

Daily Reflections  
Saturday 1 November  
Luke 14:1, 7-11

In the Gospels there are seven miracles which the Evangelists recorded as having occurred on the Sabbath. Five of them are in St Luke's Gospel (4:31-35, 38-39; 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6); the other two are in St John's Gospel (5:1-10; 9:1-14). Today's Sabbath encounter involves the Lord visiting the home of a prominent Pharisee.

Luke records that the Lord was under observation, being carefully watched for any infringement or flouting of either the rabbinic or Mosaic law. It can be hard to see things from other people's point of view but we should perhaps try and understand the Pharisees a little better. They were after all devout, religious men whose zeal and enthusiasm could not be doubted. Jesus once pointed out that they were so committed that they would travel over land and sea to win one single convert (Matt. 23:15). However, it is not their devotion which is in question but their attitude and, to be more precise, their interior attitude of heart.

The Holy Spirit always leads us to read and interpret the Scriptures in a way which speaks to our own hearts. There is something of the Pharisee in us all. Today's incident, which is recorded only by Luke, highlights a streak in all our natures which is pompous and desires social recognition and status in order to feed our egos. Today's incident leads Jesus to tell a parable about a wedding feast in which a guest who has chosen the most important seat is humiliated when asked to vacate it. The punch line of the parable is a simple one: 'every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted' (v. 11).

How do we apply this Scripture to our daily lives? Well, one of the things we need to guard against in our parishes is cliques. Cliques, which are rooted in exclusion and feelings of superiority, create the same sense of self-importance and status as we observe in our Gospel passage. Catholic cliques are notorious and they are a blight on our parish communities. All expressions of self-importance and division are anathema in a truly loving Christian culture or community. The clergy play an important role in helping the parish community to be open, loving and accepting to all. God humbles the proud and arrogant, and raises up the humble.

Lord, teach me to be a humble servant of Christ seeking to build up the kingdom by loving service.

Philippians 1:18-26 • Psalm 41(42):2-5  
Luke 14:1, 7-11

Sunday 2 November

(A) All Saints • Matthew 5:1-12

What is the goal of our life on earth? This searching question has been pondered by philosophers since time immemorial. Today, through our liturgical readings, the Church answers it. The goal, purpose and meaning of life is to be holy, to be a saint. Nowhere in the New Testament is this central teaching expressed more clearly or more beautifully than in Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes. Today we celebrate and rejoice in the saints in heaven, who during their lives on earth lived out the Beatitudes. We ask for their intercession and study the witness of their lives.

The saints give us hope because they show that by God's grace we can rise above our human nature and live lives that are truly pleasing to him. Most of us wake up each day with a list of things we need to do and achieve. We are largely driven by the here and now, the immediate and urgent. This is understandable and is the reason why Jesus invites us to draw near to him, for he is meek, humble and lowly of heart and he gives rest to our souls (Matt. 11:28-30).

The cry of the saint every day is, 'Lord, make me a saint.' Perhaps we don't desire sanctity because we have a wrong understanding of what it really is: we think it means being a kill-joy or overly serious or removed from everyday life. Quite the opposite. It is in the ordinariness of everyday life that we become saints. Holiness is being immersed in daily living. Holiness is praying for ourselves and others, letting go of resentment, repenting of our sin, striving to serve others; it is being joyful, optimistic, hopeful, striving to see the good in others, and recognizing that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God.

Although Pope Francis would be the first to say he is no saint – he recently confessed, for example, how he struggles not to gossip – in many ways he is a living saint among us and a wonderful example of the joy, vigour and fun of being a Christian. When we strive to be saints, God pours his Spirit out upon us, and we are filled with joy, hope and enthusiasm and live as the blessed children of God.

Lord God, today I commit myself to being a saint, not in my own strength but through your love poured out into my heart.

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

1 John 3:1-3 • Matthew 5:1-12

Monday 3 November

Matthew 11:25-30 • The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls) (A)

Yesterday we celebrated the saints who are in heaven. Today we remember the faithful departed –our relatives, friends, colleagues and others we know – who have passed over from this world to the next and are in purgatory. We pray for their souls and for their passage into the joy of heaven.

We don't tend to hear much these days about the 'last things' – heaven, hell, purgatory, judgement and so on. It is as if we have lost confidence in these teachings or have archived them because we don't know what to say about them. The Roman Catholic Church has always upheld the teaching of purgatory. The Catholic Church has taught since the beginning that while the souls in purgatory have inherited eternal life and are assured of their salvation, they must undergo a time of purification prior to entering into the blessed state of heaven. This practice of praying for the dead was rooted in Judaism. In 2 Maccabees 12:46 we read, for example: 'Therefore he [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.'

As human beings we have a remarkable ability not to talk about what is important, to avoid reality and trivialize the sacred and sombre. A recent trend in funerals is for people to choose coffins that are brightly coloured or carry a logo of their favourite fashion or coffee chain. One woman, for example, was recently buried in a coffin with the Costa coffee chain logo emblazoned on it. This is to deny the harsh and sober reality of death and to remove from it a sense of true and healing grief. Blessed are those who mourn: it is right that we mourn and it is right that we pray for and remember our dead. We do not know exactly how our prayers help the dead and, for sure, we do not understand time outside our current dimension – with God a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day. What we do know, however, is that the Church in her wisdom has always encouraged us to offer up prayers for the dead.

Lord, today as we commemorate our dead, we pray that our prayers may bring them consolation as they prepare to enter into the eternal joy of the beatific vision.

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

Romans 5:5-11 • Matthew 11:25-30

Tuesday 4 November

(Memorial) St Charles Borromeo • Luke 14:15-24

Jesus has just been trying to drive home an important message about hospitality – about inviting to our homes those who are not in a position to return our generosity. Perhaps trying to distract him from his uncomfortable message, one of his listeners pipes up, ‘Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!’ (v.15), which may have been a popular maxim of the day.

His comment, alluding to the Messianic banquet foretold by Isaiah (25:6), prompts Jesus to tell a very hard-hitting parable. As members of God’s chosen people Jesus’ listeners thought their eternal future was secure, but Jesus wants to shock them out of their complacency. What is immediately striking about the parable is that none of the excuses given by those who declined the invitation to the banquet are genuine. No one in their right mind would buy land without first going to see it, or purchase livestock without first inspecting them.

The landowner and farmer are disingenuous and lame in their effort to get out of attending the banquet. The third potential guest has just got married, so his mind and focus is elsewhere (v.20). Implicit is the suggestion that the invitation was refused not because of malice but because they are otherwise engaged, preoccupied, absorbed in the things of this world.

Through the parable Jesus challenged his fellow dinner guests by showing that the master had no hesitation in throwing the banquet open to those on the byways and highways. Those who had refused themselves entry had now cut themselves off from ever entering at all. The kingdom of heaven was first offered to Israel’s children but they refused to enter and rejected Christ, and so the invitation was opened up and salvation offered to the Gentiles.

We have been grafted into the hope of Israel, Jesus the Messiah, God’s Anointed and Promised Saviour, we too must guard against complacency and resting on our laurels. We face daily the challenge of resisting the urge to be consumed by and embroiled in the details of our lives which preoccupy and distract us away from resting in God’s presence and being responsive and sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Lord, we each are given a moment of eternity to live our life, and in that moment to respond to God’s generous invitation, ‘Come; for all is now ready.’

Philippians 2:5-11 • Psalm 21(22):26-32

Luke 14:15-24

Wednesday 5 November

Luke 14:25-33

Canon David Watson, who was Vicar of St Michael-le-Belfry in York, said twenty-four years ago: 'Christians in the West have largely neglected what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The vast majority of Western Christians are church-members, pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, Bible-readers, even born-again believers or Spirit-filled Charismatics – and we have got some of those here this morning – but aren't true disciples of Jesus Christ. If we were willing to learn the meaning of real discipleship and actually to become disciples, the Church in the West would be transformed, and the resultant impact on society would be staggering.'

What do you make of that? Which are you: church-member, pew-filler, hymn-singer, sermon-taster, Bible-reader, born-again believer, Spirit-filled Charismatic – or disciple? Whoever we are in the Church – pope, bishop, deacon, religious or lay person – we are first and foremost a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth.

To be a disciple means that we are prepared to be 'disciplined', trained to follow our Master. We understand this readily enough in many walks of life: many trades and crafts have their master craftsmen and women, and professionals such as barristers and surgeons spend years under tutelage or in pupillage. To be a disciple of Jesus is to come under his tutelage and to be his pupil.

David Watson was right: not many of us are truly disciples – shocking, offensive but nevertheless true! The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy said, 'Everyone talks of changing society but no one talks of changing themselves.' Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary, once said, 'If our revolution isn't aimed at changing people then I'm not interested.' We know that discipleship has not taken hold in our lives because we struggle with the same old issues and our parish communities are not beacons of light which attract and compel people to become Christians. Actually, often our parish communities are cauldrons of jealousy, in-fighting and back-biting. This is truly a sorry state of affairs.

In *Evangelium gaudium* Pope Francis challenges us to see the reality of our hearts and the state of our parish communities by asking ourselves: 'Am I prepared to pay the price, count the cost and take up my cross to follow Christ and be a true and radical disciple?'

Lord, I repent of being lukewarm and indifferent. May I be filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Philippians 2:12-18 • Psalm 26(27):1, 4, 13-14

Luke 14:25-33

Thursday 6 November

(Feast in Ireland only) All Saints in Ireland • Luke 15:1-10

Someone should publish a book called Christian Myths because they abound. Here is a perfect example: it is a myth that Jesus came to save the good, the righteous, the moral, the church-going. The truth is that Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Of course, faith can transform us and produce many good things in our lives but the grace of the gospel is primarily for the lost and we are all lost in one way or another.

At the very first general audience of his pontificate Pope Francis encouraged Catholics to reach out to the 'lost sheep'. In one sense this is the reason the Church exists. We are called to follow in the footsteps of Christ and reach out to others with God's mercy and kindness. We are called to step outside ourselves and attend to the needs of others: those who long for a sympathetic ear, those in need of comfort or help. We should not simply remain in our own secure world – that of the 99 sheep who never strayed from the fold – but we should go out, with Christ, in search of the one lost sheep, however far it may have wandered.

We need to get into Christ's way of thinking and acting. In God's grace we can move beyond a dull or mechanical way of living out our faith, and instead open the doors of our hearts, our lives, our parishes, our movements or associations, and go out in search of others and bring them the light and joy of our faith in Christ. The world is crying out for the living presence of Jesus, so full of mercy and love!

Jesus rocked his world because he turned religion on its head. He began a revolution. But today, two thousand years later, it appears as if the revolution hasn't even started. If it had, our parishes would be overflowing with those on the very margins of society. We wouldn't be spending our time fretting about church repairs but we would be building new churches to contain the growth and explosion of new life and new believers. Today's Gospel is all about how God reaches out to others – the question is: will we reach out to others in his name?

Lord, you came to seek and save the lost. Make my heart a haven and our parishes rescue centres for the lost and broken of the world.

Philippians 3:3-8 • Psalm 104(105):2-7 • Luke 15:1-10

(In Ireland only: Heb 11:2, 12:1-4, 15, 13:1 • Eccl 44:1-15 • Ps 125(126) • Lk 6:20-26)

Friday 7 November

Luke 16:1-8

Today's parable, which is unique to St Luke's Gospel, is notoriously hard to understand. In their attempts to wrestle with its meaning, interpreters have given it different names. Thus, it has been called the parable of the Unjust Steward, the parable of the Dishonest Master, the parable of the Master's Praise or, as we are calling it, the parable of the Shrewd Steward.

A steward is accused of mismanaging his master's property. When confronted, the steward makes no attempt to prove his innocence. Fearful of how he will survive when dismissed from his position, he summons his master's debtors one by one and tells each of them to reduce the debt they owe his master, in one case reducing it from 900 gallons of olive oil to 450 gallons and in another from 1000 bushels of wheat to 800 bushels. As a result of his help the debtors are placed under an obligation to help the steward in the future and he avoids the risk of destitution.

In his comments following the parable, Jesus highlights the steward's shrewdness and commends it, and he invites us as his disciples to be canny and clever in the same way that the shrewd manager was. It's a rather shocking message. The steward's behaviour can make us feel uncomfortable. No one likes a cheat or a deceiver. After the passing of two thousand years it's difficult to judge the business practices that both he and his master were employing. Was the steward really being dishonest or just shrewd? Perhaps he was reducing the excessive interest his master had imposed on his clients and had no right to charge? Or perhaps his manoeuvre was a way of circumventing the Mosaic law that prohibited the taking of interest from fellow Jews (Deut. 23:19)? Whatever the reality of the matter, the steward clearly had no scruples about exploiting his position for his own benefit.

What is the lesson of the parable? Children of the kingdom, the 'children of the light', are called to use their resources – money, but all our God-given resources – in a way which does good, builds the kingdom, and wins the admiration and affection of others. We need to learn to be shrewd and to maximize the use of these resources, both for the short and long term. Possessions are a responsibility. Their use is a test of character, values and stewardship. The one who is faithful in little is also faithful in much.

Philippians 3:17–4:1 • Psalm 121(122):1-5

Luke 16:1-8

Saturday 8 November

(Feast in Wales only) All Saints in Wales • Luke 16:9-15

Bob Dylan wrote some cracking songs. He may not be your cup of tea but he was on the money with these perceptive lyrics from ‘You gotta serve somebody’:

You may be an ambassador to England or France  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance  
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world  
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.  
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You’re gonna have to serve somebody,  
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.

Jesus taught the very same truth: you have to serve somebody. And you can’t have two masters – because ultimately you will end up despising one of them. If you love money you will despise God; and if you love God you will despise money.

St Luke’s Gospel has a very clear preferential option for the poor; for Luke – and indeed for the Christian faith – the poor are blessed and hold a special place in God’s heart. Now before we get any letters complaining that we are too hard on the Pharisees, we acknowledge, as we often do, that many were good, devout men. However, Luke records: ‘The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus’ (v. 14 NIV). Clearly these particular Pharisees were not impressed with Jesus’ teaching on attachment to money. Jesus responds with the wisdom of God: ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight’ (v. 16 NIV).

The Holy Spirit invites us, with God’s help and grace, to root out of our lives love for money and wealth. We all bow down to wealth and are all impressed by it to some degree. It would be hard for a parish priest, for example, to resist fêting a wealthy parishioner who offered to donate to the church restoration fund. However, we are called to resist the influence and domination of money, and recognize the true wealth, true riches and true currency of the kingdom of God – the tender of truth, kindness, compassion, mercy and forgiveness. One thing is certain: there are no pockets in a shroud – we cannot take our money with us. Lord, teach me to despise the shallow and fleeting values of this world and embrace the eternal values of your kingdom.

Philippians 4:10-19 • Psalm 111(112):1-9 • Luke 16:9-15

(In Wales only: Rev 7:2-4, 9-15 • Ps 23(24):1-6 • Mt 5:1-12)

Sunday 9 November

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

The Passover was one of the major annual feasts that all Jewish men were required to celebrate in Jerusalem (Deut. 16:16). All four Evangelists record the cleansing of the temple. The merchants, traders and money-lenders who plied their trade in the outer courts of the temple were providing a necessary service. The animals were required in order that worshippers could make the ordained sacrifices; coins had to be changed into the currency acceptable to the temple authorities. The problem was that they had pushed their luck and were conducting their commerce in the outer court of the temple itself – which was holy ground. The temple authorities clearly were turning a blind eye to this infringement as the revenue and commerce lubricated the day-to-day business of the temple.

The Jesus we encounter today was not meek and mild. He was indignant and angry. Making a whip out of chords he drove them out – we can assume with some force and presence as tables were overturned and coins scattered. This was a full-on physical and aggressive confrontation with the forces of mammon within the temple. Of course, as always with Jesus' critics, they wanted to know by whose authority he acted. He had already made this clear when he had declared: 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' (v. 16). Jesus' authority came then from the Father, the God of kindness, compassion and consolation as if whose patience, in the face of such blasphemy and sacrilege, had come to an end.

When Jesus warned, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (v. 19), they took his words literally, not realizing that the temple he was referring to was his own body – because he is the true temple of the living God. We can, of course, read the Scriptures literally but the Spirit often leads us to look deeper into the text. We too are temples of the Holy Spirit and we too often need to undergo a cleansing and purification. Perhaps we need to be as violent and determined as Jesus was to drive out of our lives those things which defile our hearts and spirits.

Lord, I confess my sins. I admit that my heart is unclean and my thoughts often stray, defiling and spoiling the inner temple of my being. I repent and turn back to you today.

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

1 Corinthians 3:9-11, 16-17 • John 2:13-22

Monday 10 November

(Memorial) St Leo the Great • Luke 17:1-6

Jesus uses the dramatic and rather violent imagery of the millstone to highlight how serious it is to lead others astray and to cause them to sin. A millstone was a huge stone used for grinding grain, not purpose built for ensuring that an evil-doer, as the Casa Nostra might say, 'sleeps with the fishes'.

There can be little doubt that in the modern era we have lost a sense of sin. In one way, this, we suggest, isn't a bad thing, since the Christian faith is more about grace than about sin.

Nevertheless, sin is sin. It is a fact of life. We can ignore it and pretend it doesn't exist, but we all know when we examine our hearts that sin lurks there in many and various forms. While there are many reasons why we lost a sense of sin, there certainly can be no doubt that an over-emphasis on sin, punishment and threats resulted in a gospel devoid of the joy and freedom which should be its true characteristics.

In our Gospel today Jesus is addressing the very specific issue of those who lead others into sin. One of the most tragic manifestations of this in recent years has been the child abuse scandal. The scandal of clerical child abuse has rocked the Church and continues to do so whenever new cases come to light. The abuse of trust and power involved in such crimes is truly disturbing and frightening. And whenever any kind of cover-up occurs we can only despair that such darkness and confusion can prevail and cry out for justice for the victims. We, of course, pray for all victims of child abuse and remain diligent and alert to such violation of human dignity in our parishes and schools.

On the subject of sin we have swung too far in the opposite direction and there is an urgent need to recover a balanced view by recovering a sense of sin, first in our own lives, and then in our culture and society. We cannot assuage our consciences by convincing ourselves that if we come up with another name for sin all will be well. Sin is sin: the only remedy is repentance, the only healing is the cross and redemption of Christ.

Lord God, teach me to root out the sin in my own life, and by God's grace may I never lead others astray by poor witness or bad example.

Titus 1:1-19 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Luke 17:1-6

Tuesday 11 November

Luke 17:7-10 • St Martin of Tours (Memorial)

Who is greater: the one who sits at table or the one who serves? Jesus turned the idea of greatness on its head, linking true greatness with true service. To be great we must learn to serve: it is as simple and as uncomplicated as that.

The Christian life celebrates the attitude of the servant because this was the attitude of our Saviour. Jesus was the Servant King. One of the earliest Christian hymns offers up a song of praise and adoration to God, expressing gratitude for Jesus' servanthood: 'Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant' (Phil. 2:6-7). When Paul and the other apostles wrote to their communities, they referred to themselves first and foremost as 'servants of Christ' (see, e.g., Phil. 1:1; Jas. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1). Jesus was the servant of servants, the Pope is the servant of servants, every parent is a servant of their children, every parish priest is a servant of his parishioners, every teacher is a servant of their pupils.

Where today's Gospel reading pushes things further and moves us into the realm of true altruism is that most service of others, most laying down of our lives, much of our giving has a fair degree of self-interest attached to it – this is human nature. Jesus, however, is calling us to the kind of service which serves for the sake of serving and does not seek a reward or affirmation. The prayer of the true servant is the prayer of the unworthy servant, 'Lord, I am an unworthy servant. I have only done my duty.'

This is a very high calling. How many strive for this level of total commitment and dedication? The point, though, is that this kind of service is rooted in love. When we consider the tender mercy of God towards us we can glimpse the truth that we are unworthy servants called to serve in the harvest-field of the kingdom of God. We are all servants – we all compete not for the highest place but for the lowest. This is what makes the Christian faith so attractive and compelling: those who embrace a life of such loving service are truly signs of contradiction in a selfish and often hedonistic world.

Lord, I am an unworthy servant and when I serve my brothers and sisters, I only do my duty.

Titus 2:1-8, 11-14 • Psalm 36(37):3-4, 18, 23, 27, 29

Luke 17:7-10

Wednesday 12 November

(Memorial) St Josaphat • Luke 17:11-19

The Samaritan leper who returned to thank Jesus personally was the exception and not the rule. The grace of gratitude is rare but crucial to maturity and growth in the Christian life. The leper is a model for us. Do you have a grateful heart? Do you give thanks to God for all the grace and blessings in your life? Are you the leper who returned?

The truth is our hearts are hard and they lean more towards ingratitude than gratitude. Just as parents have to train their children to say ‘thank you’, so too God the Father trains us to be grateful children. But this is not a given – rather it is a grace. To have a grateful heart we need the gift of self-awareness and self-knowledge. This was the grace that was at work in the leper’s life. He was self-aware enough and had enough self-knowledge to know that Jesus was the source of his healing. The other lepers were also clearly over the moon about their healing but they lacked the insight and self-awareness to thank the Lord. To be grateful to God requires a certain brokenness of spirit and heart. It requires that we understand that God is the source of all the blessings in our lives and in giving him thanks and praise we receive joy in return.

However – and this is the rub – can we be grateful to God for those things in our lives which we do not see as blessings or graces, such as an illness, a disappointment, a family conflict or a long-standing resentment? When these situations face us, we can easily find ourselves plunged into a negative way of thinking and simply not have the resolve or inner conviction to give thanks and praise to God. The Spirit helps us to give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thess. 5:18). God’s grace can transform the way we think and help us to understand that every day is a gift from God – that is why it is called the ‘present’!

‘Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength.’ (Hab. 3:17-19)

Titus 3:1-7 • Psalm 22(2)

Luke 17:11-19

Thursday 13 November

Luke 17:20-25

A parish priest once stood in the pulpit and introduced his homily by saying: 'Today I am supposed to talk to you about the second coming of Jesus but, to be honest, I just don't know what to say.' At least he was truthful! Despite the fact that every time we celebrate the Eucharist we remind ourselves of this vital Christian truth which is the blessed hope of the Church, rarely nowadays do we hear a sermon or homily on the glorious return of Christ. And in our own lives, truth be told, we can be so focused on the here and now that the second coming does not loom large in our minds or hearts and we don't think of it as imminent. We live after all in the real world, and very often we are immersed in and consumed by the pressures of day-to-day living.

In today's Gospel reading, the Pharisees raise the question of when the kingdom of God is going to come. Jesus answers them by saying that the kingdom of God is not something that is going to come in the future: it is already among them. If they had eyes to see, they would be able to discern evidence of its presence in the healings and exorcisms that he has been carrying out.

There is continuity between the present experience of the rule of God in Jesus Christ and the end-time when the Son of Man will appear at his second coming and establish his everlasting kingdom. But there is also a difference, and we should not confuse the two. Though the kingdom has come, the end-time is not yet. As we from our twenty-first-century standpoint know well, there is a period between the coming of the kingdom and its full realization on Jesus Christ's return. His second coming will be as sudden and obvious as lightning that lights up the whole sky. Jesus warned his disciples that before the Son of Man appears in glory, he would have to "suffer many things and be rejected" by the generation of his day (v. 25).

The Church longs for and prays for the day of Christ's return. We pray for this calmly and in peace, certain that Christ will keep his promise and one day will come again in glory to establish finally and forever the kingdom of his Father.

The Spirit and the Bride pray, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

Philemon 7-20 • Psalm 145(146):7-10

Luke 17:20-25

Friday 14 November

Luke 17:26-37

As we touched on yesterday, teaching on the second coming is much neglected these days. However, two things are hard to avoid: first, the New Testament carries numerous references to it, and, second, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, that bedrock of Christian belief and teaching, upholds the teaching since it has existed from the beginning. Paul, for example, taught: 'For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord' (1 Thess. 4:16-17).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is equally unambiguous: '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 under way; it is even now anticipated in a certain real way, for the Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real but imperfect...Christ's kingdom already manifests its presence through the miraculous signs that attend its proclamation by the Church' (paras. 554, 555, 670).

So there you have it – Scripture and tradition in a song of unison. Christ will come again. But the reality, then as now, is that there is a danger the day will take us by surprise as we go about our daily lives: buying, selling, eating, drinking, planting and building (v. 27). The Holy Spirit wants to bring to life in us a lively and living sense of the return of Christ. This does not mean that we leave our jobs, put on sackcloth and walk down the high street shouting, 'The end is nigh.' It does mean, however, that we cultivate an inner spirit which joins with the prayer of the Church for the return of our glorious Saviour. The dogma of the second coming is grounded not in the minds of men but in the mind of God. Jesus promised it, pointed to it, and warned that we need to be watching out and ready for it.

Lord, grant me a heart that is always prepared either for my own death or for your return in glory as the King of Kings.

2 John 4-9 • Psalm 118(119):1-2, 10-11, 17-18

Luke 17:26-37

Saturday 15 November

Luke 18:1-8

This much we know: God loves a cheerful giver and God loves a trier. Today's parable, unique to that giant of biblical storytelling, St Luke, is all about one such trier. It is delicious that the judge whom the widow petitions isn't even kind and benevolent but rather has a reputation for being cruel, cold and indifferent, not caring for either man, God or the devil! It is a beautiful juxtaposition, isn't it – a kind of beauty meets the beast, with beauty and goodness winning the day by sheer naked and dogged persistence. The meaning of the parable is clear: we are called to be persistent and to persevere in prayer. If a cold and indifferent judge eventually grants our noble widow her petition, how much more will our heavenly Father grant us whatever we pray for!

We live in a culture like no other in the history of the world for the way it demands and expects the instantaneous. We have instant coffee, instant food (pre-prepared), instant information (the worldwide web) and many other instants. This has rendered us all rather impatient, and our impatience means we lack the core virtue of perseverance and persistence. True or not true?

There is a rich vein of teaching in the Bible about our calling to be a people of persistence and perseverance. Paul encourages the Corinthians with the words: 'He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 1:8 NIV). We are encouraged to hold our ground, dig deep and keep going, even when the chips are down, we are running out of steam and are feeling deeply discouraged (see 2 Cor. 4:8, 9).

God's will is, then, that we persevere and persist in our prayer, our thanksgiving and our intercessions both for ourselves and for others. We know this is God's will because the Bible tells us so: 'You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised' (Heb. 10:36). This can be hard-going and challenging but we see how in nature in a confrontation between the stream and the rock, the stream always wins, not through strength but through perseverance and persistence.

Lord, grant me the grace of persistence and perseverance in prayer. Teach me never, never, never to give up, but to throw myself always upon your bountiful goodness and mercy.

3 John 5-8 • Psalm 111(112):1-6

Luke 18:1-8

Sunday 16 November

(A) Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time • Matthew 25:14-30

Our word ‘talent’ has its roots in Jesus’ familiar parable of the Talents. The word originally referred to a silver coin whose value is uncertain but at its lowest valuation was worth several thousand denarii (and a denarius was the usual payment for a day’s labour). It has, of course, come to mean ‘a natural or acquired ability, aptitude or skill’. So, for example, we might say, ‘Usain Bolt has a talent for running faster than anybody else on the face of the earth’ or ‘Paul McCartney has a talent for writing and composing music’ or ‘Daniel Day Lewis is a talented and accomplished actor’.

The parable of the Talents has many different layers of meaning. The Scripture scholar Joachim Jeremias has, for example, suggested that the parable was specifically addressed to the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day who withheld from God’s people their rightful share of his gifts in order to further their own interests. Like the servants in the parable, having been entrusted with much, they too would be required to render an account of their service. Jeremias also sees in the return of the master an underlying reference to the return of Christ, who will, at the final judgement, judge us all.

If we ask the Holy Spirit he will bring us into the deeper meaning of this parable, but what is clear is that the servant who buries his talent, producing no return on his master’s investment, does so because of a defective understanding of his master. For him his master is ‘a hard man’, reaping what he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered seed (v. 24). His fear makes him indolent.

We too must examine ourselves to see if we have a defective understanding of God because it can prevent us from being creative, generous and productive with the gifts, abilities and talents the Lord has given us. It is in accepting God as the God of love, truth, freedom, liberation and justice, revealed most perfectly in the sending of Jesus, that we can freely and willingly lay our talents and gifts before him in the service of the kingdom. How great will our joy then be when our Master one day says to us, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant!’

Lord God, may I serve you with all my talents, all my gifts, all my abilities, all my love and all my strength.

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31 • Psalm 127(128):1-5

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 • Matthew 25:14-30

Monday 17 November

Luke 18:35-43

If we have eyes to see, the blind man in today's Gospel story represents each one of us, because we too are blind and we too need Christ's healing and light to see. It is an often repeated truism that 'there is none so blind as those that cannot see' and, indeed, there are lots of things we do not see.

For example, we often have 20/20 vision when it comes to the sin, weaknesses and errors of others, but when it comes to the spotlight being shone on ourselves, our sin, our weaknesses or our errors, our vision becomes strangely hazy and blurred. Or, to take another example, we are clear about how we like to be treated, listened to and even indulged but we are less clear about offering others the same care and concern. The human condition is prone to light and shadows: we all need the light of Christ to show us the way and to lead us to salvation. We need to be courageous in inviting the Holy Spirit to shine his light, the light of Christ, into our hearts and minds.

Why does this take courage? It takes courage because we often prefer to remain in the darkness but, like the blind man in today's Gospel, we need to be willing to expose our condition and cry out to the Lord. The cry of the blind man is the cry of us all: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' (v. 38). We meet this same attitude or disposition in Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta who once said, 'To me, Jesus is the Life I want to live, the Light I want to reflect, the Way to the Father, the Love I want to express, the Joy I want to share, the Peace I want to sow around me. Jesus is everything to me.' The prayer of the blind man can be our prayer also, 'Lord, I want to see' (v. 41 NIV), and in making this prayer we open ourselves to the illumination and grace of the Holy Spirit who leads us into Christ's light and wisdom.

'What is life worth if we are only concerned with appearances? Comfort does not come through the eyes, but through the heart. Our heart follows the great and luminous spirit to the land of true life – and our gaze must be fixed on the land, a land where light never fades.' (Pope John XXIII)

Revelation 1:1-4; 2:1-5 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6

Luke 18:35-43

Tuesday 18 November

Luke 19:1-10

One of the most important verses in the whole Bible is contained in today's Gospel reading. It is Luke 19:10: 'For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost' (NIV). There, in a nutshell, is the reason Jesus came: to seek out and to save what was lost. What was lost was the human race and what needed to be found was the human race.

Since time immemorial the Christian has been characterized as a kind of 'goody two shoes': easily offended, morally upright and uptight, prone to indignation and censorious of all kinds of behaviour and people for that matter. There is also within this caricature a sense that the Christian retreats from undesirable company and judges people harshly. These caricatures prevail to this day unless challenged because the irony is that Jesus was the very opposite. He associated and built relationships with people on the margins of his society. Rather than ostracizing and ignoring those whom his society labelled and rejected, Jesus embraced and got alongside them.

Zacchaeus was a case in point as he was not just a tax collector but the chief tax collector. This meant that he was a traitor, betraying his own people for financial gain – it would have been hard to find someone more reviled and despised than this man. Whatever darkness, confusion or sin Zacchaeus was caught up in, his one encounter with Jesus changed his life. So life-changing and powerful was his conversion that he promised to make immediate restitution to those he had cheated, repaying four times the value of his debt!

Jesus came to seek and save the lost, for sure, but he also came to flip everything on its head. If we could just but grasp that none of us is righteous and that our righteous acts and efforts are but filthy rags to God. The only way that anyone can be reconciled with God is through the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. We share a common humanity with every human being on earth: the drug addicts, the prisoners, the cheats, the adulterers and those our media highlight as beyond redemption. No one is beyond redemption because Jesus died to save us all.

Lord Jesus, you came to seek and save the lost. Grant me a compassionate heart, especially towards those rejected and despised by society, and teach me that there but for your grace go I.

Revelation 3:1-6, 14-22 • Psalm 14(15):2-5

Luke 19:1-10

Wednesday 19 November

Luke 19:11-28

Jesus' constant references to the 'kingdom' and his talk of salvation coming 'today' (e.g. Luke 19:9) might well have led his Jewish listeners to conclude that the coming of God's kingdom was imminent, that Roman rule would be abolished and that Jesus himself would be crowned king.

Through a parable, Jesus explained that he would suffer rejection and that he would be going 'far away' for a period of time (this refers to the time between the ascension and the second coming). The image Jesus used was probably familiar to his audience, since both Herod the Great and his son Archelaus had to go to Rome in order to receive the right to rule Judea (and in doing so both ensured the 'kingdom' was safely under their control).

Jesus began his public ministry with these words: 'the kingdom of God is at hand...' (Mark 1:15). With the coming of Jesus, God's kingdom was inaugurated, but it has not yet come in its fullness. That is why we continue to pray, 'Thy kingdom come.' Even after the resurrection, when questioned about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, Jesus responded that only the Father knew dates and times. He focused instead on the disciples' role as witnesses in proclaiming the good news and spreading the kingdom. Despite unpopularity and even persecution, the kingdom of God will come and Jesus will return as a triumphant King, so that the main thrust of the parable is the role that Jesus' followers must play during his absence.

Today's parable is not just about developing our talents, but also demonstrates that our work on earth is linked to the coming of God's kingdom. Salvation is not just a 'ticket to heaven'. We are saved in order to serve. As Jesus disappeared into the clouds and the disciples stood staring at the sky, the angels demanded, 'why do you stand looking into heaven?' (Acts 1:11). As we await Jesus' return in glory, we are called to continue the work of Jesus by active service in his kingdom (Acts 1:8). Whatever we have received is not to be selfishly or lazily hoarded, but generously and energetically invested in the lives of those in need. Then the kingdom will grow, and the Master will be pleased and proud of his faithful servants.

Your kingdom come, Lord, in its fullness, and until it does, help me faithfully to do your will.

Revelation 4:1-11 • Psalm 150

Luke 19:11-28

Thursday 20 November

Luke 19:41-44

It is very hard to hear heartfelt weeping and not be moved. Such grief comes from somewhere deep inside a person and has the effect of laying themselves bare. Witnessing a widow mourning the loss of a dearly beloved husband or parents sobbing over the tragic death of a child, even the hardest heart could surely not be unmoved. The sight of a strong masculine man weeping is rarer but equally profoundly moving, evoking a deep sense of sympathy and connection.

We encounter Jesus weeping twice in the Gospels. The first time is captured in the shortest verse in the whole Bible, in which we are told succinctly by John that 'Jesus wept' (John 11:35) over the death of his friend Lazarus. We find Jesus weeping again today not over one person but a whole city, the holy city of Jerusalem. The Lord is weeping because of their rejection of the One who is the promised Messiah. He is the Messiah, the Lord's anointed, and what will bring them peace is what brings every human being peace and reconciliation: faith in him and in his saving death and resurrection.

The revelation that Jesus is the Messiah was hidden from their eyes (v. 42), and the veil of unbelief covers the minds and hearts of all who refuse to believe in Jesus. God has given us all the gift of free will and we are free to accept or reject God's plan revealed in and through Jesus. It was the heartbreak of unbelief and rejection which moved the Lord Jesus to weep those tears of sorrow and grief.

Pray for all those whose hearts are hardened against Christ and his gospel. Pray also for the Jewish people that their hearts may be enlightened so that they can accept the Good News that Jesus is not only our Messiah but first and foremost theirs. Indeed, the return of Christ is suspended until Jesus' coming is recognized by all Israel. Writing in Romans, Paul expressed his own heartfelt longing for their acceptance of Christ: 'For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?' (11:15).

Lord Jesus, we pray today for the full inclusion of the Jewish people in the salvation Jesus won by his death on the cross so that we all may enjoy together the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Revelation 5:1-10 • Psalm 149:1-6, 9

Luke 19:41-44

Friday 21 November

Luke 19:45-48 • The Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Memorial)

Imagine walking into your local church next Sunday and finding souvenir stalls and hole-in-the-wall cash machines set up along the centre aisle, with people scurrying to and fro, depositing cheques, withdrawing cash, choosing postcards, buying candles, paying black-market-rates for hymnals... How would you feel? What would you do?

As Jesus entered the temple, he made no attempt to hide his displeasure. The Jews believed the presence of the Lord dwelt in the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the temple. The temple was the place God intended to be 'a house of prayer for all peoples' (Isa. 56:7). How had it become a 'den of robbers'?

Worshippers were required to make sacrifices for their sins and to pay a temple tax. Since many journeyed from far-off, they could not bring their own animals; foreigners in the city had to have their money changed into local currency. Thus traders and money-changers provided a necessary service for pilgrims.

But what had begun as a service to facilitate worship had been exploited into a booming business, with merchants charging exorbitant prices and money-changers doing the same with exchange rates. All this took place in the outer courtyard – the place designated for Gentiles (i.e. non-Jews) – making worship impractical, if not impossible. Backed by the priestly aristocracy, the temple had become a centre for profiteering, not prayer.

Today, God's dwelling place is in the midst of his people, the community of believers, the Church. Peter reminds us: 'But you are...a royal priesthood...that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet. 2:9). As a faith community, let's ask ourselves: Is our church a 'house of prayer' where we 'declare the wonderful deeds' of God? Do we welcome and accept all kinds of people? By our words, actions, liturgy or lifestyle, have we erected barriers such as exclusiveness (which keeps people out) or being judgemental (which drives them out)?

Revelation 10:8-11 • Psalm 118(119):14, 24, 72, 103, 111, 131

Luke 19:45-48

Saturday 22 November

(Memorial) St Cecilia • Luke 20:27-40

Is there life after death? What happens when we die? Does death separate us from our loved ones for ever? Is physical death the end of life as we know it or do we pass over to a different kind of life? These are the questions which surely must pass through all of our minds at some time or other in our lives but which we dare to voice only rarely if ever at all because, in our twenty-first-century society, death is a taboo subject. We don't like to talk about it and pretend it does not exist, and we would certainly find ourselves excluded from polite company if (God forbid) we referred to it in any way, shape or form.

Our forefathers showed no such reluctance in discussing death. The Sadducees, who would have been in good company in our modern world since they too did not believe in an afterlife, approach Jesus ostensibly for help in addressing a domestic conundrum, but they are really out to set him a trap. They invite Jesus to pronounce on the case of a woman who married seven brothers in turn and tragically each time her husband died. Whose wife, they want to know, will she be in the resurrection (v. 33)?

Cutting through their confusion, Jesus explains that beyond death there is no need for marriage because we are like angels who behold the beatific vision of God. Through the grace of baptism, ongoing conversion and the mercy of God we become children of the resurrection, sons and daughters of the living God.

Our belief in the life everlasting, the resurrection of the body and heaven is rooted and grounded in Jesus. He is the One who has truly gone before us and he is the One who is truly risen from the dead. He is the One who proclaimed himself to be the resurrection and the life (John 11:25) and in this we put our faith, our hope and our trust. The saints are consoling and comforting in holding out the witness of those who faced death with courage and confidence, helping us to see that we too do not need to fear death. St Ignatius of Antioch said: 'My earthly desire has been crucified;...there is living water in me, water that murmurs to me: "Come to the Father."'

'I want to see God and, in order to see him, I must die.' (St Teresa of Avila)

Revelation 11:4-12 • Psalm 143(144):1-2, 9-10

Luke 20:27-40

Sunday 23 November

Matthew 25:31-46 • Christ the King (Solemnity) (A)

When Christ comes again, he will judge us on whether or not we have kept the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2-17), that is, on our obedience to God's law. He will also judge us on whether or not we followed his commandment to love our neighbour: 'This I command you, to love one another' (John 15:17), that is, on our treatment of others. This judgement is perhaps a more searching one. Christ wishes to reward us for the good we have done. He has no desire to punish us or exclude us from heaven.

Jesus laid down his life for us. He loves us unconditionally. It is critical that we grasp the depth of his love for us so that we are not paralysed with fear or by the prospect of his judgement. It is vital that we contemplate God's love towards us, recognizing his mercy and kindness. In this way we will grow in our knowledge and experience of God's love. Out of love for us God promised: 'I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the cripple, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice' (Ezek. 34:16). He fulfilled his promise when he sent Jesus as our Shepherd: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want' (Ps. 23:1). Jesus brings us back to the Father, bandages up our wounds, strengthens us through the gift of his body and blood, and protects us from Satan's ferocious attacks. We live in Jesus' love. This enables us to love others as he has loved us (John 15:12).

Matthew lists some practical ways of loving others: feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison (vv. 35-36). Fundamentally, loving others is taking care of them and serving their needs – being a blessing to them in any way that we can. This is not difficult for our love for others flows out of a grateful heart, a heart that knows it is loved. Reflect on the many ways that God shows his love for you. Let his love fill your heart. Then let his love overflow to others.

Jesus, I want to love as you have loved me. Give me an open, generous heart. Show me practical ways to love others.

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17 • Psalm 22(23):1-6

1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28 • Matthew 25:31-46

Monday 24 November

(Memorial) St Andrew Dung Lac • Luke 21:1-4

Jesus saw what others missed. Jesus highlighted the hidden and the humble. The witness of a poor, hidden and humble widow speaks to every generation of believers. She gave not from surplus or wealth but from poverty and misery. She gave in an age where there was no social security, no pension provision and no support from charities or other organizations. As a widow she would have been unable to work and would have been treated with contempt as a second-class citizen. In her pure and simple act of giving, Jesus saw the generous heart of the true disciple, and because of this she has become the living witness of the cheerful giver. From the poor widow we learn that God loves with great tenderness and compassion those who give from a good and generous heart. We are told that she did not simply make a donation but put into the temple treasury all she had to live on (v. 4).

The widow, whose name we are sadly not told, can be for us the patron saint of generous giving. Many centuries ago St John Chrysostom urged Christians to take seriously her example and then follow it: 'For what use is it when you give as much of your wealth as someone might give a spoonful of water from the ocean and you don't imitate the widow's generosity of spirit?' We can be generous in many ways: with our time, our energy, our resources and our lives.

Today we celebrate the witness of Andrew Dung Lac and his companions who were generous with their lives, laying them down so that the fledgling Church in Vietnam could take root. Father Andrew Dung Lac, a diocesan priest, is chosen as the martyrs' representative – in total 117 courageous people were martyred. They died during a fierce and brutal period of persecution in Vietnam (1625-1886), in which many hundreds of thousands of hidden saints and martyrs suffered and died for their faith.

The Vietnamese group comprised 37 priests and 59 lay people: 76 were beheaded, 21 suffocated, 6 were burnt alive, 5 were mutilated and 9 died in a prison as a result of torture. They were canonized on 19 June 1988 by Pope John Paul II.

Martyrs of Vietnam, pray for us.

Revelation 14:1-5 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Luke 21:1-4

Tuesday 25 November

Luke 21:5-11

We are now nearing various endpoints. Autumn is beginning to edge towards winter, and in just over a month it will be the end of another year in all our lives. The end of the church year is even closer as we are now making our way through the final days of the liturgical calendar. Fittingly, the readings throughout this week help us to think of the last things culminating in Saturday's reading from Revelation which speaks of the second coming: 'There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever... "Behold, I am coming soon!"' (22:5,7).

The Gospel reading today also speaks of the last things, and links aspects of Jesus' life to those things which are still to come. In this passage Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple. In what follows the horizon will expand to include Jerusalem (vv. 20-24), and then the end of the world (vv. 25-33). In other words, what this complex passage suggests is that the events unfolding before the eyes of the disciples had implications for the rest of human history, that is, our history.

The end of the world is also evoked in the apocalyptic imagery of today's passage (vv. 9-11), which anticipates indeed the language of the Apocalypse, or Revelation. As we now approach Advent and Christmas, we prepare to celebrate the first coming and to anticipate the second coming. It is without doubt a complex time of the year. On the one hand, at the beginning of November, we think of death as we remember those who have gone before us in the feasts of All Souls and All Saints. On the other hand, we are about to celebrate the most important birth in human history, that of Our Lord and Saviour.

As the days continue to shorten, then, it is good to call all these things to mind and to treasure them in our hearts. Equally, as we reflect on the last things, we should perhaps pause for a moment to think of our own end, as we know not, of course, either the hour or the day.

Lord Jesus, help us to prepare properly for your coming, and for that moment in all our lives when we shall meet you face to face.

Revelation 14:14-19 • Psalm 95(96):10-13

Luke 21:5-11

Wednesday 26 November

Luke 21:12-19

Did you know that there have been more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century than in all the other centuries put together? Hard to believe but true. Christians, from across the denominations, are suffering for their faith all over the world. We just don't often hear about it or (if we are honest) give it much thought or attention. Sadly, it is only too human to be diffident or just ignorant of the plight of human beings, even within the family of faith, who suffer in countries on the other side of the world. The Christian Church is mercilessly persecuted in countries such as East Timor, the Moluccas Islands of Indonesia, Sudan, Peru, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan and many other places around the world. To these we must now add Iraq, as the recent horrifying scenes on our television screens have forcibly brought home to us. Jesus warned explicitly that times of persecution would be the lot of many who follow him.

The suffering and persecution Jesus refers to in today's passage is specific to a time which will immediately precede the end of the world. In other words, since the beginning Christians have been persecuted and since the beginning the blood of these martyrs has been the seed of the Church.

However, the period prior to the end of the world will be a time of terrible persecution for all believers. The Catholic Church echoes this stark warning from the Scriptures: 'Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers' (Catechism of the Catholic Church 675).

We don't know times, we don't know dates, but what we do know is that the Church will pass through this final trial. Will it be in our lifetime? Will it be for a thousand years or two thousand years? We just don't know when God will wrap up human history like a garment and the end will come. What we do know is that, wherever we are, we are called to be witnesses to Christ. Our vocation is an invitation to share and testify to Christ and the beauty, truth and goodness of the gospel.

'I pray, my brothers, that we may be found worthy to be cursed, censured, ground down and even executed in the name of Jesus Christ, as long as Christ himself is not killed in us.' (St Paulinus of Nola)

Revelation 15:1-4 • Psalm 97(98):1-3, 7-9

Luke 21:12-19

Thursday 27 November

Luke 21:20-28

During November the Church urges us to ponder the last things – death, judgement, the second coming, heaven, purgatory and hell. Although sober and sombre subject matter, these are some of the most fundamental realities of life and faith, from which there is no escape. We will all die; we will all be judged; there is a heaven and there is a hell; and Jesus is coming again.

We live in a very sophisticated age in which our focus is consumed in the here and now, but as Christians we need to have a much broader horizon. Whether we choose to think about it or not, we can be certain that one day all human life will cease, Jesus will return and the righteous will reign with God. In today's passage Jesus points to a time when the holy city of Jerusalem will fall to a cruel marauding army – this actually happened in AD 70 when the temple was razed to the ground and the Roman army invaded the holy city of Jerusalem. When a city is attacked, its inhabitants seek sanctuary within its walls: however, Jesus urges his followers to flee to the hills (v. 21). The apocalyptic scene of persecution and suffering which he vividly describes is frightening and disturbing. As we read it today it can seem removed and remote, belonging to a bygone age.

Nevertheless, we need to think again and consider the following words from the Catechism of the Catholic Church: 'Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth, will unveil the "mystery of iniquity" in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh' (para. 675). We are invited to have a very firm grasp of reality. Jesus' return is imminent (CCC 673). Although, of course, we do not know the time or season, we need to be those who pray for and long for the glorious return of Jesus which will usher in the end of the world and the establishment of God's kingdom.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Revelation 18:1-2, 21-23; 19:1-3, 9 • Psalm 99(100):2-5

Luke 21:20-28

Friday 28 November

Luke 21:29-33

Throughout the year nature signals the changing seasons, forewarning us of what is to come. As human beings we have learnt to interpret these signs, which are often encapsulated in homespun proverbs and sayings, such as ‘one swallow doesn’t make a summer’, or ‘rain before seven, fine before eleven’. We have grown adept at interpreting the signs of nature – our vocation invites us to be just as wise in interpreting the signs of the times and therefore the signs of the kingdom.

As we search the Scriptures to find out what these signs are, we need to ensure that we maintain a balanced perspective – an overly apocalyptic vision of the world is dangerous and can lead to extremism. Our vocation is an all-embracing invitation to live by the power of the Holy Spirit, who brings wisdom and light to our lives. The signs of the times are that we are living in a world which is becoming increasingly hedonistic, relativistic and consumer driven. Our culture, despite its many blessings and materialistic advantages, is adrift and lost in a world of shifting and shallow values (for example, the love of celebrity, wealth and pleasure for pleasure’s sake). Our world is in need of the gospel more than ever. There are also, however, signs of hope, such as technological progress in the field of medicine, a greater awareness of our responsibility for the environment and a new momentum for justice and equality – the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign has highlighted the sense of solidarity we feel with our brothers and sisters in Africa, for example.

We are called to live with a sense that God’s kingdom is near and that Christ’s second coming is imminent. Pope John Paul II, throughout his pontificate, urged us to renew our hope in the coming of God’s kingdom. We are to pray earnestly for Christ’s second coming. How often have you prayed, ‘Come Lord Jesus, come’? How often have you reflected on the truth that every time we celebrate Mass and say the powerful words ‘We proclaim your death O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again’ we are anticipating our future glory in God’s kingdom? We are pilgrims, we have another home and we strive towards another world.

The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’

Revelation 20:1-4, 11–21:2 • Psalm 83(84):3-6, 8

Luke 21:29-33

Saturday 29 November

Luke 21:34-36

There is nothing worse than being caught unawares. The examples from daily life are many and varied: the arrival of a guest who drops in quite out of the blue, an outbreak of inclement weather with nothing to protect us from drenching, or a wild card question in an exam we had not anticipated or revised for. Such things are the stuff of life and have happened to us all. They highlight, however, a certain precariousness and fragility to life. The truth is we don't and can't really know what will happen from one day to the next. This does not mean that we live in a state of constant anxiety, fretting about what will or will not happen. We just get on with life and attend to an unexpected guest, a sudden downpour or seek some other arrangement if purse, wallet or tickets are missing.

Baden Powell, the founder of the Scout movement, drawing on his army training and discipline, coined the saying, 'A good scout is always prepared', and in a similar vein the Christian, too, always has to be prepared. 'Watch' and 'pray' are important words in a Christian's vocabulary.

There are two events in life which are certain to occur. The first will definitely occur in our lifetime; the second may or may not occur in our lifetime, but occur it will. They are, of course, our own death and the second coming of Christ, and for both of these events we are to 'watch' and 'pray'.

Jesus is startlingly direct about the issues in our lives which dull us and make us lose our sensitivities to these verities: 'dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life' (v. 34 NIV). God knows life is full of temptations. We all have our own struggles and temptations and whatever form dissipation, drunkenness or anxiety take in our life, one thing is sure: if they overwhelm and dominate we will certainly lose clarity and become confused. We are personally responsible for our lives. But there is no need to be overwhelmed because the Holy Spirit is our Counsellor and Comforter, always guiding, prompting and urging us to 'watch', 'pray' and 'be ready' because we do not know the day or the hour.

'Watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man.' (v. 36)

Revelation 22:1-7 • Psalm 94(95):1-7

Luke 21:34-36

Sunday 30 November

Mark 13:33-37 • First Sunday of Advent (B)

Today begins the holy season of Advent during which we enter a time of preparation, reflection, renewal and refreshment. Although Advent comes to us in the deep night of winter, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta compared it to ‘springtime in nature, when everything is renewed and so is fresh and healthy. Advent is meant to do this to us – to refresh us and make us healthy, to be able to receive Christ in whatever form he may come to us.’ In what form will Christ come to you this Advent?

The word ‘advent’ comes from the Latin *adventus* which literally means ‘coming’. In this season of Advent the liturgy urges us to focus on the three comings of Christ: his first coming in the incarnation, his second coming in glory, and his third coming into our lives in a new, fresh and dynamic way. We rejoice in Christ’s first coming, we long for his second, and with an expectant and living hope we are confident of a new outpouring of his Spirit into our lives this Advent.

Advent is certainly a season which evokes many sentiments and emotions. We experience wonder at the drama of the birth of Christ in a manger and joy that unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. Alongside this sense of rejoicing, Advent is a penitential season when we are invited to examine our lives, invite the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin and undergo the movement deep within us of a contrite and humble heart.

Alongside all of this grace and blessing we face one of the most commercially ferocious times of the year – we buy, we sell, we panic, we fret, we rush, we prepare, we party... However, amid the many challenges of Advent, only one thing is needed – and that is that we carve out time to be with the Lord, to pray, reflect and ponder on our Saviour’s birth, for this is the true meaning of Christmas. Each Advent we are invited to reflect in awe and wonder on the revelation of the incarnation and let its gentle grace and blessing reach deep into our lives, healing us and restoring to us the joy of our salvation.

‘Let us keep the flame of faith alive through prayer and the sacraments; let us make sure we do not forget God.’ (Pope Francis)

Isaiah 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8 • Psalm 79(80):2-3, 15-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 • Mark 13:33-37