

The celebrity culture is now so entrenched within our society that we can safely talk of the 'cult of celebrity'. The footballer David Beckham, the fashion icon Kate Moss, the businessman Richard Branson, the actors Will Smith and Helen Mirren are lauded and acclaimed and virtually bowed down to. Whereas even a generation ago fame was associated with exceptional talent, even genius, nowadays young people set their sights on being famous whether or not they have any discernible talent or ability! This is not to say that David Beckham, Kate Moss, Richard Branson, Will Smith and Helen Mirren aren't super talented but that lesser talents can become famous simply for being themselves and securing exposure on TV.

The feast day we are celebrating today is the complete antithesis of the cult of celebrity. The feast of All Saints is a sign of contradiction, a shining beacon of the hope that living a holy life can bring – a life not in tune with the shallow values of our culture but with the Beatitudes. If ever you wanted a blueprint on how to live your life, these twelve verses from St Matthew's Gospel fit the bill. The Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus'

preaching and really in so many ways at the heart of the kingdom of God.

Right from the very beginning, when God first called his people Israel, the idea of the kingdom of God or heaven took hold. For Israel this kingdom was about territory and land but in the Beatitudes Jesus revealed that he came to bring the kingdom of heaven on earth. In the Beatitudes we see the face of Christ mirrored in the men and women who have risen to the altar of sanctity in the Church but also in those who have not been beatified or canonized but lived lives of heroic virtue. Because this is what holiness truly is: it is faith worked out on the battlefield of daily living, a front-line, in-the-trenches kind of holiness. This is where our greatest dignity and our greatest destiny lie: to be saints like those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith.

'[In the kingdom of heaven] true peace will reign, where no one will experience opposition either from self or from others. God himself will be virtue's reward; he gave virtue and has promised to give himself as the best and greatest reward that could exist.' (St Basil the Great)

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

1 John 3:1-3 • Matthew 5:1-12

Yesterday we celebrated and rejoiced over the saints who have attained the bliss of heaven. They are at their journey's end. Today we remember and offer up prayers for those who have died, who have passed over from this life to the next, but, as the Church teaches, need to be cleansed and purified. We could understand today's feast as an invitation to call to mind and contemplate the Catholic teaching and mystery of purgatory.

It is important to say that the faithful departed who are in purgatory have inherited the gift of eternal life. They died in God's grace and friendship and their eternal salvation is assured – through the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord. Nowadays it is as if we have lost confidence in presenting and upholding the Church's teachings on the final things – heaven, hell, purgatory, judgement and Christ's second coming. We need, however, to understand that these teachings have been part of the Church's patrimony since the beginning and will not change. They are divine teachings, holy truths. What we need to do is rediscover them and experience the Spirit giving us fresh understanding about them.

The uniquely Catholic doctrine of purgatory was formulated at the Council of Florence (1438–45) and the Council of Trent (1545–63). The Church has held to the teaching of purgatory because of its sense of the need to be cleansed and purified. Perhaps one of the abuses which occurred in relation to purgatory was the idea that human time could be allocated to it but this simply cannot be true. Purgatory could be an instant of time rather than several thousand years as it has often been understood. Furthermore, the great saints often taught that the joy of purgatory was second only to the joy of heaven.

Today we pray for our dead, our loved ones, the faithful departed, our brothers and sisters who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith.

'I don't believe it would be possible to find any joy comparable to that of a soul in purgatory except the joy of the blessed in paradise. For it is a joy that goes on increasing day by day as God more and more flows in upon the soul, which he does abundantly in proportion as every hindrance to his entrance is consumed away.' (St Catherine of Genoa)

Isaiah 25:6-9 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 7-9, 13-14

Romans 5:5-11 • Luke 7:11-17



Today's story is unique to Luke's Gospel. Zacchaeus was probably responsible for a tax district, with other tax collectors reporting to him. There is no doubt that as a chief tax collector he would have been hated and despised – even loathed – by his fellow countrymen in the affluent region of Jericho. Basically Zacchaeus had grown rich on the backs of others and was, in effect, a spy, a traitor, a collaborator with the occupying Roman army. Anyway it is not difficult to get the picture – think child abuser today or tax evader or drug baron and so on.

Every generation has their pariahs. Consider, if you will, how you would react if your bishop or parish priest was reported to have dined with a local drug baron or was reaching out to ex-prisoners, especially those convicted of sexual crimes. We would be scandalized! We might not like to think so, but we would find it hard to stomach or understand. We might find ourselves grumbling, rather as they did in Jesus' day, 'He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner' (v. 7).

This encounter between Jesus of Nazareth and the chief tax collector Zacchaeus highlights perfectly the

'scandal of grace'. It brings to the fore this very important biblical teaching that where sin abounds, grace super-abounds. It shows us that sin, darkness, moral confusion and ignorance attract rather than repel God – because God loves the sinner but hates the sin. It is the sin which is the enemy, not the person caught up in it.

Zacchaeus' experience of God's mercy and compassion touched and healed him, and led him to repentance and conversion. No one is beyond God's grace and mercy; no one is beyond redemption; no one is outside of God's kindness and compassion. We are to be a living expression, a sign, a sacrament, of this same mercy, kindness and forgiveness. We start first of all in our own lives. A resentful, angry Christian, who holds on to hurts and offences, is a contradiction in terms. In learning to forgive others, to hold out the hand of friendship and brotherhood/sisterhood to those we find difficult, we become this living sign, this sacrament of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Lord, you treated everyone you met with great dignity and compassion; you saw their true dignity as persons created in your image and likeness. May I now go and do likewise.

Wisdom 11:22-12:2 • Psalm 144(145):1-2, 8-14
2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2 • Luke 19:1-10



We judge each other by the company we keep. This is a social reality which has existed as part of the human condition since the beginning of time. We gravitate towards our own in terms of class, education and cultural/religious background. Jesus, however, challenged this way of behaving in his own day and challenges it today.

The backdrop of his teaching was a social occasion, a banquet at a leading Pharisee's house. Clearly the host was aiming to be the host 'with the most'. He wanted to showcase his rich friends, his contacts and his standing in society. Pretty human, pretty standard behaviour and pretty understandable. This is your typical quid pro quo situation – he gives to them and expects them to return the favour. It is what makes the world go round. There were clearly not many 'downwardly mobile' people at this party. In a society without social services or a national health service the poor and disabled were on the scrapheap. People, as they have done in every age, went out of their way to avoid them, not socialize with them.

However, throughout history God has raised up men and women who have deliberately reached out

beyond their own social circle. St Francis of Assisi springs to mind, as do Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa and St Charles Borromeo, whose feast-day we are celebrating today. But what about us? Do we have this attitude? Do we treat people in the way that Jesus wants us to?

Christians are called to be the most generous people on God's earth. We hold parish events and parish functions and parish fêtes, but how often do we specifically organize an event for the homeless, the poor, those recently out of prison, the refugee or the asylum seeker? Maybe there are lots of parishes and Christian communities who are reaching out in this way but they must be keeping their light under a bushel, so to speak. Well, God bless them but it would be great if they would share the light and insight they have received! Of course, we have organizations such as CAFOD, Oxfam and Christian Aid, which reach out generously to those in need. But there are many people on our own doorsteps who are in desperate need of help and we are called to open our hearts in response to them.

Lord, teach me above all to be a cheerful giver and to have a generous and kind heart.

Romans 11:29-36 • Psalm 68(69):30-37
Luke 14:12-14

In Middle Eastern culture hospitality and politeness are deeply cherished virtues. Actual or even perceived rudeness can cause great offence. This was also true in Jesus' day. In the parable Jesus told, the guests treat the master and his hospitality with contempt. In first-century Israel it was customary to send out advance invitations to dinner guests, much as we do today. The next step was to hear from the host's servant that the meal was ready, which is exactly what happens in verse 17. It was considered deeply insulting to accept the initial invitation and then not turn up, and Jesus' first hearers would have understood how rude and disdainful the rejection of these invited guests was. They would have known that the excuses given were poor and feeble and not the real reason for their failure to attend.

The Pharisees believed that they would be invited to the banquet of the kingdom of heaven because they kept the law. This is why one of the guests cried out, 'Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God' (v. 15 NIV). They believed that they were special and part of an exclusive group who would enjoy the privileges of the kingdom because of their dedication

and commitment in keeping the Torah. They had lost sight of God's mercy and kindness.

True to form Jesus knocked this idea on the head and through his hard-hitting parable revealed the open-hearted generosity of God towards all men and women. God invites all to his heavenly banquet. Salvation is offered to all and it is very likely that we will be very surprised indeed to see who is in the kingdom of heaven.

God's invitation is given to all, but it is up to us to accept. This acceptance is not something we do simply once but needs to be a daily response. Jesus says to every human being, 'Come, for everything is now ready' (v. 17 NIV). Unlike the reluctant guests in Jesus' parable we respond with open and generous hearts. We respond with whole-hearted commitment, refusing to allow our day-to-day preoccupations to prevent us from spending generous periods of time with the Lord in prayer, reading the sacred Scriptures and loving our neighbour.

Lord, you invite us all to your heavenly banquet. May we not be hard-hearted or indifferent towards you but respond to your call with love and gratitude.

Romans 12:5-16 • Psalm 130(131)
Luke 14:15-24

Everything worthwhile in life involves cost or sacrifice. If you want to be a lawyer or a doctor or a nurse, you have to study hard and work long hours; if you want to play a musical instrument or achieve a sporting goal, you have to put in hours of practice. In all these areas of life we understand sacrifice, pain and commitment. It is not surprising, then, that Jesus highlights that it takes cost, hardship and sacrifice to follow him.

We could say that Jesus drew our attention to the 'bitter' and the Spirit points us to the 'sweet' elements of following Christ. Sacrifice and dedication for a professional, sporting or personal goal is one thing; sacrifice and dedication to a person we love and adore is a completely different proposition. Because when we love, sacrifice and dedication are not painful but necessary, and often part and parcel of what it means to love. A father sacrifices many things for his wife and his children – a mother likewise. A lover gives his or her all for his or her beloved. And it is the same with the Lord: we sacrifice and endure the cost because we have known and experienced God's love and mercy personally.

We don't follow or give our lives to a cold, remote deity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of comfort and compassion, loves each person uniquely and personally. Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, is loving and generous towards everyone who turns to him in humility and need. Yet we must count the cost of following the Lord. We must be prepared to step outside of our comfort zone. We must be prepared to carry our cross and endure whatever the Lord sends us.

This is not easy. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, despite her holiness and dedication to the poor throughout her whole life, experienced times of abject loneliness which even receiving the Eucharist could not assuage. However, during these 'dark nights of the soul', she clung on to the Lord with great courage and fortitude. She did this because she was a disciple who loved and therefore was prepared to pay the cost of this suffering.

Lord, help me to take up and carry my cross every day, but to do so with a loving and willing heart conscious of your great love, compassion and mercy. Saints of Ireland, pray for us.

Romans 13:8-10 • Psalm 111(112:1-5, 9) • Luke 14:25-33
(Ireland only: Heb 11:2; 12:1-4, 15; 13:1 • Ps 125(126) • Lk 6:20-26)



Have you ever lost anything which you needed immediately or something of great commercial or sentimental value? Some time ago a ditty captured the popular imagination with its refrain, 'Have you ever been in the situation where you've lost your keys and you've lost your phone?' Well, it seems most of us have. It's a horrible feeling and the ensuing search is often frantic and sometimes desperate. Whether it's lost keys or a mobile phone or spectacles we retrace our steps and look here, there and everywhere. There is, however, nothing quite like the joy of either someone else finding our missing possession or indeed finding it ourselves – often we are so frazzled and distracted that we need someone else's cool head to locate it.

This joy of recovery is an emotion shared by all human beings, and Jesus picks up on it to help us understand the very essence, the core if you like, of the gospel message. The heart of the gospel is that God saves sinners. And the inescapable truth is that we are all sinners – the only thing that separates us is degree or margin – and we are all in need of God's mercy and salvation. The heart of the Christian message is about us

being lost and then found, blind and then seeing.

In short, what we encounter in today's Gospel is God's amazing grace. Whilst the emphasis on God's love and mercy is consoling and comforting we can see how this knowledge or experience is rooted in our repentance. It is as if Jesus gives us a heads up and allows us to have an insight into what happens in heaven when one person repents: there is great rejoicing! Now repentance is by no means a popular subject. It wasn't in Jesus' day and it certainly isn't in ours. When did you last say not just, 'I am sorry' but, 'I truly repent and am sorry for my behaviour and resolve with God's help not to sin against you like this again'?

We always play a part in our salvation. This does not mean that we can save ourselves (we can't) but we can repent and turn away from our sin, freely and willingly but assisted and aided by God's grace.

*'Amazing grace how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.'*
(John Newton)

Romans 14:7-12 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14

Luke 15:1-10



Moses gave us the Ten Commandments; Jesus gave us the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are, if you like, the fulfilment of the interior demands of the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments). In the Beatitudes we encounter the law of the gospel, the fullest expression of what it means to live the Christian life. No wonder G.K. Chesterton said, 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.' For who among us has lived out the Beatitudes? If we did, we would change the world. The Beatitudes reveal fully what is only partially revealed through the Ten Commandments. In Christ and by his grace, these Beatitudes can be lived out. We can put them into practice; we can be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48).

If the Beatitudes are at the heart of the gospel, what then is at the heart of the Beatitudes? Love is at the heart of the Beatitudes: if you want to know what love is, study and put into practice the Beatitudes and you will be counted among the blessed. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it like

this: 'The New Law is called a law of love because it makes us act out of the love infused by the Holy Spirit... a law of grace, because it confers grace to act' (para. 1972). Holiness is putting into practice, by God's grace, the teaching of the Beatitudes. We are able to be poor in spirit, humble, meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be peacemakers, and endure suffering and persecution for Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit given to us at baptism and strengthened at Confirmation.

It was by putting today's Gospel into practice that the saints were able to live holy lives. Many of the Welsh Saints, on whom we are focusing today, gave their lives for Christ and were martyred. Not many of us are called to be baptized in our own blood – for this is what martyrdom is, a baptism in blood – but we are called to die to self and live for others. Today we give ourselves to the holy task of living the Beatitudes.

Teach me, Holy Spirit, to meditate on the Sermon on the Mount and to imprint its teachings and precepts in my heart and so become ever more conformed to Christ.

Romans 15:14-21 • Psalm 97(98):1-4 • Luke 16:1-8
(Wales only: Rev 7:2-4, 9-14, 15; 13:1 • Ps 23(24):1-6 • Mt 5:1-12)

*John 2:13-22 • Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome
(Feast of the Lord)*

Today we celebrate the dedication of the Basilica of St John Lateran in Rome. Why does the Church set aside this day, a feast day no less, to mark the dedication of this church which, while famous, is not as popular as St Peter's Basilica in Rome? The reason is because the Basilica of St John Lateran is the oldest church in Rome and the highest-ranking church in the world, followed by St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. St John Lateran is the mother church of all the churches in the world. When we celebrate its dedication we celebrate in some way the mystery of God's special presence and indwelling in buildings set apart for divine worship, including our own parish church.

We know that God is everywhere. Yet when we build a church God's glory comes to dwell there in such a way that the building can rightfully be called the house of God. Solomon recalls this mystery in his prayer of dedication of the temple in Jerusalem: 'The heavens, even the highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this temple that I have built!' (1 Kgs. 8:27 NIV). So, while we celebrate God's special indwelling in a building set aside for worship, we must remind

ourselves that God's presence is not confined there.

The Second Vatican Council most memorably changed the way we understood the church, in that the church was understood not simply as a building but as the people of God gathered in common worship of the good Creator. Nevertheless, the church is a holy and sacred place, dedicated to God; a place of adoration, praise, thanksgiving and worship of God. There is a wonderful, holy and sacred presence in a church, especially one in which the Eucharist is present or Mass has been celebrated. This sweet presence is the presence of Christ himself, and today's celebration of the dedication of St John Lateran invites us to renew our faith in the church as a house of God's presence, a house of prayer, and to cultivate ways of thinking and acting in God's house which help all who enter to behave in a reverential and respectful manner because they are aware they are on holy ground.

Lord God, your house is a house of prayer. It is sacred ground. Teach me to enter your church with zeal and love in my heart and with profound reverence because your presence resides there.

*Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12 • Psalm 45(46):2-9
John 2:13-22*

*(C) Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time • Luke 20:27-38*

In Jesus' day there were two dominant groups within Jewish society – the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus crossed swords with both of them. Today it is the Sadducees who confront the Lord. The Sadducees were an elite aristocratic group – a kind of club of socially aspirational and religiously conservative men. They rejected most of the Old Testament, accepting only the Pentateuch (the first five books) as divinely inspired. Unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in the afterlife, the spirit world or the resurrection of the body.

Intent on backing Jesus into a corner, the Sadducees present a bizarre scenario concerning a woman who appears to be something of a Black Widow, in that she has made her way through seven brothers, each of whom died after marrying her. In line with the law and Jewish culture at this time a woman whose husband died was offered future security by marrying any surviving male siblings (see Deut. 25:5-6). The question is, of course, whose wife will she be after death (v. 33)? Typical of the Lord he refuses to answer the question head

on. He rather points to the fact that marriage is a human institution which comes to an end with death, 'till death do us part'. That is not to say that those who are married are not reunited after death – surely they are – but they are reunited in a different way and in a different relationship before God. Beyond the confines of this world there is no need for marriage because both man and wife are joined together in their love and worship of God – in the same way as the angels are.

God is the God of the living, and when we die in Christ we receive the gift of eternal life and our bodies will rise again. This is the central event and the most basic truth of our faith. We look to the resurrection as our greatest hope, assuring us of our eternal destiny: Christ in us the hope of glory.

'What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.' (1 Cor. 15:42-44)

*2 Maccabees 7:1-2, 9-14 • Psalm 16(17):1, 5-6, 8, 15
2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5 • Luke 20:27-38*



We tend to associate sin with sex and sex with sin. The sexual sins – fornication (pre-marital sex), adultery, masturbation, viewing pornography, to name a few – are well and truly associated with our sinful condition. When we think of someone being a ‘great sinner’ it’s sexual sins we think of first. Historically in many Catholic countries, having a child outside of marriage was considered to be the ultimate sin and the poor woman was often driven out of her home village and ‘sent away’. Note, the man was not. We may not like to hear this, but it is true and should be the basis for an examination of conscience, leading us all to repent for treating people in such a deplorable way.

Jesus, on the other hand, always acted with compassion and kindness towards those caught up in sexual sin and reserved his harshest condemnation for sins such as spiritual pride, looking down on others, seeking the most important place, arrogance, hardness of heart and a refusal to believe. He was always very realistic about sin, teaching that it would always be with us, part of the human condition: ‘Temptations to sin are sure to come’ (v. 1).

One of the awful aspects of sin is that it likes to lead others into sin also. Jesus gave a very serious warning to those who cause his ‘little children’ to sin. It would be better for such a person ‘if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea’ (v. 2). He was probably referring to serious sin that causes stumbling and a fall from faith. His advice was stark and his warning unambiguous: ‘watch yourselves’ (v. 3 NIV). God’s concern for his children is seen in Jesus’ characterization of them as ‘little ones’. The responsibility is great because the children are precious in his sight. Parents, teachers, bishops, priests, deacons, religious and all of us need to be careful that we are not the reason others are led into sin.

And what is sin? To answer this, we turn to St Augustine of Hippo, who, great theologian that he was, saw sin as choosing to live for ourselves and not for God. He saw sin as a rebellion against the good Creator:

‘I enquired what iniquity was, and found it to be no substance, but the perversion of the will, turned aside from thee, O God, the Supreme, toward these lower things.’

Wisdom 1:1-7 • Psalm 138(139):1-10

Luke 17:1-6



Slavery was accepted as a given in ancient societies. It is perplexing that Jesus did not address it as a social evil or speak out against it. But then neither did Paul. It would take many centuries for it to be abolished but sadly its curse still exists in some parts of the world, where men and women are sold into slavery or domestic servitude. Historically, as we know, slavery in America was race related, and in England the class system ensured it endured until courageous reformers such as Wilberforce rose up to challenge it legally and politically. The abolition of slavery was a good thing – we are all agreed. However, in ancient societies, there were degrees of slavery and many slaves or servants were treated well and even taken into the family home. Their role, however, was clear – they were there to serve and they knew their place.

Shockingly for the disciples, Jesus adopted the position of a servant at his Last Supper, washing his disciples’ feet – a task reserved for a bond servant, who was the ‘lowest of the low’ (John 13:5). Peter was indignant that the Lord had adopted the position of a servant and made his view known in no

uncertain terms: ‘You shall never wash my feet’ (John 13:8). He would learn that being a servant was at the heart of Jesus’ mission: ‘who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men’ (Phil. 2:6-7).

We are called to be servants too. Whoever we are, whatever our position or rank, and no matter how important we think we are, to be a Christian is to serve with a generous and willing heart. Our bishops, our parish priests, our deacons: they are all servants. And Pope Francis too! He has made it abundantly clear that he recognizes that God has called him to serve and lay down his life for his people. Although he is the Pope and has the entire Vatican at his service, he lives simply and has embraced the lifestyle of a humble parish priest. We salute him for this sign to the world that he is an unworthy servant only doing his duty.

Lord, give me the heart of a servant and help me to serve my brothers and sisters with every fibre of my being.

Wisdom 2:23-3:9 • Psalm 33(34):2-3, 16-19

Luke 17:7-10



Jesus healed ten lepers but only one returned to say thank you. The one who returned is a model, if you like, of the heart of a disciple of Christ. He was not yet a disciple but he revealed through his gratitude and praise of God that he truly had the heart of a disciple. In a way, a good definition of a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth is 'one with a grateful heart'.

An ungrateful heart is indicative of an interior hardening which, rather like the medical heart condition arteriosclerosis, a hardening of the arteries, can lead to a kind of spiritual myocardial infarction (a heart attack!). When we examine our conscience, for example before we receive the sacrament of reconciliation, we tend to look at things we have not done and things we have done. We rarely address the condition of our heart. We rarely ask: Do I have a grateful heart? Do I thank God for all the blessings and graces I have received in my life? We need to learn to give ourselves a spiritual heart check-up.

Our hearts harden easily. We forget the way God has worked in our lives. We lose sight of the

many graces and blessings we have received. In short, we stop saying, 'Thank you, Lord.' Why is this? It is hard to say but often through lack of prayer and not taking time out to spend time reading the Scriptures and hearing from the Lord, causing us to grow resistant to spiritual truth and divine reality.

Taking responsibility for our hearts can be difficult and challenging. We don't like to be introspective and, truth be told, we find it hard to put the spotlight on ourselves. The remedy is always repentance and a turning away from those things we know make us resistant toward God and towards our neighbour. The Holy Spirit melts our hearts. In spending time with the Lord we discern the movement of the Spirit showing us the ways that we resist and fight against him. A soft heart is a work of the Spirit in our lives. It is the Spirit working in us who creates a heart pleasing to God.

Lord, create in me a pure and loving heart which delights to give you thanks and praise for all the wonderful things in my life and for all the graces and blessings I have received. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Wisdom 6:1-11 • Psalm 81(82):3-7

Luke 17:11-19



A first-century Jew's understanding of the kingdom of God was firmly centred in the notion of the coming Messiah crushing the nation's enemies (the occupying Roman army) and establishing a reign of wealth, prosperity and well-being for his chosen people. Jesus' understanding of the kingdom was at odds with this external and largely political vision which had taken hold in Israel and to some extent continues to this day. For Jesus the kingdom of heaven was within (v. 21). It was an interior reality, unrelated to geo-politics or a kingdom of this world – Jesus' kingdom was clearly a kingdom of another world.

Paul elaborated on this in his letter to the church gathered in Rome when he wrote, 'the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:7). So where we find peace, joy and righteousness, there we find the kingdom of God. For Origen, the great Scripture scholar of the early Church, Jesus was the kingdom. He said, 'The gospel of Jesus is *autobasileia*, the kingdom himself.' The kingdom of God was fully and ultimately revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

For our part we bring the kingdom of God to earth by being living witnesses of the fruits and gifts of the Spirit. This is why ultimately our greatest call and challenge is to live a holy life. It is by striving to live and move and have our being in the power of the Holy Spirit that we usher in the kingdom of God, as the saints before us have done. The kingdom then does not come by force or power or by interpreting the signs of God's coming. Neither does it come by prophecy or warning or threat or fear. No, the kingdom of God is within us. The kingdom first becomes a reality in our own hearts and then we each manifest it to the world in a unique and special way. Through witnessing to love, peace, long-suffering, patience, kindness, wisdom, fortitude and courage, the kingdom of God is established in our homes, at our work-place and in our parishes.

Lord, we join together in solidarity and communion to walk the path of holiness and by doing so usher in the kingdom of heaven which is within us but is manifest to the world by us becoming the salt of the earth and light to the world.

Wisdom 7:22-8:1 • Psalm 118(119):89-91, 130, 135, 175

Luke 17:20-25

Jesus will come again. This is a cherished truth of our faith as certain as the incarnation, the Blessed Trinity or the Virgin Birth. The second coming has a special place among us because, of all God's interventions in human history, it is the only one that has not yet occurred. This glorious and sacred teaching should not be understood as an obscure or rarefied doctrine. Rather it is a fundamental and essential teaching of our faith. Jesus taught frequently that the Son of God would return.

Drawing on examples from the drama of Israel's salvation history the Lord highlights how the anxieties, the cares and the distractions of life can overwhelm us to such an extent that we can become dull, complacent and ill prepared for that day. In Noah's day God intervened by sending a great flood, in Lot's day by destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. God's final intervention is still to come. This is the second coming, the return of Christ, which will herald the end of the world as we know it and the wrapping up of human history.

When will this happen? We do not know. How will it happen? We do not know. What we do know is

that it will happen because Jesus said that it would and the Church has proclaimed this profound reality since the beginning. The Church in her wisdom has guided her children away from the rash and foolish tendency to predict times and dates pertaining to the end of the world. However, she has not ceased to remind us that we should pray for and long for the return of the King. When working in the field one day St Francis of Assisi was asked by a brother what he would do if he knew Christ was coming back that day. He said that he would continue working in the field – he was ready.

We must become a people who pray and long for the return of Christ. When we celebrate the Eucharist, whether we realize it or not, we are praying for the ushering in of the kingdom of God, the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit brings alive in us the blessed hope of the Lord's return. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

"That is why Christians pray, above all in the Eucharist, to hasten Christ's return by saying to him: Marana tha! "Our Lord, come!" (CCC 671)

Wisdom 13:1-9 • Psalm 18(19):2-5

Luke 17:26-37

November is traditionally a month when we are invited to ponder the more sobering or even sombre truths of our faith. There is nothing like death, heaven, hell, purgatory and judgement to tune the mind, that is for sure! In recent years these Christian doctrines, to a large extent, have been relegated to the sidelines. We know that these truths or teachings play a part in Christian revelation but, on the whole, we would rather focus on the jollier or nicer parts of the message – the ones that are, as it were, more digestible, noble, popular and accessible, such as the joy of the gospel, serving the poor, the beauty of the liturgy, the call to pray, the glory of the Scriptures and so on. However, try as we might – and many do try – to hide or obscure these more sombre teachings, we cannot. They are integral to the gospel message and they are all part of its richness and beauty.

Today we are presented with a powerful scene of the last judgement. This frightening and intimidating image has inspired great works of art and poetry. From Dante's *Inferno* to Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*. The idea of judgment and especially the final judgment tunes the

mind somewhat. Theologians refer to these words of Jesus as the 'eschatological discourse' because the study of eschatology is a reflection on the 'end things' and that it is impossible to get more 'end game' than the final judgment. What is striking however about the scene the Lord paints for us is that the final reckoning is rooted in social justice, care for the sick and the poor. Faith, we learn, must be backed up, witnessed to and lived, by our care of others, and our good deeds. And the good deeds are these – the Lord Jesus is very specific and clear. Feeding the hungry, offering hospitality to the poor, clothing the naked, comforting the sick and visiting the imprisoned. It is these deeds, over and above any other, which are rewarded in the life to come. And the reason why? Because our faith taught us to identify and recognize Jesus, the Son of Man, in the least of his brethren.

Lord, as your servant St John of the Cross taught, in the evening of our lives, we shall all be judged by our love. Teach me to serve, to be kind and loving to the sick, the prisoner, the asylum seeker, the refugee, and all who suffer or are marginalized.

Wisdom 18:14-16, 19:6-9 • Ps 104(105): 2-3, 36-37, 42-43 • Luke 18:1-8
(Scotland only: Pr 31:10-31; 19:6-9 • Ps 127(128) • Mt 25:31-46)



It is always interesting to note how the Gospel writers vary in some of the detail of their accounts of the Lord's life. In Mark's version of today's incident Jesus gives this teaching outside the temple, allowing the disciples to take in an impressive view of the temple's grandeur and beauty (13:1-2). Luke, however, places Jesus within the temple itself and the disciples appear to be commenting on its interior beauty (v. 5).

In the popular mind at that time the temple was a symbol of God's promise of divine protection and its destruction was connected with the end of the world. The prophet Jeremiah had spoken out against a reliance on a temple made of stone rather than trusting in and turning to the living God: 'Do not trust in these deceptive words, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord"' (Jer. 7:4).

The Greek word for 'end' is *eschaton*, from which we derive the theological word 'eschatology', the study of the 'end things' or 'end times'. This discourse in the Gospels is referred to as the 'eschatological discourse' because of its emphasis on the end of the world. It was

not long before Jesus' words came to pass. The early Church was mercilessly and cruelly persecuted – from Pentecost right up until the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in about 312 AD. Over these centuries believers were indeed dragged before kings and governors – including, for example, Pilate, Herod, Agrippa I, Agrippa II, Felix and Festus. How reassuring that the Lord promised those enduring intimidating trial that the Spirit would give them words and wisdom that no one could contradict (cf. Acts 4:13).

Not many of us will be called to suffer for our faith in the way the early believers did, but we are all called to stand up for what we believe in and give testimony for the hope, joy and love we have in our hearts. We do not know when the end of the world will come but come it will. We know for a fact that the star we know as the sun will one day – maybe in several billion years – run out and the earth will be destroyed. Hopefully, the Son will return before this natural cataclysm, ushering in the power and the glory of God's kingdom.

*Lord Jesus, you will come again!
Grant me the grace to prepare, long
and pray for your coming.*

*Malachi 3:19-20 • Psalm 97(98):5-9
2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 • Luke 21:5-19*



What was the disciples' problem? They were like 'minders' or 'apparatchiks' protecting their Master from the riffraff and hoi polloi who had the temerity to approach him in their need. For men who were to become the leaders of the Church they showed remarkable insensitivity and a fundamental lack of pastoral care. For them, a blind man was the lowest of the low. They clearly considered him to be insignificant and irrelevant and were arrogant enough to rebuke the poor man.

Why did Luke include this account in his Gospel? Perhaps the key is his recording of the fact that 'Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet' (v. 39 NIV). The men who had led the way on that occasion were now the leaders of the Church. Was Luke giving them a kind of prod to remind them always to ensure that they remembered the poor, downtrodden and marginalized? In Mark's Gospel the blind man is given a name, Bartimaeus (10:46); in Luke's account he is a man with no name. However, blind as he was he cried out with inspired insight, calling Jesus by the messianic title 'Son of David'. When questioned further he went on to identify Jesus

as 'Lord'. His faith was rewarded and his sight restored.

It is a wonderfully encouraging and uplifting story which but for the diligence and care of the Evangelists would have been lost to history. Clearly the Holy Spirit wanted to preserve this powerful incident in Jesus' life. Because far from being insignificant and irrelevant, the blind man represents all of us who turn to the Lord in our need. The gospel and indeed the church are not for the social elite, the intellectually superior, the rich or well off, or even, dare we say it, the cardinals, bishops, priests, deacons and religious. No, the gospel and the church are for men and women just like this poor blind man. The gospel is for those who cry out to the Lord, as this blind man cried out, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' We are all blind in many ways and we all need healing in many ways.

Lord God, teach me that the things which are seen are fleeting and temporal and that the things which are unseen are eternal and everlasting. Help me to focus my mind and heart on the unseen and eternal truths of the kingdom of God.

*1 Maccabees 1:10-15, 41-43, 54-57, 62-64
Psalm 118(119):53, 61, 134, 150, 155, 158 • Luke 18:35-43*



We are familiar with the story of Zacchaeus. The punch line of Jesus' encounter with the tax collector is basically: bad and greedy man meets Christ and is converted. In response to the turnaround in Zacchaeus' life Jesus announces, 'For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost' (v. 10). Today we are going to reflect and ponder on this single verse, which is unique to Luke's Gospel.

The reason why we wish to focus on this verse is because it is profound and addresses the very core of the gospel message. God came to seek and to save the lost. So who are the lost? We recognize the lost in those who have lost their way: prisoners, drug addicts, those caught up in all manner of dark and destructive lifestyles. We don't tend to associate ourselves and other believers with being lost, and neither do we tend to place in this category the clergy or our bishops or cardinals, and most definitely not the Pope! We generally think of believers as belonging to the fraternity of the found, not the fraternity of the lost.

Of course, this is true: those who have received the salvation of Christ are among the saved, the found, and for this we give praise to God. But are they in some ways still lost? Are they still afflicted by sin and its wounds? Do they still struggle to resist temptation? The answer is, of course, yes. In a very real sense we all get lost, we all lose our way. We lose clarity both spiritually and morally, and find ourselves trapped and bound by sin.

Salvation is a paradox – it is something that happens once but it is also something that happens daily. Another paradox is the fact that the holier we grow, the more conscious we become of our sin. This is a mystery for sure. St John Vianney asked God to reveal to him what his true spiritual state was. However, when his prayer was answered, so terrifying did he find the reality that he had to beg the Lord to remove the insight. Every day we need a fresh revelation of God's grace because without it we would truly be lost.

Lord, I am lost, but you find me every day; I am blind but you give me sight every day; I am dead but by your grace you restore me to life every day.

2 Maccabees 6:18-31 • Psalm 3:2-7

Luke 19:1-10



Luke's Parable of the Minas (mnas) is the equivalent of Matthew's Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30). Both parables could equally be called the Parable of the Wise Investment. It is interesting to note that Luke's version has ten servants whereas Matthew's has only three. Also Matthew's talents are of considerably more value than Luke's mnas – one talent equalled 60 mnas, and a mnas equalled about 100 drachma (a drachma was about a day's wages).

The correct, responsible and, some would argue, legitimate but creative use of money informed a number of Jesus' parables. The bottom line, to adopt an accounting phrase, is that God expects a return on his investment. The servant who came a cropper lacked the imagination, creativity and energy to provide a return. He clearly did not value the investment his master was prepared to make in him enough.

A number of things are fascinating about this parable. The first is that the lazy, unproductive and unprofitable servant had sufficient energy to hide his investment. He even wrapped it in a cloth to protect it but that is as far as his diligence went. Secondly, he admitted that fear and cowardice

were the reasons for his inability to act. He in effect blamed his master, whom he described as a 'hard man' reaping what he did not sow, etc.

What is the meaning of this parable? As hard a message as it may be to hear and stomach, it is that God wants a return on the blessing and grace he has poured out upon us. This is both a natural law and a supernatural law. What parent doesn't want a return from their children? What employer doesn't want a return from their staff? What person doesn't want a return from their relationships? That return can be emotional, spiritual or financial, but deeply implanted in human nature is this notion of you receive generously, you give back generously. A son or daughter who takes care of their parents in their dotage is simply returning their love. An employee who works hard for the company behaves like this because they have been well treated. We are called to produce a return – or perhaps we prefer the term 'fruit' – for the kingdom of God.

Lord, teach me to give generously, to give my all with a willing heart because you have been so merciful and generous to me. Help me to be a profitable and productive servant for the kingdom.

2 Maccabees 7:1, 20-31 • Psalm 16(17): 1, 5-6, 8, 15

Luke 19:11-28



When did you last weep? Really weep? Not just shed a tear as we do when watching a moving film or reading a compelling novel but weep your heart out? Women, truth be told, tend to have this ability – or is it a grace? – more than men. British men especially are notorious for their stiff upper lips – real men don't cry. Of course, as experienced army and prison chaplains will share, strapping, grown men hardened by a battlefield or a prison cell do weep and do express heartfelt emotion. The reason they weep is because of loss – loss of a comrade in battle, the loss of freedom, the loss of their loved ones.

The things that make most of us weep are common and understandable. Failure, for example, in its myriad forms can make the tears well up inside. Rejection can be a bitter pill to swallow and causes even the most hardened of us to crumble and despair. Sometimes, and this is becoming more common in our modern era, we weep out of sheer frustration.

We know what made Jesus weep – the holy city of Jerusalem did it for him. He wept for the city that

he loved and for the people that he loved more than life itself. He knew by prophetic insight that its destruction was imminent. In 70 AD the Romans would raze the whole city to the ground, including the nation's beloved temple.

God's love and call are irrevocable. God cannot fall out of love. God loves his people with a tender parental love but also with the love of an unrequited lover. The Jewish people are God's special and chosen people. God revealed his plan of salvation through Israel. They are and will be for all time our elder brother in faith. However, to reject Jesus is to reject God's plan for Israel. In a way this is the tragedy of Israel. They did not recognize the Messiah when he appeared among them. This is purely and simply why Jesus wept such bitter tears. He was weeping over their ungrateful and hard hearts. But we are just like Israel. We too reject God, and the Lord Jesus weeps over us too. Jesus revealed the tender and vulnerable heart of God.

Lord, by the grace of your Spirit may I weep for my sin, my stubbornness and my hard heart. Create in me, O God, a soft and tender heart.

*1 Maccabees 2:15-29 • Psalm 49(50):1-6,14-15
Luke 19:41-44*



There is no point beating about the bush: the chief priest, teachers of the law and religious leaders utterly loathed and despised Jesus. They had murder in their hearts and on their minds (v. 47). They were taken over by the 'green-eyed monsters' themselves – envy and jealousy. And the reason, Luke informs us, was because 'all the people hung on his words' (v. 48). These were deeply religious men. They believed in God, they believed in the Torah, they lived by the Ten Commandments, and they governed and instructed their people in the ways of God. And yet they had murder in their hearts.

How could this be? Imagine how shocked we would be if our own religious leaders, bishops, priests or deacons were engaged in plotting the demise of someone in this way. Thankfully such things are rare. Tragically, in the genocide in Rwanda, for example, religious leaders were complicit and actively engaged in the massacre of innocent people. Rightly and justly they were tried for crimes against humanity. 'Good' people can do evil things, it seems. We would need a criminal or forensic psychiatrist to help us understand such crimes. What we can see from today's reading is that

apparently good and religious men, when threatened and insecure, were quite capable of plotting murder.

The truth is that we don't know what any of us is capable of and there is no escaping the fact that there resides in the human heart a multiplicity of evils and sinful desires (Matt. 15:19-20). This is a reality which we find difficult to ponder. In fact, looking into the darker side of our nature is almost generally avoided at all costs because it is deemed overly negative or guilt inducing (God forbid!). Ultimately this mindset is a way of avoiding the Good News of the gospel. Because sin is present in human history and any attempt to ignore it or to give it another name is futile. We need a gift of revelation to recognize sin clearly, first in our own lives and then in the world around us. This leads us to the joy of repentance, the grace of conversion, the freedom of confession and the blessing of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Lord, the heart is deceitful and dark above all things but you have made us into a new creation. It is by your grace that we recognize sin and know the joy of the gospel in our lives.

*1 Maccabees 4:36-37, 52-59 • 1 Chronicles 29:10-12
Luke 19:45-48*

We human beings have a remarkable ability to talk about and discuss all manner of things – except the important ones. Topics such as the meaning of life and what happens after we die are largely relegated to the ‘don’t discuss in polite society’ category. Why is this? It is hard to know but clearly two of life’s most important questions are: What happens after we die? Is this life all there is? Heavy and serious questions? Yes, maybe, but necessary and even urgent ones.

The truth is everyone dies. The Christian faith offers amazing and incredible hope in the face of this central mystery of human being. Interestingly, in Jesus’ day the ruling Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife. Keen to catch Jesus out regarding this issue, they approached the Teacher with a conundrum which they hoped would back him into a corner regarding life after death. They were, it is fair to say, too clever by half but they were no match for the Lord.

According to the law of levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-6; Ruth 3:9-4:12) a man was supposed to raise up an heir for a brother who died childless, so that the property

would not leave the family and his brother’s name would continue in posterity. The Sadducees wanted to force Jesus into either renouncing the resurrection or allowing polyandry (a woman being permitted to have more than one husband). Jesus recognized the trap but, as was his style, refused to address the question head on, teaching instead on the reality of life after death.

We too can be mistaken about the resurrection, and so it is good to remind ourselves of the Church’s teaching. We believe in the resurrection of the body but how this will come about is a mystery. What we do know is that God has promised to raise us up on the last day. Although the afterlife is beyond our minds to grasp, at that time we will be reunited with our loved ones in blissful joy, happiness and contentment, but the state of being into which we enter will be completely different to that we now know.

‘The visible universe, then, is itself destined to be transformed so that the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should be at the service of the just, sharing their glorification in the risen Jesus Christ.’ (CCC 1047)

1 Maccabees 6:1-13 • Psalm 9:2-4, 6, 16, 19

Luke 20:27-40

Today’s feast is a relatively new one in the liturgical calendar. It was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in his encyclical *Quas primas*. Back then the feast was called ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, the King’ and fell on the last Sunday of October. However, in 1969 Pope Paul VI gave the feast its current title ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe’ and also a new date, the last Sunday in the liturgical year. In the UK this day also marks Youth Sunday, when we give thanks and praise to God for our young people, for their faith, enthusiasm and joy, but also pray for all those who have difficulties in living their faith today.

The idea of kingship is one which was better understood by the ancient and medieval world than it is today. Monarchies are less prevalent today, although of course Elizabeth II has served the British people as their queen for over fifty years. Her role as sovereign has decreased politically over the years but her regal presence and witness of dedication to duty and unfailing service of her people is a great source of joy and inspiration to many. Queen Elizabeth II is the first to confess that although she is

a queen, Jesus is also her King. In her Christmas speech to the nation last year she said, ‘Jesus is the Saviour, the Prince of Peace, who is our source and light and life both in good times and bad.’

Our understanding of kingship or queenship is very much rooted in the idea of privilege and of ruling over subjects. Jesus, however, bore witness to an altogether different kind of kingship. He is the Servant King. He is the King of the kingdom of love, service and sacrifice. We are his subjects – we swear a loyalty to our King. What is wonderful about the kingdom is that rather than us just serving the King, the King also serves his people. Jesus turned upside down our understanding of what it means to be great, what it means to be regal. We are called to witness to the fruits, gifts and values not of the kingdom of this world but of the kingdom of Christ.

Lord, today the Year of Faith draws to a close. Teach us in faith to proclaim with heartfelt conviction and joy that Jesus Christ is the King of the Universe, the one before whom we bow down and worship.

2 Samuel 5:1-3 • Psalm 121(122):1-5

Colossians 1:12-20 • Luke 23:35-43

Pope Francis has a special place in his heart for the poor. Raising his voice on their behalf has become a kind of watchword of his papacy so far. His experience of the slums of Buenos Aires and his understanding of the economic and social challenges Latin America faces have clearly informed his vision. However, care, concern and love for the poor are not an option. We have a fundamental choice to make in favour of the poor of the world.

This fundamental choice is a simple one: we cannot sleep or rest easy without ensuring that the poor, our brothers and sisters, receive the many goods of the earth that we have been blessed with. There is without any shadow of a doubt a disparity between the rich and the poor. This disparity grows day by day and is one of humanity's greatest challenges. How can it be that one half of the world are on a diet whilst the other half starve? How can it be that one half of the world receive a free education whilst the other half are deprived of even a basic education and the opportunities this creates?

Our love and care for the poor is rooted in Jesus' love and care for them. We see this in today's

reading in that Jesus noted how generously the poor widow gave to God. She gave from her poverty; she gave from her heart. When Pope Benedict visited England on his Papal Visit those who had given huge donations to fund it were granted a special audience. We applaud their goodness and kindness but there is a way in which they gave from their plenty. This is not to take away from their generosity, but the reality is that through the centuries the Church has been supported and funded not by large donations (as wonderful as they are) but by the widow's mite. By men and women who through their humble giving express something truly noble and dignified about a heart filled with faith.

Bible Alive readers have especially generous and kind hearts and throughout the years have given remarkably generously to our outreaches to prisoners and to missionaries. We know that God loves a cheerful giver, and we know too that God sees when we give from our poverty, our need and our very self.

Lord, teach me to imitate the goodness and generosity of the widow who gave all she had to live on.

Daniel 1:1-6, 8-20 • Daniel 3:52-56

Luke 21:1-4

When will the end of the world come? Have you any idea? Can you point to it? Can you prophesy it? Of course we can't but throughout history many misguided people have tried to do so. What we do know is that the end will come. The earth has a limited life. How long life will be able to be sustained on our planet, we just don't know.

Switch on your TV set or read any newspaper and you will find the things that Jesus spoke about in verses 10-11 happening somewhere in the world: nation rising up against nation, famines, pestilence, fearful events (tsunamis, earthquakes, mud slides) and signs from heaven (meteors). Just as Jesus taught his own disciples to look for the signs of the times, so he teaches us.

We must resist the temptation to give in to the misconception that talk of the end of the world is the preserve of other, more marginal Christian denominations. This is simply not true. The Catholic Church teaches clearly that the second coming, the end of the world, is imminent. That means that when we get up in the morning, by that evening the

world could in theory have ended. Of course, we don't live as if we really thought and believed this. If we did, many of us wouldn't even bother getting up in the morning! And, in fact, back in the days of the early Church, some believers did see the imminence of the end of the world as an excuse not to work or contribute, and Paul had to step in to correct this way of thinking.

In order to avoid any doubt that this is what the Church teaches, let us turn to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: 'Since the Ascension Christ's coming in glory has been imminent' (para. 673). The Holy Spirit is the One who creates in us a wise approach to these truths. We strive to live as if each day could be our last; we strive to live as those who long and groan for the return of Christ. We live as those who resist panic or extremes or a kind of fundamentalist approach to such things because we are guided by the teaching of the Church especially as held out to us in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The Spirit and the Bride (the Church) join together in one hymn of praise as they say, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

Daniel 2:31-45 • Daniel 3:57-61

Luke 21:5-11



The Greek word , from which we derive our word 'martyr', originally meant 'a witness'. Martyrs are those who have given witness literally in their blood. The letter of Hebrews contains this powerful reflection on the martyrs of the Old Testament: 'others... were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them' (11:35-38 NIV). These heroes of faith did not know Christ Jesus our Lord and yet they suffered much for their faith.

We don't encounter too much suffering or persecution for our faith these days. Certainly we live in a secular society and it can seem at times that religion and faith are largely consigned to the margins. The Church's moral and ethical teaching is seen as being out of kilter with the rest of the world, especially regarding sexual morality and same sex marriage, for example. We have to endure some degree of ridicule or mockery or

even of being ostracized, but this is nothing compared with being beaten, imprisoned, flogged or even sawn in two. We stand on the shoulders of those saints who have gone before us, marked with the sign of faith, and laid down their lives for their faith.

Today we face new challenges but we take our lead from our leader and shepherd Pope Francis, who is calling us to get out and bear witness to Christ. Then the persecution will begin; then we will need courage.

'We cannot keep ourselves shut up in parishes, in our communities when so many people are waiting for the Gospel! It's not enough simply to open the door in welcome, but we must go out through that door to seek and meet the people. I want to tell you something. What is it that I expect as a consequence of World Youth Day? I want a mess. We knew that in Rio there would be great disorder, but I want trouble in the dioceses! I want to see the church get closer to the people. I want to get rid of clericalism, the mundane, this closing ourselves off within ourselves, in our parishes, schools or structures. Because these need to get out.'

Daniel 5:1-6, 13-14, 16-17, 23-28 • Daniel 3:62-67
Luke 21:12-19



The disciples' admiration of the beauty of the temple has prompted Jesus to make a long discourse about the destruction which he foresees will happen to Jerusalem and which in fact did happen when the Romans marched on the city and destroyed it in AD 70. As is typical in prophetic presentation Jesus presents the events of Jerusalem's fall and the end of the world side by side. At one moment he is describing the fall of Jerusalem in graphic detail, at the next his thoughts have turned to the end of the world. The suffering and destruction of the earlier event mirror the suffering and destruction of the much-larger scale catastrophe which will signal his return to this earth.

We need to take Scriptures like today's reading from Luke's Gospel very seriously indeed. The same Luke who recorded the beauty of the Nativity scene also gave us today's apocalyptic vision of the end of the world: people fleeing to the mountains, nursing mothers being warned of a time of dread, many falling by the sword, nature in a state of uproar and tumult, and grown men fainting from sheer terror. It will be a time of great chaos and great suffering. It will be

a time of great testing and trying.

We might be surprised to know that the Church today teaches that this time will indeed come but we do not know when: 'The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and resurrection. The kingdom will be fulfilled then not by a historic triumph through a progressive ascendancy but only by God's victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven' (CCC 677).

Jesus warns that these events will cause the faith of many to be shaken. But in forewarning of these events, his purpose is to assure his disciples that they are part of God's overarching plan for the world. When they see these cataclysmic events taking place, they will know that his plan is being fulfilled and that Jesus will soon return. Jesus wants us to rest assured in the knowledge that God is in control and his purpose is being fulfilled.

Lord, renew in me a firm faith in your second coming and teach me to pray for it with all my heart, soul and strength. Marana tha.

Daniel 6:12-28 • Daniel 3:68-74
Luke 21:20-28

We know how to interpret the weather because of the signs that nature herself offers up – for example, the green shoots of spring, bursting forth after a cold winter, signal that warmer weather is on its way. The same principle applies to the kingdom of God, for God, in his mercy, provides us with signs pointing to the coming of his kingdom. But what are these signs? How do we interpret the signs of the kingdom today?

One of the signs of the kingdom of God today is the witness of Pope Francis himself. His humility, his eschewing of pomp and circumstance, his apparent dislike of clericalism, and his exclusive and warm-hearted desire to reach out to everybody: these have all signalled a new kind of pontificate. As he himself said recently, 'No one is excluded from the Pope's affection.' Pope Francis is both a prophet and a prophetic sign of the dynamic and exciting power of the gospel to change lives and our culture. He is a sign showing us that the Church is the living and active presence of Christ in the world today.

Another sign of the times – and one which can pass us by if we don't look carefully – is the hunger

and thirst in people for goodness, truth and beauty. In short people are crying out for the gospel – they are hungry and thirsty and want to be fed. Truly this hunger and thirst is often misplaced and misdirected but in the heart of every human being there is a God-shaped hole which only God can fill. There is in everyone a profound and heartfelt cry to know God's love. The proliferation of social media, mobile phones and new technologies means that we are not relating to one another as people but are becoming overly reliant on the electronic and convenient. This intensifies our hunger and thirst for love, connection and God.

The question is: how do we respond to the signs of the times? We respond by seeking out God's word in the Scriptures because this is where we hear God speak. We know that 'heaven and earth will pass away' but Jesus' words will never pass away because they are eternal and are food for our spirit, soul and body.

Lord, teach me to read, interpret and understand the signs of the times and in doing so be an authentic witness of the goodness, truth and beauty of the gospel.

Daniel 7:2-14 • Daniel 3:75-81

Luke 21:29-33

Today we celebrate the life and witness of St Andrew, one of the Twelve, brother of St Peter and Patron Saint of Scotland. Jesus chose this Galilean fisherman to become a fisher of men – an apostle and evangeliser. He was a disciple of John the Baptist but on learning that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Messiah, he went immediately and evangelized his brother Simon Peter, saying, 'We have found the Messiah' (John 1:41).

Andrew only appears twice in the Gospels. The first incident is when he finds the young man with the loaves and the fishes (John 6:5-14), and the second is when some Greeks want to speak to Jesus and he passes on their message (John 12:21-22). Andrew disappears from view after the feast of Pentecost. Eusebius, the church historian, informs us that he went to Greece to preach the gospel. We don't know what happened to him after this but a tradition emerged in the tenth century that he was crucified on an X-shaped cross, and today this is Scotland's symbol of national identity. In 1969 Cardinal Gordon Gray was appointed as the first Scottish cardinal since the Reformation. To celebrate and mark the occasion Pope Paul VI

gave Cardinal Gray further relics of St Andrew with the words, 'Saint Peter gives you his brother.' These relics are now displayed in a reliquary in St Mary's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Edinburgh.

The Scottish Church has been rocked by the resignation of Cardinal O'Brien. His harsh and outspoken condemnation of same sex orientation and same sex marriage gave way to accusations of hypocrisy and double standards after it was revealed that the Cardinal himself was falling below the high standard expected of him as the leader of the Catholic Church. The scandal has been damaging and has shaken the faith of many. The media have pounced on Cardinal O'Brien's hypocrisy and inconsistency and rightly so. However, we pray for him and ask for God's mercy and healing. The Church preaches a message of compassion and mercy, and we its members are always in need of repentance and reform. For surely the message of St Andrew, following in his Master's footsteps, has always been 'Repent and believe the Gospel.'

Lord, we pray for Catholics in Scotland that they would each play a part in the reform and renewal of the Church.

Romans 10:9-18 • Psalm 18(19):2-5 • Matthew 4:18-22
(In Scotland only: Wisdom 3:1-9 • Ps 30(31) • Romans 10:9-18 • Matthew 4:18-22)