, don't like a joke, and are rather down on sex, alcohol and having fun. Just for the record Catholics are not down on sex (sex is one of God's great gifts) or alcohol (Jesus changed water into gallons of the stuff).

There you are, you read it here first: God created sex and booze, and he created them good. The problem invariably isn't sex or booze but not living in moderation and not discovering God's plan for our lives. Fullness of life and personal happiness come to us when we are obeying and following God's plan for our lives – isn't that the point?

The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, considered to be the father of modern existentialism (a philosophy which posits that life is meaningless and empty), said once, 'Everything has been figured out, except how to live.' He might have been a great intellect but he sure got that one wrong. Jesus came to show us how to live. The Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes show us how to live the life in the Spirit. We can live holy, joyful and happy lives because God has given us the Spirit. So stop being a sourpuss, stop being miserable and moody, and turn back to the Lord, because he came to bring us the fullness of life and the fullness of joy.

'Each small task of everyday life is part of the total harmony of the universe.' (St Thérèse of Lisieux)

Acts 2:14, 36-41 • Psalm 22(23):1-6
1 Peter 2:20-25 • John 10:1-10

Peter was a Jew, deeply rooted in the traditions of his forefathers. Despite being with Jesus and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the alarming truth is that he still harboured prejudice and discriminated against non-Jewish believers. For him there remained a huge distinction between a Jewish believer and a non-Jewish believer. It is staggering that the head of the Church, the rock upon which it was built, could be so wrong – but he was and that is a fact. However, God changed the way Peter thought. Had God not acted in this powerful and wonderful way in his life, the nascent Church could easily have been ripped apart by faction and dissension.

In a vision God opened Peter's mind to see that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile. In fact, God has no favourites but grants repentance unto life for every human person (v. 18). This revelation led to a revolution. God thinks in ways that we cannot even imagine. God loves every human being. Think about that for a minute: God loves homosexuals, transsexuals, hermaphrodites, bisexuals; God loves drug addicts, prostitutes, alcoholics, abortionists and child abusers. No one is beyond, outside

or removed from God's love, mercy and compassion. And oh yes, just to be absolutely clear, God has no favourites – contrary to the funny T-shirt doing the rounds which on the front says 'God loves everybody', but then on the back has the words 'But I'm his favourite'.

God sees us first and foremost as persons; he sees and understands our very core and our very essence. Just as the Holy Spirit changed the way Peter thought about the Gentile believers, so we are challenged not to discriminate against people because of their gender, their sexual orientation or even if they are our enemies. Peter underwent a conversion born of repentance and was transformed by the renewing of his mind. He had a change of heart, and this is what we too must know in our own lives. The gospel is held out to every single human person, without fear and without favour. This message of love, mercy and forgiveness has the power to change the world.

Lord, by your grace I can win the battle for the mind and overcome thoughts and attitudes which discriminate against others. Give me a heart of love and mercy towards everyone, including my enemy. I pray for my enemies and all those who oppose the gospel.

Acts 11:1-18 • Psalm 41(42):2-3; 42(43):3-4
John 10:11-18

Believers were first called Christians in Antioch (v. 26). From the days of the early Church until now, the Christian message has been advancing as the gospel is proclaimed. Looking back, however, on over two thousand years of history we humbly acknowledge both the light and the shadows of our Christian past. The light always involves a proclamation of the gospel; the shadows are those times when we have lost our way. Pope John Paul II led the Church into this new millennium by reflecting on these past shadows: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms and genocides, the prejudice and discrimination, and so on. We lose our way and walk in darkness when we lose sight of the gospel message of repentance, new life and God's grace. We lose our way when the Christian life does not involve love and service of others and a laying down of our lives. And we lose our way when we oppress, dominate and exercise power over others. Christian history can make for sobering reading when we come in touch with how the noble calling of being a Christian has been undermined and become a cause of scandal.

However, putting the past behind and looking forward in the

Spirit, we need to ask ourselves the reason why the Church exists. The answer is that the Church exists to evangelize. She exists to proclaim and witness to the message of Christ's love, mercy and forgiveness. We are ambassadors of this Good News. Jesus was the first and greatest evangelist, and the whole purpose of his life was that we would come to know his Father. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. This is the *raison d'être* of the Church and our own personal charter. We are called to be Spirit-filled evangelizers, proclaiming this message of new life with zeal, creativity and passion.

'This kingdom and this salvation, which are the key words of Jesus Christ's evangelization, are available to every human being as grace and mercy, and yet at the same time each individual must gain them by force – they belong to the violent, says the Lord, through toil and suffering, through a life lived according to the Gospel, through abnegation and the cross, through the spirit of the beatitudes. But above all each individual gains them through a total interior renewal which the Gospel calls metanoia; it is a radical conversion, a profound change of heart and mind.'
(Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* 25)

Acts 11:19-26 • Psalm 86(87):1-7
John 10:22-30

Today we celebrate the feast of St Matthias. Chosen by lot to step into the shoes left by Judas, he had not so much a tough act to follow as a great challenge and burden of office to fulfil. We actually know very little about Matthias, but what we do know is that he had been with Jesus throughout his public ministry. He was, if you like, fully qualified and equipped to be an apostle. He was chosen by that method tried and tested and clearly approved of both by God and the Church – selection by lot!

Peter's prayer prior to the lot being cast reveals the importance of the heart in serving God: 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry' (vv. 24-25). Why was the heart so important? In a very real way Judas' problem was one of the heart. He allowed his heart to become seduced and resistant to God's plan. He loved his own thinking, not God's thinking. He clearly also loved money, which perhaps had a corrupting influence on him. What is evident is that he chose the way of the world, not the way of the gospel; he chose the way of compromise, and the way of political and secular power.

God knows our hearts, and we too must be constantly examining our hearts and asking the Holy Spirit to shine his light into them. None of us is pure or perfect, and each of us has our own demons or temptations. A good heart is a repentant and contrite one. The truth is our hearts are complex and not always easy to understand. St Augustine said: 'The hairs on your head are far easier to count than the feelings and movements of your heart.' We can know our hearts, however, and we begin this journey of discovery by inviting the Holy Spirit to shine his light into their dark and hidden recesses.

The Hebrew word for Matthias means 'gift of Yahweh' and truly on this his feast-day we celebrate him as a gift to the Church. The following words recorded by St Clement of Alexandria are attributed to him: 'We must combat our flesh and put no value on it and concede to it nothing that flatters it, but rather increase the growth of our soul by faith and knowledge.'

St Matthias, on this your holy feast-day, pray for us.

Acts 1:15-17, 20-26 • Psalm 112(113):1-8
John 15:9-17

Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. How true and how wise this saying is in respect of so many areas of our lives – including preaching and proclaiming the gospel! We are living in a secular and, some would suggest, post-Christian age in which faith in God is largely ridiculed and certainly somewhat marginalized. The god of science seems omnipotent nowadays! In such an age our challenge as Christians is to think up new and lateral ways of witnessing to Christ.

That said and understood, this can never mean that the fundamental message of the gospel is tampered with or changed. The gospel is the gospel, and it is this initial proclamation which truly has the power to change lives. Jesus was without doubt the first and greatest evangelist, but it is fair to say that Paul was the second! Today we watch the master at work and learn.

Paul is invited to share with those gathered in the synagogue. It's always a good start when people invite you to share your faith. The apostle gives them a kind of bird's-eye view of salvation history, beginning with God's holy and chosen people Israel and concluding his whistle-stop tour with the

coming of Jesus as the climactic moment of God's working through his people Israel. We probably wouldn't take the same approach if we were called upon to bear witness to Christ. However, the message of salvation took root in the soil of Israel. We owe the Jewish people a great debt – to them belong the Torah (the Law), the Psalms and the Prophets, all of which point to the coming of Jesus, the fulfilment of the promise that God would save his people. It is by immersing ourselves in the history of Israel that we also ground ourselves in a sure and firm grasp of our faith. St Augustine said, 'In the Old Testament the New is concealed; in the New Testament the Old is revealed.'

We are called to be competent ministers of the gospel, men and women who have a profound understanding and knowledge of salvation history undergirding our own experience of God working in our lives. For it is in penetrating the depths of our faith that we mine new treasures, which we can then pass on to those to whom we are called to bear witness.

Lord, give me a profound reverence for the Hebrew Scriptures for they are pregnant with Christ.

Acts 13:13-25 • Psalm 88(89):2-3, 21-27

John 13:16-20

'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (v. 6).

Jesus is the Way who alone can lead us to the Father: 'no one comes to the Father, but by me' (v. 6). After his resurrection Jesus ascended to take his place at the right hand of the Father. He wants us to be with him and his Father in glory: 'Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am' (John 17:24). He tells us that there are many mansions in his Father's house and that he has gone to prepare a place for us there. He promises that at his second coming he will take us to be with him and his Father forever: 'I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also' (v. 3).

Jesus is the Truth who brings us out of ignorance and unbelief into knowledge and understanding: 'grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). Therefore, we listen to the word of Jesus and seek to obey it. Just as the apostles knew the importance of preaching the word, so we know

the importance of taking the word into ourselves in order that it may produce in us light and life.

Jesus is the Life who brings us out of darkness into the light, out of death into life: 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men' (John 1:4). The Twelve were convinced that, as they continued to preach the word of God, many would find faith in Jesus and so come into the light and into life: 'I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in the darkness' (John 12:46). Therefore, they were determined to allow nothing to distract them from their preaching of the word of God (Acts 6:2).

As we follow the Way, the Truth and the Life, we can be filled with a wonderful confidence that Jesus is leading us to the Father and to the place that he has prepared for us!

Jesus, I thank you for preparing a place for me with your Father. Grant me the grace not only to hear your word, but also to put it into practice, so that I may be with you and the Father forever.

Acts 13:26-33 • Psalm 2:6-11

John 14:1-6



In response to Thomas' objection that the disciples do not know the way because they do not know where Jesus is going, Jesus tells them that he is himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus does not merely teach us the way to go or guide us in the way: he is the Way. Christianity is not just a set of commands or guidelines about how to live a good life: it is centred on a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him. He is the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Heb. 12:2), who has opened up for us the way to God. Through baptism and the Eucharist we can be made one with his death and risen life, living out our new life in daily love and obedience to the Father (Rom. 6:4).

By being united with Jesus we receive new life, and so we can see that Jesus is both the Way and the Life. Because he has gone before us and shed his blood for us on the cross, we can approach God with confidence, knowing our sins are forgiven. '[W]e have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of

Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain' (Heb. 10:19-20).

Jesus also tells us that he is the Truth. He does not just speak truth to us, but he is the Truth. As the eternal Word of God, he makes God known to us in his person and has in himself the fullness of revelation. In him the faithfulness of God is revealed, and all God's promises find their fulfilment.

Let us strive then every day to draw nearer to Jesus by prayer, reading Scripture and celebrating the Eucharist. As we follow him and share in his death, we shall receive his risen life and be able to live in a new way by the power of his Spirit. As we contemplate him, we shall come to see more fully who God is, and one day he will lead us to the fullness of life in heaven.

Lord Jesus, help us to follow you each day, and to be united with you in all that we do. May we come to see more and more clearly what it means that you are for us the Way, the Truth and the Life.



Jesus knew his disciples were unhappy at the prospect of his leaving them. To alleviate their sorrow, he told them: 'Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me' (v. 1). By believing in him their hearts would find peace. They would have peace by believing in Jesus because they would come to the Father: 'no one comes to the Father, but by me' (v. 6). They would know the Father, 'If you had known me, you would have known my Father also' (v. 7), and they would see him: 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (v. 9). The disciples had to make a choice. Would they believe in Jesus and find their peace, or would they remain with troubled hearts?

Like the disciples, we often live troubled lives. We are so absorbed by everything we have to do or cope with that we often forget the truth that our destiny is heaven. This should be the true source of our joy. We were created by the Father to be his children. Our first sin took us out of the plan God designed for our good and blessing. Out of love for us, Jesus came to bring us back into the Father's original

plan. By his life, suffering, death and resurrection Jesus reconciled us to the Father. He took away the sins that separated us from him. He opened up the gates of heaven, closed against us by our sin, so we could enter into heaven itself. Jesus gives us the power to become children of God (John 1:12) and to be receivers of the Spirit (John 20:22), so that we can live in God's presence all our days and then, after our death, be with God forever and live in his light and love.

We are on a journey to the Father. In faith we should keep our eyes fixed on heaven, longing and thirsting for it. Christ has prepared a place for us in his Father's house (v. 2). This hope can overcome all the troubles that burden our hearts and fill them with confidence, joy and peace.

Father, I thank you for creating me to live forever in your presence. In Jesus I can come to you freely. I can know you as my Father and see you face to face. Teach me to put my faith in the truth of the gospel and the hope and life it brings.

Do you love God? A simple but profound question which goes to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. But what does it mean to love God? For Jesus, one word captured the idea of love better than any other. It wasn't tenderness, affection, commitment or dedication, but obedience. This isn't to say that love doesn't mean tenderness, affection, commitment and a host of other qualities, but it does mean that, for Jesus, obedience was a fundamental quality of love.

Jesus taught that love for God and obedience to God's teachings go hand in hand. So, just to be clear, to love God is to obey his commands. We may not like this answer but its truth remains and we do well to attend to its meaning. To obey God is to love him because when we obey Jesus' teaching we are fulfilling God's perfect plan for our lives.

We can only be truly happy and fulfilled as we do God's will. We understand this readily enough in human relationships. When we are in love we delight to do what our beloved wants – that's part of the fun, the joy, the frisson of loving and being loved. Loving God is similar.

God's will for us is that we live by the power of the Spirit, that we put on the mind of Christ and that we seek to be transformed by the Holy Spirit through the renewal of our minds. He wants us to receive, participate in and celebrate the sacramental life of the Church. He wants us to set aside time to pray, meditate and reflect on sacred Scripture, and examine our conscience. He wants us to serve the poor and those who suffer injustice, and be attentive to the cries of those who need comfort and consolation. Who will teach us to live like this? Who will give us the wisdom, grace, understanding, knowledge and insight? The Holy Spirit, the Lord the giver of life, the Counsellor, who teaches us all things and reminds us of everything Jesus said and did.

'Don't think that pleasing God lies so much in doing a great deal as in doing it with good will, without possessiveness and the approval of men. What does it profit you to give God one thing if he asks of you another? Consider what it is that God wants, and then do it.'
(St John of the Cross)

Acts 14:5-18 • Psalm 113(115):1-4, 15-16
John 14:21-26

There is no greater gift than the one Jesus promises his disciples, knowing that he would soon be leaving this world. In making this promise he assures them that he will not abandon them; in fact, his gift will guarantee that they know his presence in an even deeper way.

Jesus promises his disciples the gift of peace: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you' (v. 27). This promise is true for us too. Jesus offers us a peace that comes from his presence and love deep within. It is a peace nothing can take away, a peace that will last for all eternity. The peace that Jesus gives does not mean that we will be free from troubles and suffering; it means that even in the middle of our troubles we can know the presence of Christ and can be assured that he loves us infinitely and will never abandon us.

He brings us peace with God, our neighbours and ourselves. We can know that we are reconciled to God and need not be ashamed to come before him in prayer. We can learn to love one another and to forgive those who have hurt us.

We can know that we are valuable because God loves each of us and sent his Son to die for us. In Christ we rejoice that our sins are forgiven, and we are beloved children of God. Christ's gift of peace is worth far more than anything the world has to offer: it is priceless.

We need not envy the disciples who knew Christ while he was on earth, for we now know his presence and power in a deeper way. He told the disciples that they should rejoice at his departure, because he was going to the Father. In heaven Jesus is the mediator who intercedes for us at the Father's right hand. He has risen from the dead and ascended into glory, and now our true life is in heaven with him. Even today we share in his risen life, and we look forward to joining him in heavenly glory one day.

Lord Jesus, you are our peace: you reconcile us to God and one another, and comfort us in times of trouble. May your peace never leave our hearts as we await the time when we will enjoy the eternal peace of heaven.

Acts 14:19-28 • Psalm 144(145):10-13, 21
John 14:27-31

God has created everything and it is his will that keeps us in being. We know that he is the one who made us and that we are totally dependent on him: 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). But the same is also true of our new life in Christ. It is not something that we have produced ourselves, or can increase by our own efforts: it is a gift to us, and it flows entirely from Jesus Christ. Jesus illustrated this vividly in the parable of the vine and the branches. The branches have no life in themselves: they draw it from the main plant, and if they are cut off from the plant they wither and die. Jesus tells us plainly that 'apart from me you can do nothing' (v. 5). Our human pride does not like to hear this: we like to achieve things by our own efforts, and people often boast that they are not dependent on anyone else for their success.

Being a Christian means abandoning this sort of attitude: it means accepting that we are sinful creatures who can do nothing to make ourselves right with God and humbly asking him for forgiveness.

The great paradox is that the more we humble ourselves and depend on the Lord, the more he can work in us and the stronger we become. As Paul memorably said, 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor. 12:10).

Jesus encourages us to abide in him, and then he will abide in us and we will produce much fruit. What does it mean to abide in him? It means that we must spend time with him in prayer every day and become aware of his presence. Even if we can only pray for a short time, this will affect how we live during the day. We can learn to turn to him during the day, to depend on him and ask him for strength and guidance in our difficulties. If we do this, then we are sure to bear fruit for him, in good works and in being witnesses to others by what we do and say.

Lord Jesus, you are the source of our life and apart from you we can do nothing. Help us always to abide in you so that we may bear much fruit and the Father may be glorified in us.

'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you'. We may have heard this so often that we forget what an amazing statement it is. The love between Jesus and the Father is love between two persons of the Trinity: it is perfect and infinite. This is the sort of love that Jesus has for us. While he is worthy of the Father's love, as finite creatures, created by God but full of weakness and sin, it is wonderful to think that Jesus loves us in the same way the Father loves him. The Father showed his love for Jesus by always guiding him while he was on earth and raising him up after his death. Jesus tells us that we should abide in his love and that we do this by keeping his commandments.

Love is shown not by nice feelings, but by our actions. It is easy to say that we love someone, but harder to show our love by caring for them and sacrificing our own wishes. We may say that we love God, but do our actions bear this out? The Pharisees claimed to love God and did do many righteous things, but Jesus said that they were lacking

in love because they only cared about religious rules and rituals and did not act out of love of God and neighbour.

If we truly love someone, we will want to do what pleases them. If we want to abide in Christ's love, we will try to know his will and to do it as best we can – and we can be sure that he will help us in our efforts. Jesus showed that he loved the Father perfectly because he always did the Father's will. He was never concerned about his own wishes, but only what the Father wanted. This was truest when he came to lay down his life on the cross, humbly obeying the Father's command. As we live lives based on following Christ's commandments, we will find that we will know his love more and more and will be able to spread that love to others.

Lord Jesus, you showed your perfect love for the Father and for us when you gave up your life to save us from sin and death. Help us always to abide in your love so we may build your kingdom in this world.

On the night before he died, Jesus left his disciples a single command: 'love one another as I have loved you' (v. 12). In the New Testament the Greek word for this kind of love is *agape*. It expresses the idea of self-sacrifice, of loving until it hurts, of giving everything and expecting little in return.

Jesus is the very model of this kind of love. He is the one who revealed what love is in all its depth and beauty when he freely and in complete obedience to the Father laid down his life for us on the cross. As Paul tells us, 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8).

Jesus not only invites but commands us to love in the same way. The problem for many of us is that in our day-to-day experience we find it very difficult to be faithful to the Lord's command. We can love those we like, our friends and those who think along similar lines to ourselves. When, however, we have to deal with people we do not like, who get under our skin, love can seem almost impossible.

From God's perspective, it is no bad thing that we see our poverty and face the truth of our inability to love. In fact, far from being a disabling defeat, it becomes a moment of grace, full of opportunity. When we recognize and confess how empty we truly are, the Lord Jesus is able to move powerfully in our lives. He is the one who gives us the power to love. We cannot begin to love as he wishes without a humble and complete dependence on his indwelling presence. Most of us, deep down, have a real desire to reach out to others in love. What we often lack or have a dim sense of is the immense and boundless love God has for us. As we let his grace work in our hearts we begin to grasp something of the tremendous love Jesus had for us in dying on the cross. It is this deepening sense of what Jesus has done for us that enables us to lay down our lives for others.

Father, we confess that often we cannot love. Touch us with your Holy Spirit so that more and more we may know the love of Jesus and be enabled to give away that love to others.

Acts 15:22-31 • Psalm 56(57):8-12
John 15:12-17

Throughout history – and still today – many Christians have been persecuted for their faith, often suffering imprisonment, torture and death rather than reject Christ. In the western world we are lucky enough to live in a society that does not torture or execute people for their religious beliefs. Nevertheless, as our society becomes increasingly secular and is mostly either indifferent or hostile to religion, people of faith face a much more subtle type of persecution. Though we may not be risking our lives, it takes courage to proclaim our Christian beliefs and defend them when we will often meet with ridicule or hostility. How do we react when this happens? It is easy to get discouraged and depressed, but we need to remember Jesus' warning that this is what those who are truly trying to follow him should expect.

The apostle Peter wrote these words of encouragement to persecuted Christians: 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be

glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you' (1 Pet. 4:12-14).

Our greatest source of reassurance is that, though he did nothing but good in his life, Jesus himself was persecuted and put to death. People do not always like to hear the truth preached and to have their sins condemned. Our Master's words and deeds went against the values of the world, then as now. So if we really are his followers, we are sure to attract hostility – in fact Jesus warns us to be worried if we are liked by everyone. Despite antagonism, ridicule, or mere indifference we must try our best to bring people to Christ, all the while recognizing that as Christians we are never fully at home in this world: we look forward to life with Christ in our true home in heaven.

Lord Jesus, we know that we will suffer like you if we try to serve and follow you. Help us and strengthen us to bear witness to you, so that after sharing in your sufferings we may also one day share in your glory.

Acts 16:1-10 • Psalm 99(100):1-5
John 15:18-21

Jesus promises his disciples that, although he will soon be leaving them, he will not leave them 'desolate' – or 'as orphans', as another version puts it. He will send them his Spirit who will be with them always. In his mortal humanity, Jesus could only be in one place at a time and could not live forever. His Spirit is with us always, even when we feel as if we are alone and helpless. The Greek word used to describe the Spirit here is *parakletos*, which can be translated into English in various ways: advocate, helper, counsellor, comforter, teacher. He is the Spirit of Christ, and he continues the work that Jesus did among his disciples. He is the Spirit of Truth, and he leads us to the truth as we try to listen to him and be guided by him.

In prayer it is the Spirit who brings God's word to life and gives us a deeper understanding of the truths of the gospel. The Spirit also guides us in our daily lives, showing us the right actions in the situations we face and strengthening us to carry them out. He gives us encouragement and consolation in

our troubles and fears, and he is our advocate when we sin, praying with us when we repent and seek forgiveness.

As we come to the end of the Easter season, we can rejoice that Jesus has sent us this great Helper. It is because of his resurrection and ascension that he can send the Spirit into our hearts, and he never refuses us this gift. Jesus says that he does not leave us orphaned, and he is coming to us. He comes to us every day as we go before him in prayer, read his Word attentively, and receive him in the Eucharist. But the Spirit also encourages us to look forward to the time when he will come again in glory, when his kingdom will be fully revealed and evil will be no more. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with longing for that time and help us pray for it each day.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you have sent us your Spirit to help, guide and comfort us as we try to follow you in this world. May we know your love more and more through the Spirit, and spread that love to those around us.

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17 • Psalm 65(66):1-7, 16, 20
1 Peter 3:15-18 • John 14:15-21

Jesus warns his disciples frankly that the world will hate them. They will be expelled from synagogues and put to death by people who think they are doing God's will. These are not the kind of words any of us wants to hear. However, Jesus promises that they – and we who follow them – will not be alone in these trials, for he will send his Spirit to be with them. The Spirit always bears witness to Christ. He does this in our hearts, revealing the Lord to us, and then through us he witnesses to the world about him.

In these verses Jesus teaches us a lot about the Spirit. The Spirit comes from the Father and is sent by Jesus to all those who ask for him. We find it hard to have a picture of the Holy Spirit, since the word 'spirit' just suggests a vague sort of force, but he is as much a person of the Trinity as the Father and the Son. There is no difference between the work of the Son and the work of the Spirit. 'When the Father sends his Word, he always sends his Breath. In their joint mission, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct but inseparable.

To be sure, it is Christ who is seen, the visible image of the invisible God, but it is the Spirit who reveals him' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 689).

Jesus has now ascended to the Father's right hand and has received all authority and power. He longs to pour out his gifts on us, and the Spirit is the greatest gift he can give. Let us pray every day to receive the Holy Spirit more and more into our lives and live by his power and guidance. In a world that is often hostile to religion, the Spirit can help us to be faithful witnesses to Christ and also give us comfort when we are hated and despised by others. Like Jesus' disciples, we can only witness to him if we know him and have spent time with him. If we are coming to God in prayer each day, the Spirit can reveal Christ to us and fill our hearts with enthusiasm to bring his gospel to the world.

Lord Jesus, you were always guided by God's Spirit. May your Spirit help us to imitate you in being faithful witnesses no matter what opposition we face.

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

Jesus stood before his disciples, telling them that it was to their advantage that he should go away. They were dumbstruck with grief. Distressing as Jesus' words seemed to the disciples, the fulfilment of them would bring everlasting joy and hope to the Church.

Jesus had to return to the Father to complete the work that he had come to do. In his dying he drew all humankind to himself and crushed the grip that evil had on the world. The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost confirmed Jesus' victory over the power of death. The work of the Spirit convinces us of Jesus' victory over the power of death: the Prince of this world has been judged and has lost the right to hold people in bondage to sin and death. The Father has raised Jesus far above all powers, authorities and dominions.

Jesus, who spoke in the flesh to his apostles, speaks to us through the Spirit. Through the Spirit in the Church Jesus continues his work in the world. As we move towards Pentecost we dedicate ourselves to the Holy Spirit and

his sanctifying work in our lives. We are encouraged to renew our appreciation of the Spirit as being present and active within the Church, and as being the one who builds the kingdom of God. Christ in us is the hope of glory, the glory of the coming of the kingdom of God in our lives and on earth. Our hope will be realized, and it is our hope that singles us out as belonging to Christ.

With courage we pray to the Holy Spirit that he will lead and guide us in the way of holiness and righteousness. In humility we acknowledge our need of his grace and power. In faith we proclaim our conviction that it is by the grace of the Holy Spirit that the face of the earth is renewed.

Come, Holy Spirit, convict us with the truth about ourselves, so that in repentance our hope will be renewed, and our lives ever increasingly conformed to Christ. Renew within us today a clearer sense of your presence and a surer grasp of our eternal hope. Help us to be a beacon of hope in the world and a sign of your love, grace and victory.

We know that there are many things children are not ready to understand, and so we teach them what they can learn at the stage they are at. Jesus loves us even more than we love our children, and he treats us in a similar way. He wants us to know the fullness of truth, but at the same time he knows that we cannot learn this in one go; we have to be led gently into the truth, and he does not teach us more than we can cope with at a time. Though we do not expect children to learn more than they can, we do expect them to be eager to learn and would be disappointed if they stayed at one level of knowledge for too long. We should never think we know everything about the gospel or be satisfied with what we know.

However wise we are, there is always infinitely more that God wishes to reveal to us. He does not always teach us new truths: often the work of the Spirit is to bring us to a new understanding of familiar truths, to help us see and experience them in a more profound way than before. Knowing the truths of God

is not just a matter of learning information: to really know them means to feel them in our hearts and experience their power in our lives.

Jesus teaches us that it is the Spirit who can bring the truth to life for us in this way. We for our part have to be open to his work and eager to learn more each day. We can ask the Spirit to teach us more every time we pray and read the Word of God. What he reveals to us above all is Christ: who he is and what he has done for us. The Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son, and his desire is always to glorify Jesus Christ, which also brings glory to the Father. In knowing Jesus Christ we know all that is worth knowing, for in him 'are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col. 2:3).

Lord Jesus, you send us your Spirit to glorify you and reveal to us the truths of your gospel. May we always be hungry to learn more about you, until the day we attain complete knowledge, when we are with you in heaven.

From the moment Satan enters Judas and he leaves the meal table (John 13:30), the Lord embarks on a long discourse to his disciples. It is, in effect, his farewell address.

There is nothing unusual in this. Those who know they are to die, for example in cases of terminal cancer, will look to put their affairs in order and to set the record straight with those closest to them. The dying person may also draw up a will and demonstrate concern for the legacy they are leaving behind. In effect, the farewell discourse of John 13:31–16:33 was the Lord setting his disciples straight, in giving them the key tenets of his teaching and preparing them for the difficult days ahead.

His concern ran so deep that he was looking to reassure them about any anxieties they may have had, rather than thinking of his impending death. There is something reassuring for us all here. There is an almost childlike confusion in the disciples, and such is their meekness that they dared not ask their questions directly to the Lord.

The Lord would have been pleased with this naivety and questioning. In Mark 10:15 he says that 'anyone

who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it' (NIV). He wants us all to question in the way a child questions. If the disciples had had intellectual pride, the Lord could not have helped them to see the core values he was looking to teach.

Indeed, a common thread running through John's Gospel is a childlike questioning by people who came to believe in the Lord, leading on to a discourse of explanation. For example, Nicodemus asks, 'How is that possible?', enabling a long explanation by the Lord (3:9-21). We are encouraged through this Gospel to have a childlike trust in the Lord, and to feel free to present our questions and worries to him in the form of prayer, knowing that we can trust in Jesus' promise that '[w]hen the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth' (16:13).

Lord God, help me always to believe, as St Thérèse of Lisieux did, in God's great love for me, so that I might imitate your 'Little Way' each day, believing that each act of kindness, generosity and mercy, no matter how small, builds and extends your kingdom, bringing glory to your name. Amen.

Acts 18:1-8 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

John 16:16-20

All four Gospels are united in their testimony to the fact that the men whom Jesus chose to be his followers were decidedly 'slow on the uptake'. They were constantly missing the point, misinterpreting what Jesus said and failing to assimilate things which he told them quite plainly. In this passage of Scripture, however, they can perhaps be forgiven for having difficulty with a message which Jesus was expressing in rather mysterious terms, and is much more understandable to those of us who are privileged to know the outcome to Jesus' earthly ministry. Even so, there are perhaps deeper levels of meaning to be found in Jesus' words, other than the most obvious interpretation that he would shortly be taken from their sight in the crucifixion, and would be visible to them once more in the resurrection some days later.

In a manner of speaking, every one of us goes through periods when Jesus seems to be invisible, particularly in times of challenge or crisis. We usually deduce that because we cannot 'see' him, or are unaware of his presence, then he is not there. Subsequently, of course, we see his presence once more,

usually along with the realization that he was indeed present all the time, even though we were not aware of it. Jesus does not say to his disciples that he is going to withdraw his presence from them, just that they will not see him.

It can be hard to understand why God allows this to be so, and perhaps it is fatuous to come up with glib 'off the peg' explanations. The truth is that God has, as Jesus has told us, numbered even the very hairs of our head, and Jesus has promised that he would always be with us (Matt. 28:20). In this context, we can rely, absolutely, on the truth that his presence with us is guaranteed, whether we sense it or not. Maybe in our moments of doubt and feelings of isolation we are re-living the spiritual slow-wittedness of the apostles who went before us, and in these situations we can take heart that we are in illustrious company!

Lord, help me to hold fast to your promise that you are always with me, and when I feel that I am alone, or overwhelmed by doubts and fears, help me to remember that I can rely on this truth unreservedly.

Acts 18:9-18 • Psalm 46(47):2-7

John 16:20-23

Mary was a young Jewish girl who lived in Nazareth. Her early life would have seemed nothing out of the ordinary. She would not have been at the centre of what was going on around her; her life would have melted into the background of daily life in a small town. But it is here that we find the model of the hope that does not disappoint.

The quality of a person's faith, its character and its strength, are exposed when it is tested. It would be a mistake to think that when Mary was asked to be the mother of the Lord, she did not fully grasp the implications of what was being asked of her. She must have known that her acceptance of this role would lead to her life being changed forever. There must have been worries and fears. But Mary's 'Yes' was both a brave and a remarkable response from a human being.

Mary reveals to us all a faith that trusts God. But faith does not exclude us from the worries and anxieties of life: it is a gift by which we can retain our hope and confidence regardless of our circumstances. Mary would have

faced anxieties along with her joy. She would have welcomed the support and encouragement of those who were close to her. And so she set off on the arduous journey to visit her cousin in the hill country, knowing that Elizabeth loved the Lord and would not only rejoice in her news but would understand and encourage her.

God's Spirit is at work in us who believe, because it is as we believe that the word of God is both conceived and brought forth in our lives. Our words and deeds may be hidden from the eyes of the world, but each step of faith, each act of hope, each word of prayer brings us closer to God. We do not make this pilgrimage through life on our own; we journey in faith, with all the angels and saints.

God our Father, we thank you for the example of faith, hope and love that we have in Mary. It is hope in you that leads us to see you at work in our lives. May we learn to live each day with an expectation of your plan unfolding before our eyes. We offer our lives to you today, knowing that our hope in you will not disappoint us.

Zephaniah 3:14-18 or Romans 12:9-16

Isaiah 12:2-6 • Luke 1:39-56
