

Sunday 1 May

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29 • Sixth Sunday of Easter

Old habits die hard. We remember well enough that the Pharisees stirred up trouble for Jesus in the Gospels, but today we find some Judaeen Pharisees, now believers, unsettling minds and hearts within the early Church. The nub of the problem was that they were concerned (it's interesting how those of a legalistic bent are always 'concerned' by what they perceive as lax practice) with the baptizing of uncircumcised pagans or Gentiles. For them this wasn't just about bad practice: it was even more important than that – it was a matter of eternal salvation. Luke, who was not one to gloss over rows or disagreements, tells it as it was: in the view of these men who had travelled from Judea to Antioch: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved' (v. 1).

Mercifully, this view did not prevail, because Jesus came not only to fulfil the law, but to usher in a new humanity, a new and radical way of relating to God, not as slaves but as sons and daughters of the Father. This crisis – and, indeed, it was a crisis – led to the Council of Jerusalem, the fruit of which was the Apostolic Decree determining that, in the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and the apostles, Gentile believers should not be burdened with the requirements of the law but should be instructed to refrain from pagan practices (sacrificial rituals and sexual immorality). This decree was relayed to the Gentile believers by means of a letter sent down to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas (see vv. 23-29).

In Christ a new work of God took place. Christ's death is a remedy for sin both as a barrier between us and God and as a corrupting power within us. By the gift of the Holy Spirit justification, being reconciled with the Father and made holy and righteous, is made a reality in us through the grace of baptism. We are not saved by obeying the law or by circumcision or by leading a noble life. In other words, we cannot save ourselves: we are saved only by Christ, and his is the only name under heaven and earth by which we can be saved.

Lord God, it is so easy to slip back into trying to save ourselves: please help me to trust solely in your grace and mercy and to understand that I am saved only by Christ.

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29 • Psalm 66(67):2-3, 5-6, 8
Apocalypse 21:10-14, 22-23 • John 14:23-29

Monday 2 May

(Memorial) St Athanasius • Acts 16:11-15

When Paul, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, arrived in Philippi, it was the first time the gospel was preached in Europe! The city of Philippi was named after the famous king Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great. In the time of the apostles it was a Roman colony, settled mainly by Roman soldiers. This is probably why there was no synagogue and the Jewish place of prayer was outside the city walls.

Lydia was a worshipper of God (v. 14) and, when Paul found her, she was honouring the Sabbath, which means she was likely a Jew. The account of Lydia's conversion informs us that she was among a group of women gathered at a place of prayer near the river outside of Philippi. Lydia listened intently, took the gospel message to heart, and she and her family were then baptized in the river.

Lydia insisted on providing hospitality to Paul and his companions, so they made their home with her for the duration of their stay in Philippi. She continued to help them even after they were jailed and released. As a successful businesswoman, her home would have been spacious enough to welcome guests and to become a place for community gatherings and liturgies. Paul cherished the members of the Christian community at Philippi and called them his 'joy and crown' (see Phil. 4:1). Undoubtedly, Lydia's generous hospitality and leadership in the founding of this early Christian community contributed to Paul's affection.

The Spirit had prepared Lydia to receive the good news and her heart was open and receptive. The Holy Spirit is always at work in people's lives preparing them to receive the message of salvation. Our task is to be responsive and open to the leading of the Spirit. The Spirit moves as he wills and is often working in those we might think are far from God. God has no favourites – or rather everyone is his favourite and he thinks of everyone as if they were the only person in the world. The Spirit is calling us to be ambassadors of the gospel, bringing the message of God's mercy and joy to those to whom the Spirit leads us.

Lord God, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for we are one in Christ and our vocation invites us to proclaim the gospel to those near and those far.

Acts 16:11-15 • Psalm 149:1-6, 9

John 15:26–16:4

Tuesday 3 May

1 Corinthians 15:1-8 • SS Philip and James (Feast)

If you had to capture the very essence of the gospel message, what would you say? This can be somewhat challenging. We can think the gospel is all about reaching out to the poor or getting the liturgy just right or going to Mass on a Sunday. Of course, all of these aspects, and many others, are vitally important, but can they be said to be the essence of the gospel – at its very heart and centre? Today's reading shines light on this question.

For Paul the core elements of the gospel are that Christ died for our sins (according to the Scriptures) and he rose again from the dead. In short: Christ died, Christ rose, Christ will come again. This simple message is referred to as the 'kerygma'. Kerygma is derived from the Greek verb *kerussome* meaning literally 'to cry or proclaim as a herald'. So going back to our question – what is the gospel? – the gospel is a proclamation, a heralding, a bold and joyful pronouncement of what God has done in Christ.

Of course, this heralding and proclamation can be expressed in many different ways. Pope Francis has put it like this: 'Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.' This message, the kerygma, is the first and most important proclamation. It is the one we must hear time and time again, and it is the one we must witness to time and time again. This is why everyone, from the Pope downwards, needs to hear this basic proclamation, because everyone is in need of being continually evangelized.

Here's the thing though: we can have the attitude that we are beyond this basic message – because we are baptized we have already been evangelized. But this is to miss the point of our continual need for conversion. We receive a daily call to repent and daily invitation to reform our lives and turn back to God. It is a work of the Holy Spirit in us when we acknowledge that the basic gospel message invigorates us, renews us, and causes our heart to leap and skip with joy.

Lord God, we praise your name and thank you for the witness of St James and St Philip, who were so committed to proclaiming the gospel message that they were prepared to lay down their lives.

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

John 14:6-14

Wednesday 4 May

(Feast in England only) The English Martyrs • Acts 7:55-60

Stephen was pummelled to death with stones. Many years later Paul confessed his part in the stoning: 'And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him' (Acts 22:20 NIV). He knew in his heart that he was as guilty of murder as if he had hurled the stones himself. Indeed, he would go on to say as much when writing to Timothy: '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).

Stephen's final moments as recorded by Luke are remarkable for the similarities with the death of Christ on the cross. Just as Jesus commended his spirit to the Father, Stephen commended his to Jesus. Just as Jesus forgave his executioners, so did Stephen. Despite his violent death Luke records that Stephen 'fell asleep' (v. 60).

It is very unlikely that any of us will be called to martyrdom, but around the world today many are. In countries such as China, Burma, Iraq and Syria believers across the denominations are subject to terrifying ordeals and intense suffering because of their faith. Today, we remember them in our prayers, thanking God for their courageous witness of faith, demonstrating that as from the beginning the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

Today we remember especially the forty martyrs of England and Wales. On this day in 1535 the first martyrs were hung, drawn and quartered in Tyburn for opposing the Act of Succession, which in a nutshell meant that they refused to recognize Henry VIII as 'the only supreme head on earth of the Church of England'. For this act of conscientious objection and dissension they paid the highest of prices. Five priests were dragged across London on hurdles. St Thomas More, looking down on them from the Tower of London, said: 'they were as cheerful going to their deaths as bridegrooms to their marriage.' St John Houghton, one of the first to die, had his heart ripped from his chest. His final words were reportedly: 'Good Jesu, what wilt thou do with my heart?' These men inspired the famous work by Spanish artist Francisco De Zurbarán, which now hangs in the art gallery in Cadiz (a copy is also kept in the Martyrs' Crypt at Tyburn Convent, London).

Proper of Saints: Acts 7:55-60 • Ps 30(31):3-8, 17-21 • Mt 10:17-22

Proper of Season: Acts 17:15, 22-18:1 • Ps 148:1-2, 11-14 • Jn 16:12-15

Thursday 5 May

Acts 18:1-8 • Easter Weekday

They say, don't they, that when one door closes, another opens? And, in fact, this is precisely what happened with Paul regarding his ministry to the Jewish people. Everywhere he went he devoted his time to explaining the faith in the synagogue, as he did here in Corinth, but there is only so much abuse and resistance anyone can take and these Corinthians pushed Paul too far. He determined that from that time on he would take the gospel to the Gentiles (v. 6).

Whilst the Acts of the Apostles is replete with the 'sweet' joy of the gospel (conversions, signs, wonders and miracles), Luke doesn't shrink from the 'bitter' despair of rejection, frustration and abuse. Both are part and parcel of advancing the kingdom of heaven; both require us to be grateful and thankful to God. This is the nature of the gospel: some accept, others reject. God wants every person to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, but this is his work not ours.

The rejection of the gospel by the Jewish people is a great tragedy – one which should cause us to turn to the Lord in prayer. The Church teaches that there is a way in which the return of Christ is suspended at every moment of history until Jesus of Nazareth is recognized as Israel's Messiah (Rom. 11:20). Peter said to the Jews of Jerusalem after Pentecost: 'Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come..., and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old' (Acts 3:19-21). Paul echoed this truth when he said: 'For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?' (Rom. 11:15). God's plan is for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles alike, and we pray that hearts will be softened and eyes opened to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Lord's Anointed, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

Lord, through the mystery of your grace you will enable the people of God to achieve 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph. 4:13), in which 'God may be all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28 NIV). For this we hope and pray.

Acts 18:1-8 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

John 16:16-20

Friday 6 May

Easter Weekday • Acts 18:9-18

God spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘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). It was hard if not impossible to shut Paul up – God knows many tried! He was, in short, irrepressible and intoxicated with Christ. It is true that God blessed and anointed him in a unique and special way. It is not true, however, to think that God hasn’t blessed and anointed us in a special way also.

The key to Paul’s ministry was that he could discern the voice of God. He recognized the presence of the Spirit and he sensed what God was saying to him: through visions, through a prophetic word, in his prayer and in the Scriptures. We can be uncomfortable with the idea of God speaking to us. It can feel grandiose or exaggerated – doesn’t God have more important things to do than speak to us! This is, of course, said facetiously, for God does, indeed, want to speak to us and it is important that we learn to discern his voice.

The psalmist prayed: ‘The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars’ (Ps. 29:3-4). In the past God spoke through his prophets and in many and various ways. Today and every day he speaks through his Son and our vocation is an invitation to hear his voice. For when we hear his voice we hear his encouragement, we hear his forgiveness, we hear his guidance, comfort and consolation.

How do we hear his voice? The best way is to carve out time and space in our busy schedules, silence our minds and hearts, and hear the gentle voice of the Spirit. Through baptism and the grace of the Spirit in the sacrament of confirmation we have received the ability to hear God’s voice.

‘My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.’ (John 10:27)

Acts 18:9-18 • Psalm 46(47):2-7

John 16:20-23

Saturday 7 May

Acts 18:23-28 • Easter Weekday

Priscilla and Aquila knew something was missing in Apollos' life. He had received a baptism for repentance but had not been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In short, he had not been baptized in the Holy Spirit and therefore needed to know the gospel more fully and thoroughly. It is amazing to think that Apollos knew the Hebrew Scriptures, spoke fervently about the Lord and taught about Jesus accurately, but something was still missing.

Jesus came to baptize with water and with fire, and that fire is the fire of the Holy Spirit. To use a crude analogy, we are the car and the Holy Spirit is the petrol. If a car leaks petrol sooner or later it will grind to a halt; if we leak the Holy Spirit, we begin to struggle in our Christian lives. Although we have received baptism we can feel like Apollos and sense that we need to be led into God's life more fully or thoroughly. If we are a member of the clergy we may sense that our preaching isn't coming from the heart and isn't very inspiring. If we are lay people we can sense a certain weariness or even cynicism coming over us. We lack a kind of spiritualchutzpah, which robs us of joy.

Around the time of the Second Vatican Council Pope John XXIII spoke of a new springtime of the Holy Spirit. Pope John Paul II spoke of the new evangelization and recognized that many have experienced a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis' longing for the coming of the Spirit to empower our mission to evangelize is heartfelt and moving: 'How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction! Yet I realize that no words of encouragement will be enough unless the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in our hearts. A Spirit-filled evangelization is one guided by the Holy Spirit, for he is the soul of the Church called to proclaim the gospel...I implore him to come and renew the Church, to stir and impel her to go forth boldly to evangelize all peoples.'

Come, Holy Spirit, and burn your fire in our hearts. Guide us, lead us, steer us so that we are filled with the joy, conviction and enthusiasm of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 18:23-28 • Psalm 46(47):2-3, 8-9, 10
John 16:23-28

Sunday 8 May

Ascension of the Lord (Or Seventh Sunday of Easter where Ascension was celebrated on Thursday 5) • Luke 24:46-53

Mary Magdalene played a pivotal role as a witness both of the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of his ascension into heaven. She was the first to hear the Lord's words about his mysterious ascension into heaven: 'Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17). The glory of the risen Lord was different from the glory of the ascended Lord. The glory of the risen Lord was veiled compared to the complete divine glory of the ascended Lord.

Jesus is our Great High Priest; he is seated at the right hand of the Father and always lives to make intercession for us. He who ascended in glory will return in glory, which is why we pray: 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.' The feast of the Ascension is a celebration of the fullness of Jesus' divinity, seated forever at the right hand of the Father, but also our future destiny as children of the Father, partakers in the divine nature. As St John Damascene said: 'By the Father's right hand, we understand the glory and honour of divinity, where he who exists as Son of God before all ages, indeed as God, of one being with the Father, is seated bodily after he became incarnate and his flesh was glorified.'

We don't tend to think too much about our future destiny beyond the grave. We tend to think it can be presumptive to claim that we will go to heaven but also the pressures of everyday living prevent us from thinking too much about the life to come. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we have the feast of the Ascension: the Church, our mother, gently reminds us that we are on a pilgrimage back to the Father's house, where, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we will enjoy his risen and glorified life. None of us are 'mere mortals': we are destined to be raised up and share in God's eternal life, infused with the light and life of God's holy presence for eternity.

Lord, fill my heart with a living hope of heaven. Root my life in the victory of the resurrection, for Christ who went before us is our hope that we too will be raised on the last day.

Acts 1:1-11 • Psalm 46(47):2-3, 6-9

Ephesians 1:17-23 or Hebrews 9:24-28; 10:19-23 • Luke 24:46-53

Monday 9 May

Acts 19:1-8 • Easter Weekday

How would you respond if you were asked: ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ (cf. v. 2). Hopefully, we could respond affirmatively since when we were baptized we did, indeed, receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Most of us are, however, baptized as babies and at our baptism it was probably not so much the gift of tongues that was in evidence as the sound of crying! Still, the fact remains that the gift of baptism immerses us in the life of the Blessed Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through baptism we are reconciled to the Father. The Spirit draws us into this mystery and dwells in us from then on.

Today’s reading suggests that the receiving of the Holy Spirit can also be dynamic and experiential. If this is the case, then most of us would answer the question: ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit’ (cf. v. 2 NIV). When Paul prayed over the Ephesian disciples they spoke in tongues and prophesied (v. 6). This can be the experience of those involved in the Charismatic Renewal. However, no group or movement owns the Spirit or can claim special access. Jesus said of the movement of the Spirit among us: ‘The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit’ (John 3:8 NIV).

We rejoice in the way the Holy Spirit works among the many movements within the Church, but we don’t need to belong to any of them to experience a fresh work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. What we need, first and foremost, is a sense of hunger and thirst. We also can’t determine how the Spirit may work in our lives: we may pray for a fresh outpouring and find that we speak in tongues and prophesy, or we may simply be filled with a deep abiding joy, or the Scriptures may come alive in a new and exciting way. The Spirit blows where the Spirit wills. What we do know is that being a Spirit-filled Christian is the norm not something unusual, and at Pentecost we can expect to receive the Spirit in a new and wonderful way.

Come, Holy Spirit: fill the hearts of your faithful and affirm us in the grace of your love.

Acts 19:1-8 • Psalm 67(68):2-7

John 16:29-33

Tuesday 10 May

Easter Weekday • Acts 20:17-27

Millions of pounds are spent every year on self-help books. They promise to change us, holding out the hope that we can overcome old habits and be the person we were meant to be, etc. The best self-help advice is, however, found in the library of books we call the Bible. To be accurate, the Bible isn't a self-help manual: more a God-help manual. The self-help industry is predicated on the maxim 'God helps those who help themselves' (if belief in God is mentioned), whereas the Bible rejects this notion because God helps those who are incapable of helping themselves. This is because the mystery of God's life opens us up to the mysterious working of God's grace in our lives.

Paul is an outstanding example of someone who opened himself up to God's grace, and God raised him up to be not only one of the great saints of the Church, but one of the greats of human history. We encounter him today saying farewell to the Ephesian church he had founded. He was clearly very fond of these fellow believers, as they were of him, and is conscious that this truly was farewell – they would not see him again. What is striking about Paul's speech is that it reveals him as quite simply a human being, fully human and fully alive. As St Thomas Aquinas said: 'Grace is nothing else but a certain beginning of glory in us.' We see the glory of grace growing and emerging in the life of this great apostle. St Paul the Apostle of Grace has a certain ring of truth about it.

We don't need any self-help books: what we need is the grace of the Holy Spirit, and that is freely and readily available to us, as it was to Paul. What we need is a deeper sense of our state before God, and to become weary and fed up with relying on our own strength. We need to race for grace; to get up every day and be eager to call upon the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We could compose our own Holy Spirit prayer, along the lines of: 'Come, Holy Spirit. I am a sinner, make me a winner and grant me the grace to overcome all that prevents me from enjoying the life of God.' Paul's life is a testament to the power of grace and so can our lives be. Be greedy for God's grace.

Acts 20:17-27 • Psalm 67(68):10-11, 20-21

John 17:1-11

Wednesday 11 May

Acts 20:28-38 • Easter Weekday

It is commonly believed that everything Jesus said is contained in the four Gospels. This is largely true but there are a few exceptions. In the opening chapters of the book of Revelation, John records what Christ said to him in one of his many visions on the island of Patmos. In Acts 1:4-8 Luke sets down the Risen Lord's parting words to his disciples about the coming of the Spirit before he ascended into heaven. And in today's reading we come across a saying of Jesus which isn't recorded anywhere else in the New Testament: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (v. 35). We are blessed whenever we give – of our time, our money, our possessions or ourselves.

This wonderful saying of Jesus, which could be called the ninth beatitude, is similar to Paul's observation when writing to the Corinthian church, 'God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Cor. 9:7). To be a Christian, then, is to be rooted in the idea of being generous. A mean, tight or miserly Christian is an oxymoron. Why is this? It is because our generosity flows from the generosity we have first received. How can we not be generous when God has been so good to us?

By being generous we discover an inner joy and happiness. This is because generosity is a divine quality. When we give, we become an imitator of God (Eph. 5:1). Being generous, however, kicks against our nature. Generosity is a work of the Spirit in us – true, some are naturally more generous than others, but generally speaking we lean towards self-interest. We tend to think of generosity as relating primarily to money, and to be sure our willingness to give financially is a kind of litmus test. Yet generosity touches all aspects of our being: a generous heart is also a forgiving heart, a merciful heart, a heart that does not hold grudges or seek revenge. St Francis of Assisi said: 'For it is in giving that we receive.' When we give in God's name we receive a hundredfold in return.

'Lord, teach me to be generous. Teach me to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for reward, save that of knowing that I do your will.' (St Ignatius of Loyola)

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

John 17:11-19

Thursday 12 May

Easter Weekday • Acts 22:30; 23:6-11

Moving house is very high on most people's list of major life stresses, but so too is public speaking. Most of us would run a mile from having to speak before a large audience. Some are gifted in this area and despite suffering from a degree of nerves are able to pull it off. Such people, however, are not the norm: it is more common to be terrified at this prospect.

Although we tend to think that Paul was one of those who found speaking in public easier than most, the Acts of the Apostles reveals that he, rather like us all, needed God's courage. We know this because on the occasion recorded in today's passage the Spirit encouraged him with the words: 'Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome' (v. 11). God knew that for Paul to testify in front of the hostile Sanhedrin needed great courage and conviction.

God also knows that whenever we are called to witness or testify for our faith, it takes great courage and conviction. In such situations we don't need to rely on our own words but rather the wisdom of the Spirit, although this requires both faith and courage. Blessed Charles de Foucauld said: 'One of the things we absolutely owe to Our Lord is never to be afraid.' But of course, we often are and in realizing this we are humbled. What is it we are afraid of? Of being laughed at, mocked, ridiculed, ostracized or, worse, the cold draft of indifference.

In one sense we don't need to defend our faith – our faith is big enough to stand up for itself. What we do need to do is to be willing to share the reason for the hope we have. We simply need to share sincerely and with conviction what God means to us and how grateful we are to have him in our life. But there is no getting around the fact that it takes courage to take a stand for what we believe. Nevertheless, something not often realized is that people are crying out to hear the gospel, and they respond when it is presented with goodness and love in our heart.

'Do not be held back by doubts or fears. Say "Yes" with courage and without reserve...' (St Pope John Paul II)

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

John 17:20-26

Friday 13 May

Acts 25:13-21 • Easter Weekday

Luke begins today's reading with a seemingly simple and innocent statement: 'A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus' (NIV). However, to Luke's original readers it had a hidden and fuller meaning. This is why a little bit of history or background can help us penetrate the Scriptures.

Agrippa was the last of the Herodian rulers; his father, Herod Agrippa I, was the same Herod who had James executed and Peter imprisoned (see Acts 12). Agrippa II was only seventeen when his father died and the Roman Emperor Claudius decided that he was too young to succeed his father. However, by AD 50 he had been allowed to take charge of the region ruled by his uncle, Herod of Chalcis. By the time we join him his rule had been extended to include regions that used to form part of his father's kingdom.

What about Bernice? Bernice was not Agrippa's wife but his oldest sister. She had been married to his uncle, Herod of Chalcis, with whom she had two sons. After his death in AD 48, she moved in with Agrippa in what, according to the gossip of the day, was viewed as an incestuous relationship. She later married Polemon, King of Cilicia, in an attempt to overcome the scandal, but soon returned to Agrippa, and went on to become the mistress of Titus, who conquered Jerusalem in AD 70. Luke doesn't refer to any of this but his rather curt reference to Bernice would have spoken volumes to his first readers.

The gospel message does not discriminate against rich or poor, educated or uneducated, famous or unknown. We see this principle today: Festus, Agrippa and Bernice belonged to the ruling elite, the celebrity class of their age. They were intrigued and fascinated by Paul's message about 'a dead man named Jesus who [he] claimed was alive' (v. 19 NIV). The gospel message is attractive and attracts. We should never be ashamed of the gospel but have confidence in its power to win over people from every stratum of society. We live in a celebrity culture where wealth and fame are valued over and above all things, whereas the gospel of Jesus Christ looks into the heart and sees therein a human being in need of God's mercy and salvation.

Lord, give me a new confidence in the power of the gospel to attract, regardless of status, power or wealth.

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

John 21:15-19

Saturday 14 May

(Feast) St Matthias • Acts 1:15-17, 20-26

The early Church cast lots to decide between Matthias and Barsabbas who were in the running to replace Judas. To be fair, lot-casting came at the end of a process of discernment involving prayer to the Holy Spirit. The lot fell to Matthias and a sorry chapter in the Church's history, Judas's betrayal, came to a close. Interestingly, there are more references to Judas in the New Testament than Matthias, who doesn't appear again, his witness lost to human history but remembered by tradition.

The New Testament writers never shy away from scandal or behaviour unbefitting of our vocation or calling as Christians. The first disciples had their fair share of failure, ranging from dullness of heart to Peter's denial and Judas's betrayal. And so did the early Christian communities – in the epistles we find teaching seeking to address quarrelling, infighting and sexual immorality (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 5:1-12). Sin and sanctity, scandal and holiness, are bedfellows, it seems. Scandal has the effect of undermining faith as the recent wave of child abuse cases within the Church illustrates. St Pope John Paul II said: 'The scandalous behaviour of a few has undermined the credibility of many.' There can be and is no excuse, and we all fall short of the glory of the Lord (Rom. 3:23).

So how do you react to scandal in the Church? Does it dishearten and discourage you? Does it unsettle and rock your faith? Of course it does – how could it not? Blessed John Henry Newman, no stranger to controversy himself, saw scandal not as a source of discouragement but rather as a sign of the Church's divine destiny, for how could a merely human institution continue to survive despite such gross failure? He saw the Church rather as a cork which could be submerged but never sunk because it keeps bobbing up to the surface. We take heart from his wisdom and ask for the intercession of St Matthias, on this his feast-day, that the Church be kept safe on her journey through the turbulent waters of history and find safe harbour in the kingdom of the Father.

'It also is a fact that, in spite of them [the gravest scandals] still, the Church has ever got on and made way, to the surprise of the world; as an army may fight a series of bloody battles, and lose men, and yet go forward from victory to victory.' (Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman)

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

Sunday 15 May

Acts 2:1-11 • Pentecost (Solemnity)

At Pentecost, the Apostles underwent a kind of baptism. It was as if they cast off their old clothes to be robed anew in the resplendent and radiant white garment of the Holy Spirit. The idea of being clothed in a resplendent and radiant garment reminds us of Christ's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor: 'And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white' (Luke 9:29). There is a profound connection between the transfiguration on the mountain and the transformation on Pentecost morning. The Holy Spirit changed and changes everything! The Spirit has and always will astonish, amaze and astound us.

One of the great works of the Holy Spirit was the Second Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII, the Council's prophet and visionary, had an acute sense of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and in us all. One of the wonderful fruits of the Council was its teaching documents. As one example, *Lumen gentium* says the following about the Holy Spirit: 'Whenever the Spirit intervenes, he leaves people astonished. He brings about events of amazing newness; he radically changes persons and history...It is not only through the sacraments and the ministrations of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the people, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor. 12:11), he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank...He makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church' (para. 12).

Being filled and renewed in the power of the Spirit is an invitation we cannot refuse. To receive the gift of the Spirit we bow our heads in expectation of God's blessing. We make this prayer conscious of our sin, weakness and failure, for the Spirit is poured out not when we are strong but when we cry out in need and supplication.

'Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful and enkindle in them the fire of thy love. Send forth thy Spirit and they shall be created. And thou shalt renew the face of the earth. O God who hast taught the hearts of the faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit, grant that by the gift of the same Spirit we may be always truly wise, and ever rejoice in his consolation, through Christ our Lord. Amen.'

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

Romans 8:8-17 • John 14:15-16, 23-26

Monday 16 May

Ordinary Weekday • James 3:13-18

James asks of us a challenging question: ‘Who is wise and understanding among you?’ (v. 13). Wisdom is different from the power of the intellect or having knowledge or understanding. In other words we can be intelligent but not necessarily wise. James informs us that God’s wisdom comes from heaven and has heavenly qualities. It is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (v. 17). Wisdom is first and foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit. However, grace builds on nature, and we are called to pursue and cultivate wisdom as a virtue. Obtaining a virtue like wisdom requires dedication, commitment and holy desire.

In this year dedicated to mercy, we seek especially the wisdom which comes through mercy. This is a grace which is the fruit of examining our own conscience and grasping the depth of the mercy and forgiveness we have received. This wise insight teaches us to show the same mercy towards others. This twofold grace or blessing enables us to look kindly on our own weakness and frailty, be compassionate towards others and cultivate a way of looking at the world through a prism of God’s goodness, kindness and mercy. St Thérèse of Lisieux, herself a Doctor of the Church, said: ‘Jesus needs neither books nor doctors of divinity to instruct souls; he, the Doctor of Doctors, teaches without the noise of words.’ We learn wisdom through prayer, reading the Scriptures, and studying the teaching of the Church and the lives of the saints.

Wisdom is rather like humility: if you think you are wise, you’re probably not! In fact, in learning to be wise we first learn that we are fools, rather as in seeking to be humble we learn that we are proud. At the heart of a quest for wisdom is a hunger and thirst to be holy. And the desire to be holy is no more than the desire to be a saint. The saints of old and the saints of all time testify that the gift of wisdom resides with those who fear the Lord. This fear isn’t fear at all – it is rather a profound love for God. For wisdom comes from God, and he pours this gift out lavishly on those who seek him with all their soul, all their strength and all their will.

Lord, teach me to seek the wisdom which comes from above and is full of grace, goodness and kindness.

James 3:13-18 • Psalm 18(19):8-10, 15

Mark 9:14-29

Tuesday 17 May

James 4:1-10 • Ordinary Weekday

Today's reading is about pride, our greatest enemy, and humility, our greatest friend.

According to C S Lewis pride is the great sin. In Mere Christianity he wrote:

‘According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride.

Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind...it is Pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.’

Since the Fall pride and death are our greatest enemies. Pride was at the heart of our fall from grace. The story of Adam and Eve (see Gen. 3) is mocked, scorned and ridiculed by many as ancient mythology and irrelevant in our scientific world. Yet nothing could be further from the truth as its wisdom has spoken to every generation and continues to speak to us today. We fell away from God's grace through thinking we knew best, through believing that fulfilment and freedom could be ours independent of God. In short, we rebelled against the good Creator, preferring our ways to God's ways. Humility doesn't come naturally. It's a struggle involving the bitter-sweet gift of self-knowledge. St Francis de Sales said: ‘Pride dies twenty minutes after death.’ In other words we can never truly be free of pride's grip – a curse or remnant of original sin.

The remedy to pride is repentance, its antidote conversion, contrition and sorrow for sin and striving to live a holy life. The first step to being humble is to realize that you are proud – because if you think you are not conceited, then you are very conceited indeed. The humble realize that they need God's grace more than anything else. They don't go around wringing their hands and lamenting their sin and failure; on the contrary, the humble focus on God's mercy and forgiveness, of which they are grateful recipients. The humble of the earth have a living sense of God's greatness and majesty, and find giving thanks and praise to God easy and natural. They know it is pointless and futile to rebel against God for they know that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (v. 6).

Lord, today I humble myself and turn again to your grace, for where the sin of pride abounds, the grace of humility superabounds.

James 4:1-10 • Psalm 54(55):7-11, 23

Mark 9:30-37

Wednesday 18 May

Ordinary Weekday • James 4:1-17

It is hard to live in the moment. Our minds race and quickly unsettle. We are slaves to schedules, ruled mercilessly by the tyranny of the urgent. Sometimes life can feel like a rollercoaster or merry-go-round, and our world spins so fast all we want is to get off. We are kidding ourselves if we think this is a modern disease; it isn't – it's as old as the hills. The ancients were as afflicted as we are today.

Part of our fallen human condition is that we get caught up in our lives and lose sight of what is important. There are two vital truths we need to keep in mind: the first is that we live in God's presence; the second is that we are mortal and life is precious, precarious and fleeting. It can seem at times that so many things conspire to prevent us from being in touch with God's presence and the brevity of life. James wants his readers to be under no illusion that our lives on earth are but a breath. Thomas Hobbes, the English philosopher, said that human life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'. James is more gentle and lyrical, 'you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes' (v. 14).

We don't need a life-changing accident or event to give us this perspective: we just need God's grace. We don't need to spend hours in prayer to enjoy a lively sense of God's presence: we just need God's grace. This is because the Holy Spirit enables us to live in a sober and clear way, conscious and grateful that every breath we take, every move we make, God is watching over us. We live and move and have our being in God; our very existence is held in the palm of his hand.

We don't truly know what will happen from one day to the next; we live in time but our destiny is eternal in God. When we practise the presence of God, we become sensitive and responsive to our eternal destiny and not so much controlled and dominated by the demands of the urgent and here and now.

Lord, by your grace may I seize every day as one to live in your presence and be grateful for the gift of life.

James 5:9-12 • Psalm 103(102):1-2,3-4,8-9,11-12

Mark 10:1-12

Thursday 19 May

James 5:1-6 • Ordinary Weekday

They say, don't they, that there are lies, damned lies and statistics. Well, one statistic that doesn't lie but does shame us is that in today's world the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The richest 1 per cent of the world's population are getting wealthier, owning more than 48 per cent of global wealth, according to the recently published Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report, which warned that growing inequality could be a trigger for recession.

The report shows that a person needs just \$3,650 – including the value of the equity in their home – to be among the wealthiest half of world citizens. However, more than \$77,000 is required to be a member of the top 10 per cent of global wealth holders, and \$798,000 to belong to the top 1 per cent. Taken together, the bottom half of the global population own less than 1 per cent of the world's total wealth. These are staggering and sobering statistics, which make today's reading from James's letter to the Jerusalem church highly relevant. He pulls no punches: he is direct, even harsh, as he makes clear that those who have wealth run the risk of being deaf to the cry of the poor, who are dear to God and who hears their cry.

We cannot avoid social justice if we believe in Christ. As St Pope John Paul II said: 'Commitment to the poor is based on the gospel; it does not have to rely on some political manifesto.' Pope Francis has a great heart for the poor and is often accused of being a Marxist. As Archbishop Helder Camera said: 'When I give bread to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no bread, they call me a Communist.' If our brothers and sisters suffer, so do we. Every human person has the right to enjoy the goods and blessings of the earth. As St Augustine said, echoing the sentiment of today's reading: 'You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all and not only to the rich.'

Lord, teach me to see you in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the displaced. For in serving them, I serve you.

James 5:1-6 • Psalm 48(49):14-20

Mark 9:41-50

Friday 20 May

Ordinary Weekday • James 5:9-12

Every verse of today's reading is jam-packed with life and wisdom, but we are going to focus only on verse 9: 'Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!' (NIV). God knows we grumble in many ways about many things but especially those we rub up against every day: those we live with, work colleagues, friends, relatives but also fellow parishioners. Some people just get on our nerves – we find something about them irritating or annoying. Furthermore, there are those we resent, gossip about and find impossible to be around. This was the case in the first Christian communities and is the case in many parishes today. Welcome to the real world.

But why can't we all just get along? If only it was that easy! The reason why we all just can't get along and why it isn't that easy is because of our fallen nature and an absence of love. We lose sight of God's mercy and compassion and forget that every Christian community is not full of saints but sinners – a good analogy would be a field hospital full of hurting and wounded soldiers. So how do we stop grumbling, moaning and complaining? We need a grace of revelation, a work and gift of the Holy Spirit, who gives us insight which renews within us a living sense that God has shown us mercy and forgiven us all our sins. We also need a special grace which sees our brothers and sisters as God sees them: as dearly beloved children, created in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26), destined for eternal glory and partakers in the divine nature.

So next time you are tempted to grumble, moan and complain, remember these words of C S Lewis:

'There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously – no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.'

James 5:9-12 • Psalm 102(103):1-4, 8-9, 11-12

Mark 10:1-12

Saturday 21 May

James 5:13-20 • Ordinary Weekday

When you are in trouble, do you pray? Many do; some even say when caught up in a crisis or in need: 'I'm not religious but I have never prayed so hard in all my life.' When you are happy, do you sing hymns of praise? It requires a grace to sing songs of praise when we are happy as we tend to turn to God more readily when we are unhappy. When you are sick, do you seek out the sacrament of anointing? Some of us might if we were facing major surgery or had been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. However, most of us don't, not wanting to impose on or bother our priests, when, in fact, we are not bothering or imposing, simply seeking out the healing mercy of the Church.

James's advice holds as true today as when he first wrote it: 'Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord' (v. 14). Illness brings us in touch with many harsh realities of our existence: we experience powerlessness; we understand our limitations; we recognize our own frailty; and we sense something of our own mortality. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: 'Every illness can make us glimpse death' (para. 1500).

The sacrament of the sick (rooted in today's reading) is underpinned by a lively hope and expectation that God is able to restore the sick person to health. However, over the centuries a tradition evolved in which the sacrament was primarily administered to those on their death-beds and it became known as 'Extreme Unction'. This practice explains in part why we don't avail ourselves of its grace more readily.

The Church has never failed to ask the Lord to heal the sick. It seems fitting in this Year of Mercy that this merciful sacrament be rediscovered and administered to those who perhaps haven't considered receiving it. It is not Last Rites, it can be given more than once, it is strength to get better or live with serious illness or frailty in advanced age. As the Catechism teaches us: 'In the sacraments Christ continues to touch us in order to heal us.'

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

James 5:13-20 • Psalm 140(141):1-3, 8
Mark 10:13-16

Sunday 22 May

(Solemnity) The Holy Trinity • John 16:12-15

Many clergy will candidly confess that giving the homily on Trinity Sunday is a difficult task and not a great favourite of theirs. Some would rather clean the leaves out from the guttering on the church or presbytery than get their heads around giving an inspiring sermon on the Blessed Trinity. However, that's the point in a way: we don't need to get our heads around the Trinity but in it!

No one is ever going to get their head around this mystery – their heart maybe, but never their head. This is because we enter this great truth of Three Persons in One God through the grace of revelation, through being taught and led by the Holy Spirit. We also enter it humbly and on our knees because in one sense the Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith. The Blessed Trinity is the secret kept hidden but fully and finally revealed by Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was the key that unlocked the revelation that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Judaism and Islam recognize God as Father but not as Son or as Holy Spirit – in fact, they find this idea abhorrent. Christianity teaches, however, that within the Godhead there are Three Persons, all three of whom are God.

Rather than allowing the doctrine of the Trinity to overwhelm us, it should give us life and refresh us in our faith, because in seeking to enter this mystery we draw closer to God, who delights to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom. The only way to enter into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity more deeply is to have faith, and from this faith comes a deeper understanding. If we set out to understand and then believe, we will not touch its majesty.

While on earth Jesus revealed God as Trinity. He constantly referred to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and so should we because we are invited into a relationship with God as our Father, the Son as our Redeemer and the Spirit as our Sanctifier. Our pilgrimage on earth is a journey back into the heart of the Trinity, and the hope of our salvation is that in heaven we will behold forever the very beauty of the Trinity in the beatific vision.

‘Firmly I believe and truly – God is Three and God is One: and I next acknowledge duly – manhood taken by the Son.’ (Blessed John Henry Newman)

Proverbs 8:22-31 • Psalm 8:4-9

Romans 5:1-5 • John 16:12-15

Monday 23 May

1 Peter 1:3-9 • Ordinary Weekday

Today's reading reads like a prayer, because it is a prayer. Peter, the Rock of the Church, is moved to give God thanks and praise. We can glean much from his prayer of thanksgiving about living the Christian life. His prayer begins by acknowledging God as the Father of Jesus Christ. This is our prayer too. What a wonderful prayer to sing in our hearts as we rise each day: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!' (v. 3).

Peter goes on to acclaim God's mercy: he is the God of mercy and compassion. The greatest sign of the Father's mercy is baptism because through this sacramental grace we receive new birth and new life. This grace is our greatest gift, our most precious and cherished possession. Why? Because it is our inheritance which cannot spoil, perish or fade. St Pope John Paul II was once asked what was the greatest day of his life. The journalist who posed the question thought he would say his election as Pope but rather he replied, 'The greatest day of my life was the day of my baptism.'

We don't tend to think of our faith as our most valuable possession, but according to Peter it is of greater worth than gold, which, as we know, perishes even though it is refined by fire (v. 7). Faith in Christ answers the most profound question of life: for what purpose do we exist? Do we exist to make money, acquire wealth, live comfortably and indulge ourselves until we die? Peter's wisdom cascades down the centuries, filled with the grace and insight of the Holy Spirit. Faith means that although we do not see God we believe in him (v. 8; cf. Heb. 11:1). It is this gift of faith which can fill our lives with an inexpressible and glorious joy. This joy is the fruit of our baptism; it is our birthright, if you like. All we need to do is claim this right – it is ours. Grab it with both hands, giving thanks and praise to the Father for the gift of his Son and the salvation he has won for us.

Lord, thank you for the gift of baptism, your most wonderful and magnificent gift. We could not earn it, we do not deserve it, but through it we are washed clean and inherit the gift of eternal life.

1 Peter 1:3-9 • Psalm 110(111):1-2, 5-6, 9, 10

Mark 10:17-27

Tuesday 24 May

Ordinary Weekday • 1 Peter 1:10-16

It is a remarkable divine irony that Peter wrote his letter not realizing that it would become sacred Scripture, the inspired Word of God. Today's text addresses the reverence we should have for the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Peter teaches that we should read the Old Testament searching and seeking to identify how the Spirit of Christ was working in and through the prophets to point to the coming of Christ. St Jerome famously said: 'The Old Testament is pregnant with Christ.' He also said: 'Christ is made latent in the Old Testament but patent in the New.' Good old St Jerome! This great Scripture scholar speaks to us today about how we should read and approach the sacred text we know as the Old Testament.

The problem is that most of us prefer the New Testament to the Old. We can have a certain mindset that the God of the Old Testament is more primitive, angry and prone to judgement than the compassionate Father revealed by Jesus. This is to misconstrue and misunderstand the Hebrew Scriptures as they were a partial revelation, pointing to the fullness of revelation to come. The God of Israel and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ are one and the same. The Spirit gives us the wisdom to understand that this ancient text is replete with God's wisdom and inspiration.

Wanting us to grasp this truth, the bishops and fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote: 'These books, though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy. These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence' (Dei verbum 15). Just as the Spirit of Christ was at work in the prophets of old he is also at work in us, encouraging us to plumb the depths of the Old Testament. When we open up our hearts and minds to the Scriptures, the Father delights to teach us about the mystery of Christ.

Lord, inspire me to look into the Scriptures with a new joy and enthusiasm and find Christ there: Christ in the Torah, Christ in the Prophets, Christ in the Psalms and Christ in the Wisdom writings.

1 Peter 1:10-16 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

Mark 10:28-31

Wednesday 25 May

1 Peter 1:18-25 • St Bede the Venerable (Memorial in England only)

Yesterday we were encouraged to seek out God's wisdom in the Old Testament. Today we meet it head-on as Peter quotes directly from the prophet Isaiah. Peter identified a powerful and evocative word he wanted to bring to our attention. It is a word we rarely hear, a topic seldom discussed and one which almost has the aura of taboo about it: 'All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of God endures forever' (v. 24, quoting Isa. 40:6-8). What a beautiful, moving and yet sobering Scripture spoken from a prophet who lived many years before Christ. This is a word which is as true now as it was then: we are mortal, we are fragile, we live today but tomorrow we must die. Our glory, no matter how great or bright or impressive or newsworthy, fades like the flowers and grass of the fields. Such a Scripture has the power to change our lives.

In and of itself this Scripture is simply a truth about human existence. For Peter, and for us too, it has a backdrop, a sure and living foundation. Although it is true and certain that we are mortal and will die, we also have in us an imperishable seed, the spark of divine life, planted in us at baptism through the living and enduring word of God, which nothing can destroy. This is the grace of our baptism, and through faith we grasp that death is not the end but the beginning.

Death does not have to be a morbid or taboo subject. St Thomas à Kempis wrote: 'Happy is the man who keeps the hour of death always in mind and daily prepares for it.' The Spirit gives us a healthy (and not morbid) approach to life's most important certainty and helps us to commit ourselves to living a life of love – as Peter says, loving each other deeply and from the heart (v. 22). Tomorrow we celebrate the feast-day of St Philip Neri. He speaks to us today about how we should think about life and indeed about death.

'The best way to prepare for death is to spend every day of life as though it were the last. Think of the end of worldly honour, wealth and pleasure and ask yourself: And then? And then?'

1 Peter 1:18-25 • Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20

Mark 10:32-45

Thursday 26 May

(Memorial) St Philip Neri • 1 Peter 2:2-5, 9-12

Peter encourages us to crave pure spiritual milk in order that we might ‘grow up’ in our salvation. Just as we nourish our body, so we must feed our soul. If the body is not fed and watered, it becomes weak and eventually perishes. So too the soul: if it doesn’t suckle on the milk of salvation it grows weary and weak.

What is this pure spiritual milk to which Peter refers? The spiritual tradition of the Church identifies the following food/drink: prayer, Scripture, the Eucharist, Lectio Divina. A balanced spiritual diet consists of all four – too much of one and not enough of the other and our spiritual life can become unhealthy and out of kilter. For example, if we only read the Scriptures (as laudable as this would appear), neglecting prayer and the Eucharist, we could open ourselves up to the curse of fundamentalism and a simplistic view of the world. Too much prayer and not enough Scripture means our minds can easily wander and become lost in daydreams. The Eucharist, of course, is the source and summit of our faith and truly contains every grace and blessing we need, but we need to be nourished from both the table of the Bread of Christ and the Word of God, sacrament and word.

We look today to the example of St Philip Neri for balance and moderation, and a sense of fun and enjoyment in living the Christian life. He was born in Florence in 1515. On the eve of the feast of Pentecost in 1544 he had a profound and life-changing experience of the Holy Spirit in which he saw a vision of a ball of fire enter through his mouth and go to his heart. Straightaway he was filled with an intense divine love and fell to the floor, crying out, ‘Enough, enough, Lord, I can bear no more!’ After being ordained at thirty-five, he very quickly established a ministry reaching out to the young people of Rome. He was gifted with a light and humorous approach to living faith and enjoyed playing jokes and having fun with people. He once went around Rome with half his beard shaved off and used to set penances for young men that involved them making fools of themselves in public. It is not surprising, then, that St Philip Neri is the saint of joy, and today we ask for his intercession that we would learn the secret of God’s joy.

1 Peter 2:2-5, 9-12 • Psalm 99(100):2-5

Mark 10:46-52

Friday 27 May

1 Peter 4:7-13 • St Augustine of Canterbury (Feast in England)

The first followers of Christ believed his return was imminent. Peter couldn't have stated it any more clearly: 'The end of all things is at hand' (v. 7). But, guess what, two thousand years later, the end is still near. So did Peter get it wrong? Was the Rock of the Church confused and taken over by a frenzy of anticipation that Christ would return in his lifetime? Peter reassures us that his longing for the return of Christ is no frenzy or delusion and its delay is explained by understanding human time in God's mind: 'But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises, as some understand slowness' (2 Pet. 3:8-9).

It seems unlikely that the world will end tomorrow and Christ will return. And most of us, truth be told, are rather attached to the world, and its destruction or demise is not something we want or can even pray for. Since the beginning we have been encouraged to pray for the return of Christ because it heralds our salvation and God's reign. This is clearly in the Father's hands – no one knows the day or the hour. What we do know is that our dignity and destiny is to be with the Lord, and this is what we pray for when we pray as the Church through the centuries has prayed: 'Maran atha. Come, Lord Jesus, come.' This is first and foremost a prayer of the heart.

While we may find it hard to want the world to end now, we do want the injustice of this world to end; we do want the world to be deeply changed and the civilization of love to begin; we do want a world of justice and peace, without violence, without hunger.

Come, Lord! Come where there is injustice and violence. Come to the refugee camps, in Darfur and in North Kivu, in so many places in the world. Come where drugs dominate. Come, too, among the rich who have forgotten you and who live only for themselves. Come where you are not known. Come to your world and renew the world of today. Come also to our hearts. Come and renew our lives. Come to our hearts so that we ourselves can be the light of God, your presence. (Pope Francis)

Proper of Season: 1 Pt 4:7-13 • Ps 95(96):10-13 • Mk 11:11-26

Proper of Saints: 1 Thess 2:2-8 • Ps 116(117) • Lk 10:1-9

Saturday 28 May

Ordinary Weekday • Jude 17, 20-25

Since the beginning the Church has taught that we are living in the end times. In other words, the next intervention by God will be the return of Christ, bringing about the end of human history and the beginning of God's definitive kingdom and realm. These ideas and truths can seem a little beyond us, consumed as most of us are with the here and now. Faith is lived out in the stuff of daily life, and contemplating the end of the world or the return of Christ can seem rather too unworldly and unrealistic.

The call of faith is always an invitation to bridge the gap between doctrine and our daily lives. How can a teaching like the return of Christ impact our daily lives? Or do we simply never give it any thought? Thankfully we have the Catechism of the Catholic Church to help us: 'Since the Ascension God's plan has entered into its fulfilment. We are already at the "last hour". Already the final age of the world is with us, and the renewal of the world is irrevocably underway; it is even now anticipated in a certain real way' (para. 670).

St Francis of Assisi was once asked as he was working in the garden: 'Brother Francis, what would you do if you knew in the morning that the Lord was to return in the evening?' St Francis replied: 'I'd continue working in the garden.' In other words he was ready for the Lord's return, and each day he strove to live in God's presence as he went about his allotted tasks.

This story encapsulates the spirit of the teaching we find in Jude. We are called to encourage each other in living the faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keeping ourselves (and others) in God's love and waiting for the mercy of God to be revealed. Our lives are to carry the hallmark of mercy, and we are to show mercy to those who doubt, those who struggle with sin and those caught up in destructive lifestyles. In this we are motivated by the knowledge that human history and our lives are moving ever closer to the moment when time and history will come to an end and God's kingdom will finally and fully be established.

'To the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.' (v. 25)

Jude 17, 20-25 • Psalm 62(63):2-6

Mark 11:27-33

Sunday 29 May

Luke 9:11-17 • The Body and Blood of Christ (Solemnity)

Feeding 5,000 people is a daunting catering challenge even today! God wants to satisfy our deepest hunger – the ache within to know the love and mercy of the Father. Jesus' feeding miracle was a sign pointing to the miracle of miracles, the gift of the Eucharist, the source and summit of our faith. Today, on this holy feast-day, we celebrate the greatest gift and blessing of all, the supreme gift and blessing of the Eucharist.

Consider, if you will, that all the sacraments, all ministry, all mission, every apostolate, are bound up with and orientated towards the Eucharist. This is because the Eucharist is Christ himself. The other sacraments are actions of Christ but the Eucharist is Christ himself, the author of life and grace, the architect and captain of every blessing.

The word 'eucharist' has its roots in the Greek word eucharistein, meaning literally 'to give thanks', and perhaps praise from a truly grateful heart is the best-possible response to the God who loved us by creating us and saved us by redeeming us. The Eucharist highlights a key and fundamental truth of faith: we don't earn the Eucharist, we simply receive it in thanksgiving. The Eucharist is truly the sacrament of mercy because through it, in it and with it we receive every spiritual blessing and grace.

The Holy Spirit leads us to live in awe and wonder of this sublime grace we receive. What is truly awesome about the Eucharist is that through it the mercy and forgiveness of the cross of Jesus are made real and present to us. In a profound mystery of faith we are immersed into it and embraced by the tender mercy of God. This is why we draw such grace and strength from the Eucharist because every time we receive it we draw ever closer to the tender heart of the Father. Today, give thanks to the Father for the gift of creation, praise him for sending his Son and glorify him for pouring out upon us the Holy Spirit.

'I adore you, Lord and Creator, hidden in the Most Blessed Sacrament. I adore you for all the works of your hands, that reveal to me so much wisdom, goodness and mercy, O Lord. You have spread so much beauty over the earth and it tells me about your beauty, even though these beautiful things are but a faint reflection of you, incomprehensible Beauty.' (St Faustina)

Genesis 14:18-20 • Psalm 109(110):1-4

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 • Luke 9:11-17

Monday 30 May

Ordinary Weekday • 2 Peter 1:2-7

It is said that we only use a small percentage of our brain's potential. Scientists and neurosurgeons inform us that we have amazing abilities of memory, imagination and creativity that are as yet untapped. Perhaps part of our problem is that we have a low expectation of what we are really capable of. The same is true of our spiritual lives and of the grace we have received to live holy lives.

Peter is very clear in his teaching: God has given us everything we need for life and holiness (v. 3). By God's grace we can grow and mature and conquer in ways we haven't even begun to imagine. In other words, if we have faith we can have even greater faith; if we possess a certain goodness, this too can grow and increase. So can our self-control, our knowledge and our understanding. We can possess these blessings in ever-increasing measure and become the saints that God wants us to be.

The problem with this idea of being saints is that we tend to think of true holiness being the preserve of the clergy and the religious life brothers and sisters. Nothing could be further from the truth. Peter was a fisherman and so he should know what he was talking about when he said that we can all become saints. God wants saints without cassocks or veils but who wear jeans and tennis shoes. At least this is the vision of the one who stands in the shoes of the Fisherman:

'We need saints to live in the world, to sanctify the world and to not be afraid of living in the world by their presence in it. We need saints that drink Coca-Cola, that eat hot dogs, that surf the internet and that listen to their iPods. We need saints that love the Eucharist, that are not afraid or embarrassed to eat a pizza or drink a beer with their friends. We need saints who love the movies, dance, sports, theatre. We need saints that are open, sociable, normal, happy companions. We need saints who are in this world and who know how to enjoy the best in this world without being callous or mundane. We need saints.' (Pope Francis)

2 Peter 1:2-7 • Psalm 90(91):1-2, 14-16

Mark 12:1-12

Tuesday 31 May

Luke 1:39-56 • Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Feast)

The Magnificat is a hymn of praise and celebration of God's great mercy. In this special and extraordinary Year of Mercy, Mary our Mother in Faith, the Mother of God, watches over us and intercedes for us that each of us would rediscover the joy and tender mercy of God. Her hymn of praise reflects a unique insight into the mystery of our salvation. To pray the Magnificat is a great privilege because in it we touch Mary's profound insight into the mercy of God. Her hymn of praise, sung as it was at the threshold of the home of Elizabeth, was dedicated to the mercy of God which extends from 'generation to generation' (v. 50). Her prayer of praise was the fruit of her experience of God.

The Holy Spirit moves us to make this holy prayer our own. We too can sing the Magnificat because when we contemplate and meditate on what God has done for us in Christ we can but glorify the Lord and rejoice in God our Saviour. The Mighty One has done great things for us too – we have received baptism, the sacraments, the Eucharist, the teaching of the Church, the many graces and blessings. God's mercy has rained down on every generation. We were hungry but God has filled us with good things – the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

We venerate this special prayer in the Church's life and especially so in the Year of Mercy, because Mary, although conceived immaculately, rejoices in God's mercy towards her. How much more can we, who were born into original sin but blessed with the grace of baptism and the forgiveness of our sins, sing a song of praise, thanksgiving and gratitude to the God of mercy and compassion.

'Therefore it is an excellent and fruitful custom of holy Church that we should sing Mary's hymn at the time of evening prayer. By meditating upon the incarnation, our devotion is kindled, and by remembering the example of God's Mother, we are encouraged to lead a life of virtue. Such virtues are best achieved in the evening. We are weary after the day's work and worn out by our distractions. The time for rest is near, and our minds are ready for contemplation.' (St Bede)

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

Isaiah 12:2-6 • Luke 1:39-56