

Sunday 1 November

Matthew 5:1-12 • All Saints (B) (Solemnity)

Each year on the feast of All Saints we read again ‘the Beatitudes’, which are Jesus’ words of introduction to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel. It is the saints above all who have lived and embodied the Beatitudes and therefore deserve to be described as ‘blessed’ or ‘happy’. One of the things that is initially most striking about the Beatitudes is the fact that they seem to run counter to any popular understanding of what might make us happy. From the first of them, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit...’, to the last, ‘Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you...’, we see a very different set of values and desires from what we might describe as worldly values and desires.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the Beatitudes is the extent to which we ourselves might feel alienated from them. Well, do we really feel blessed or happy when we mourn! What do we make of being meek? And is ‘hungering and thirsting for righteousness’ an accurate description of ourselves?

The truth is that the Beatitudes could only really be said to be an accurate description of Jesus himself. They become a description of others, and even of ourselves, to the extent to which we have become transformed by Christ and conformed to his image. This is why this reading is particularly appropriate on the feast of All Saints. It is a reminder to us all that a saint is not simply a person who lived an extraordinarily good and holy life: most of all, a saint is one who has received Jesus into his or her life and allowed him to mould him or her into his very likeness.

It is because the paschal mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection and the gift of his Spirit have been a living power in their lives that the saints have become saints. Saints come in all different shapes and sizes. They come from every background and walk of life and manifest every different kind of character. They have also manifested every different kind of flaw and weakness in their lives and they have committed all the sins that we know can beset our own lives. But the overriding characteristic of every one of them is the transforming power of Jesus. They permitted the cross of Jesus to overcome the power of sin so that the risen life of Jesus could be revealed in them.

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

1 John 3:1-3 • Matthew 5:1-12

Monday 2 November

(B) (All Souls) The Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed • Mark 15:33-39; 16:1-6

There is a close connection between today's commemoration of All Souls and yesterday's feast of All Saints. The saints represent the goal of the journey of the holy souls. We saw yesterday that the saints, whatever their walk of life, took hold of the cross of Jesus, which acted like a sharp knife separating and cutting away what was sinful in their lives. The cross dealt a sort of death blow to the mastery of sin and sinful habits. In their awareness of these realities in their lives, the saints refused to be complacent or to accept that this is the way we human beings are. Instead they turned to Jesus. They understood that he has called us all to something much greater – to be holy as he and the Father are holy. Only in the transforming power of Jesus – in the work of his cross, putting to death our fallen nature that actually desires to sin – is there found a remedy to our human condition and the release of the power of the Spirit, making of us a new creation. We become a new creation in Christ and his risen life begins to be manifested in our lives.

The holy souls were on that journey, even though the transformation may not have been complete before the moment of their death. There is more conforming to Christ's image that needs to take place. The cross and resurrection of Jesus have certainly touched their lives – they were, as the liturgy describes, 'marked by the sign of faith'. However, there is more to be done, more transformation to take place, until they are completely transfigured into Christ's likeness and no trace of the fallen nature and its traits remain. The continued working of the power of the death and resurrection of Christ in those who have died is another way to understand the teaching about purgatory.

Souls who are not yet perfected in Christ's image cannot bear to be in the awesome and holy presence of God. They cry, 'Take me away so that I may be purified.' It is the work of those still living in the Church to pray for them and especially to celebrate the paschal mystery of the Mass for them, so that what was begun in them may be brought to completion.

May the souls of the faithful departed, by the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

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

Romans 5:5-11 • Mark 15:33-39; 16:1-6

Tuesday 3 November

Luke 14:15-24

The parable in today's reading is set in the context of Jesus dining at the house of a leading Pharisee. We are told that this took place on a Sabbath and that there was a man present who was in need of healing. Anticipating the likely reaction to a healing miracle, Jesus asked a question about the lawfulness of healing on the Sabbath before going ahead and healing the man. The Pharisees remained silent and gave no reply – perhaps because they knew that even they would not think twice about rescuing an animal which had fallen into a pit. How could they deny similar help to a fellow human being?

Jesus then extended the image of helping someone in need on the Sabbath to inviting the needy to a dinner or banquet, rather than just friends, relatives and rich acquaintances. It would not have escaped the notice of his hearers that the image of a banquet on the Sabbath is drawn from the Old Testament and refers to the kingdom of God and to the promise of its fulfilment in the time of the Messiah. Entrance into the banquet of God's kingdom will be determined by the mercy and generosity of God, rather than the rather mercenary way that the wealthy invited each other to meals, expecting that they would receive invitations in return.

Against this background, Jesus' parable introduces a note that might have taken his audience by surprise. He spoke of a man giving 'a great banquet'. The surprising element was the refusal of the original invitees to attend – all of them making different excuses. As a result, it was the needy who attended, those not, apparently, originally invited. The shock involved here was the realization that Jesus was still talking about the kingdom of God and seemingly implying that the Pharisees and religious leaders in Israel might find themselves excluded from God's kingdom! Given the background we have spoken about, the basis for the exclusion of the original invitees was that they thought more about their own property, animals and relations than they did about the poor and needy, even using the law of the Sabbath to justify not helping the needy, while ignoring the law when it came to their own selfish interests.

They are fit for the kingdom and banquet of heaven who reflect something of the generosity and mercy of God himself – a generosity and mercy made incarnate by Jesus, the Messiah.

Romans 12:5-16 • Psalm 130(131)

Luke 14:15-24

Wednesday 4 November

(Memorial) St Charles Borromeo • Luke 14:25-33

Which of us has not baulked at the words of Jesus in today's reading? Perhaps it is among the most uncompromising passages in the New Testament. The demands Jesus makes on those who would be his disciples seem to contradict much of what we understand about living the Christian life. We search for understanding when we are faced with the proposal that someone cannot be a disciple without 'hating' his mother and father, brothers and sisters. There is no quarter in Jesus' words 'unless he gives up all his possessions'. And although we have become familiar with the idea of 'carrying our cross', what possible meaning could these words have had for those who first heard them and had no inkling of the way that Jesus was to die?

We need the light of the Holy Spirit to unlock the meaning of Jesus' words. We also need to remember that it is important to take into account the wider context of the whole of Jesus' teaching. Clearly, we know that, elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus characterizes his disciples by the love they have for one another – this love in no way excludes family relations. We appear to have a dilemma! Perhaps we are being invited to make a distinction between 'becoming a disciple' and 'living as a disciple'. The first is a one-time step, the second a continuous way of life.

Once we have made this distinction, we can begin to be clear about the fact that, throughout the New Testament, there is always something entirely radical about the step of becoming a disciple of Jesus. Think of the disciples themselves – dropping their nets at the call of Jesus – and also the condition placed upon the rich young man. All of this speaks of a radical choice. In fact, it involves a turning around, even a turning of the back on a former life.

In the writings of the Apostle Paul, the language of discipleship speaks of a death: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?' (Rom. 6:3). Perhaps the true significance of our baptism is too little considered, or perhaps the death to an old way of life has not been taken hold of in our adult life. In following Jesus, everything in our former life has to die, even though it may then be resurrected and recreated in Christ.

Romans 13:8-10 • Psalm 111(112):1-5, 9

Luke 14:25-33

Thursday 5 November

Luke 15:1-10

Someone ought to say it! There was surely someone in the crowd who was thinking, ‘I wouldn’t go after the lost sheep. I’d cut my losses and stay with the ninety-nine so as not to risk losing any more!’ Are we more cynical today? But didn’t this shepherd go a little bit over the top? We are very familiar with the image and respond possibly sentimentally to the pastoral scene. But it can be good and perhaps instructive, sometimes, to let different reactions and questions surface when we read the gospel texts. What was the shepherd thinking? Was he sure that the ninety-nine would be safe? And why is there more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine who had no need of repentance? Are there in fact any who have no need of repentance?

Let’s follow a slightly unusual train of thought and see where it leads. It does appear that in the parables of today’s reading there are a number of slight inconsistencies. Are the ninety-nine really safe in the wilderness? Are they really not sinners – not lost even a little bit?

Some of these sorts of questions and inconsistencies occurred to the early Fathers of the Church, great saints who loved to study and interpret the Scriptures and especially to see in them the over-arching plan of God. They started to realize that perhaps the Holy Spirit was leading them beyond a simple parable about repentant sinners, to opening up the foreordained plan of salvation and the mystery of the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ himself. They concluded that the ninety-nine were not so much virtuous men as the great part of God’s creation that did not rebel against him – the realm of angels (although some of those had rebelled!). The one sheep, not so much a single sinner but the whole human race! In that light, we see new significance in the shepherd who goes in search and carries the lost sheep on his shoulders. It is an image of the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. An image of the Suffering Servant who carried the weight of human sin upon himself.

The joy in heaven is joy over the restoration of the human race. But it is also joy in the victory and the glory of Jesus, who emptied himself even unto death. For this God has exalted him.

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

Luke 15:1-10

Friday 6 November

(Feast in Ireland) All Saints in Ireland • Luke 16:1-8

What did Jesus really have in mind when he told this parable? It is unusual for Jesus to choose an example of downright dishonesty as a means for teaching his disciples. That's not to say that we aren't probably all a little bit impressed by the way that the dishonest steward tried to secure his future by making sure there would be a few open doors and favours to call in when he was eventually out on the street. We can imagine that his dishonesty was compounded also by the threat of a bit of blackmail to hold over his master's debtors, who would not want their complicity in the false accounting to be brought into the light. Even the master himself was impressed. He may not have been tempted to re-employ the steward, however. For all of his astuteness, the steward couldn't be relied upon. After all, it was not the master who was benefitting – the steward used his wits largely to serve himself.

But what did Jesus mean when he spoke of the children of this world being more astute than the children of light? It is not likely that he was encouraging us to imitate the steward's practices. Perhaps, however, Jesus was highlighting the man's single-mindedness. Is the clue in the distinction that Jesus makes between 'the children of this world' and 'the children of light'?

The children of this world can be expected to be worldly in their thinking and in their goals and aspirations. Without casting any particular judgement on worldliness, the fact remains that the perspective is simply of this world and its goods, that is, all that is good about it. What the steward was concerned about was worldly goods – not simply goods in the sense of money and possessions, but his future, his security, his friendships. He was single-minded in ensuring these good things, even ingenious in the way he set about overcoming any obstacles.

And there's the rub: are the children of light as single-minded about their goods (again, not possessions, but those good things that they value most)? Calling them 'children of the light' suggests that their understanding of what are the real goods in life is derived from 'revelation', from God's word and his truth about our true nature and destiny. As children of God our destiny is heaven. Are we single-minded in our desire and effort to overcome any obstacle to reaching this goal?

Proper of Season: Romans 15:14-21 • Psalm 97(98):1-4 • Luke 16:1-8

(Ireland only: Ecclesiasticus 44:1-15 • Psalm 125(126) • Luke 6:17-23)

Saturday 7 November

Luke 16:9-15

‘Money, money, money!’ – as the Abba song goes – ‘it’s the rich man’s world.’ And that’s where the problem lies. Money is tainted, as Jesus describes it, because it carries the danger of reducing our world to the attainment of money. When money is our world, then it also becomes our God and we can find ourselves even serving it. Like the Abba song, today’s few verses mention money so many times that it almost seems like a little world in which money dominates.

But, of course, there is no real intrinsic problem with money. It is strictly an artificial means invented by ourselves to facilitate trading with each other. In the past, trading happened through putting an equivalent value on various goods, even time, so that a day of a man’s work was said to be equivalent to, for example, a sack of potatoes. Money was invented to represent the same value as the hours of work or a quantity of vegetables, so that we would not need to carry around sacks of potatoes if we wanted some skilled worker to do a job for us. Money was a great idea and it facilitated society because we could give something we had in exchange for something we wanted. It was a way of using our gifts, skills, goods to service others and to benefit from those skills, etc., of others in return.

The taintedness of money comes not from money itself but from the human heart, in which greed resides. From within the heart, the need and desire to build society and to exchange goods and skills can be corrupted into the lust simply for profit. The heart can produce a self-centredness that simply wants to take advantage of others. As mentioned above, the corrupt heart can shrink the world simply to ourselves.

Jesus invites us to use money in a different way. Profit is no bad thing: it only becomes bad insofar as it is used wholly to serve ourselves. What matters in the end is the state of our heart. It is through our union with Jesus that our hearts are transformed. Like the heart of Jesus, who came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many, our hearts can give money its true value in the building of society and the kingdom of God.

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, make our hearts like unto thine. Amen.

Romans 16:3-9, 16, 22-27 • Psalm 144(145):2-5, 10-11

Luke 16:9-15

Sunday 8 November

(B) Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time • Mark 12:38-44

Today's reading is the last time Mark presents Jesus in the temple. It is a dramatic and powerful moment in which two worlds collide: religious ostentation, pretension and hypocrisy meet a humble, self-effacing and generous widow.

Jesus was always quick to expose hypocrisy – it was a kind of archenemy of his. He named it, shamed it and revealed it. The Lord showed no reservation in highlighting the inconsistency of the scribes and Pharisees and warned us to beware of them. For they prayed long and loud so that they might be identified as the 'holy ones' (vv. 38-39) whilst at the same time they 'devour[ed] widows' houses' (v. 40). This hypocrisy revealed a cold heart toward God and others, rendering their prayer empty and hollow. Interestingly the Torah condemned this attitude: 'You shall not wrong a stranger... You shall not afflict any widow or orphan' (Exod. 22:21-22).

It is against this backdrop of duplicity and hypocrisy that the poor widow enters the scene. She is the model disciple – dependent upon God, simple in faith, trusting and lavishly generous, giving out of her poverty not her wealth. This is the kind of faith we are called to, the fruit of our baptism, and bears witness to the new creation, a new humanity.

However, before we get too carried away, we need to reflect. The scribe and the Pharisee lurk in all our hearts. We may not devour widows' houses but there is a drive in the human heart to want to be affirmed and recognized for our righteousness and holiness. We all face this temptation – but it is especially real for our clergy who are esteemed because of their vocation.

Before God we are all equal – we are all widows and beggars before God's throne. Before the judgement seat of Christ we will not be asked: were you a priest, were you a deacon, were you a bishop? We will be asked whether we loved God and our neighbour as we loved ourselves. We cannot know, because the widow only spoke through her witness, but we can be sure that she had received and knew intimately the mercy of God in her own life. She was a believer rooted in a sure knowledge of God's love and mercy and this overflowed in her generous life and witness.

Lord, give me the heart of the widow – generous, trusting and loving.

1 Kings 17:10-16 • Psalm 145(146):7-10

Hebrews 9:24-28 • Mark 12:38-44

Monday 9 November

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

Today the Church celebrates the feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome, the oldest and highest-ranking of the four major basilicas in Rome. The Basilica of St John Lateran is the cathedral of the diocese of Rome, the official ecclesiastical seat of the Holy Father, the Bishop of Rome, not St Peter's Basilica as so many mistakenly believe. The Basilica is also called the Church of the Holy Saviour or the Church of St John the Baptist. In ancient Rome this was the church where everyone was baptized. It is the oldest church in the West, the first to be built after Emperor Constantine's edict, in 313, granting Christians freedom to practise their faith. It was consecrated by Pope Sylvester in 324. This feast became a universal celebration in honour of the archbasilica, the ecclesiastical mother church, called 'the mother and mistress of all churches of Rome and the world' (*omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput*), as a sign of love for and union with the See of Peter.

On the Third Sunday of Advent, Pope Francis will open the Holy Door of the Cathedral of Rome and will call on cathedrals or shrines in every diocese in the world to open a Holy Door of Mercy, marking our entry into a special and holy Year of Mercy. In the following weeks, the Holy Doors of other papal basilicas will be opened.

We enter this doorway of faith with hope and expectation in our hearts confident and sure that we are temples of the Holy Spirit, where the Spirit resides, not in buildings made by stone, but in hearts full of the love and joy poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Today's feast celebrates a mystery that is always relevant: God's desire to build a spiritual temple in the world, a community that worships him in spirit and truth (cf. John 4:23-24). But this observance also reminds us of the importance of the material buildings in which the community gathers to celebrate the praises of God. Every community therefore has the duty to take special care of its own sacred buildings, which are a precious religious and historical patrimony.

We call upon the intercession of Mary Most Holy, that she may help us to become, like her, the 'house of God', a living temple of his love.

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

NB: No Second Reading John 2:13-22

Tuesday 10 November

(Memorial) St Leo the Great • Luke 17:7-10

Honestly – and be honest, it's more fun – what do you make of today's hard-hitting reading on humble service? Slavery whilst commonplace in the ancient world is an illegal activity today. Human beings are not to be bought and sold for profit – neither are they to be owned. Jesus, however, looks to a cultural reality of his day to teach us about the interior attitude of one who serves.

The Greek word for 'servant' used in this parable denotes a bondservant, the lowest of the low in the slave pecking order. Jesus' hearers would have been much amused by the suggestion that, at the end of a long working day, a master would wait on the slave! The idea would have been ridiculous and offensive. It was socially impossible: a slave serves his master, end of story.

Now this is hard for our modern ears. But Jesus is teaching something radical here about Christian service. Jesus is pointing to a standard which goes far beyond tit-for-tat, you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, and the 'What's in it for me?' mentality. The Lord is teaching values which seem old-fashioned today: duty and obedience.

Clearly, true Christian service is a bitter pill to swallow but with God's grace we can serve others from a heart overflowing with love for God. For when we serve others in Christ's name we are actually serving Christ and expressing our love and devotion to him. This insight into Christian service is a work of God's grace in our lives rooted in the truth that God's grace is freely given and received by those, including us, who do not deserve it. As Paul says: 'Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness' (Rom. 4:4-5 NIV). Our service then of others is firmly grounded in God's grace: 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do' (Eph. 2:8, 10 NIV).

Father, forgive me for presuming upon my relationship with you as if you owed me something. Help me to better understand my appropriate role as your slave, so that when you graciously grant me your friendship I might truly appreciate your love.

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

Luke 17:7-10

Wednesday 11 November

Luke 17:11-19 • St Martin of Tours (Memorial)

Lepers were literally pushed to the margins of society in Jesus' day – they were considered a menace. The term 'leprosy' as it is used in the Bible covered a number of highly infectious skin diseases, and those afflicted were regarded as 'unclean' (see Lev. 13:45-46). The group that met with Jesus was composed of Galilean Jews and Samaritans (Gentiles). Their shared disease had united them in solidarity, friendship and dependence on each other.

Jesus healed the lepers with the word: 'Go and show yourselves to the priests' (v. 14). The priest's job was to determine if the lepers were healed in order to grant permission for them to return to society (Lev. 14:2). Although the name of the Samaritan leper who returned to give praise and thanks to God is lost to history, he stands out as a true disciple and shows us that the way of gratitude and praise is the way of Christ.

God is calling us to be happy and grateful disciples – for a grateful disciple is indeed a happy one. We tend to be better at counting our curses than our blessings. We tend to focus on the negative rather than the positive, but graciousness – which as the word suggests is the fruit of grace – makes us grateful, thankful and optimistic. Since the Holy Spirit fills our lives with joy – God's joy and God's happiness – believers should be the happiest people on earth. We should radiate the joy of Christ. If we don't, we need to examine our lives and see what it is that prevents us from living joy-filled lives. Are we like the nine lepers who went on their way or are we like the one who returned?

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life and the very essence and heart of the Christian life. The word 'eucharist' means 'thanksgiving' and this is why gratitude, thanks and praise are at the heart of being a believer. To be blunt, the reason why we are not joy-filled Christians is because we have lost a sense of profound gratitude to God. But if we turn back to the Lord in humble repentance, our hearts will overflow with gratitude once again.

Give thanks with a grateful heart, give praise with a joyful heart, give glory to God who has healed us, restored us and made us his sons and daughters.

Wisdom 6:1-11 • Psalm 81(82):3-7

Luke 17:11-19

Thursday 12 November

(Memorial) St Josaphat • Luke 17:20-25

When will the world end? When will the Lord return? When will the kingdom of God come? These questions are as real and relevant today as they were in the first century. The first believers had a lively sense that the world could end at any moment. They believed passionately that Jesus was going to return in their lifetime. The truth is, we just don't know. It is as simple as that.

What we do know is that since the ascension of Christ God's plan has entered into its fulfilment: we are living in the 'last hour'. As the bishops at Vatican II taught, 'Already the final age of the world is with us and the renewal of the world is irrevocably underway; it is even now anticipated in a certain real way, for the Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real but imperfect' (Lumen gentium 48). The return of Christ then is imminent; it could happen today or the next day or at the end of the week. Or it could be in 1000 years, 10,000 years or 1 million years. For as Peter taught, in the eternal mind of God 'one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day' (2 Pet. 3:8).

Why hasn't the Lord returned? Why hasn't God wrapped up human history? The answer to this is a mystery, of course. But one element of this mystery is that God's call is irrevocable and from the beginning Scripture has taught that the glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by all of Israel regarding belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God.

This is why we must pray for our elder brother in faith. We pray for them in the hope that one day we might be united with them in praying for the return of Jesus, the Christ, whom God has exalted to the highest place and given the name that is above every other name. For at this name, the name of Jesus, every knee must one day bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Lord, may I make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace for your patience means salvation for the whole world. May I grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wisdom 7:22-8:1 • Psalm 118(119):89-91, 130, 135, 175
Luke 17:20-25

Friday 13 November

Luke 17:26-37

Let's face it, some Scripture verses can be a bit depressing. They seem full of foreboding and impending doom. In short, rather than filling us with joy and hope, they have the opposite effect. Today's reading is a classic example of this. Jesus, we could say, is on a roll and reminds his listeners of many things: the coming judgement, the brevity of life, the reality of death and the inevitability of one day having to face the judgement seat of Christ. Oh dear, it's hard not to feel a little depressed, isn't it?

Scripture is rather forthright and frightening in the way that it speaks about judgement. Preachers of old tended to maximize on this, so that they over-emphasized damnation in their proclamation and teaching of the gospel, leading to feelings of fear, guilt and shame. We need a certain wisdom, the light of the Holy Spirit if you will, to interpret and understand today's reading. The first thing to understand is that Jesus followed in the steps of the prophets of old and of John the Baptist in pointing to a day of judgement. Its coming is as certain as night follows day. There can be no escaping it, for we must all die and stand before the judgement seat of Christ.

However, no matter how frightening and terrible and worrying this reality may seem, Christ is the Lord of eternal life. He received the full right from his Father to be the judge of the living and the dead and to look into each of our hearts, because he is the redeemer of humankind. He acquired this right through his death on the cross. And yet as terrifying as God's judgement may seem to us, we also know that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18) and Jesus is love. Furthermore, the Son did not come to judge but to save (see John 3:17) and to give his life, the life he has in himself, for the world. Perhaps, at the end of the day, as creatures blessed with the gift of free will, it is by rejecting God's grace that we actually judge ourselves.

Lord, keep me sober and watchful so that I can guard the way I think, the way I speak and the way I act. May I seek always to please you, and when I do not may I have the grace to repent and turn back to the Father of Mercy.

Wisdom 13:1-9 • Psalm 18(19):2-5

Luke 17:26-37

Saturday 14 November

Luke 18:1-8

The problem with prayer is that it is a battle, and in every battle the temptation is to surrender. Jesus taught the parable of the Unjust Judge to encourage us to persevere when tempted to throw in the towel.

But here's the thing, what kind of prayer is Jesus addressing here? We are unlikely to give up on the kind of prayers we pray when we are in trouble or facing a difficult situation – this kind of prayer comes naturally enough. Or how about intercessory prayer? This can be a bit trickier in that if we don't see fruit or results we can lose heart. But what about the kind of prayer where, in order to spend time with the Lord, we need to carve out time and space? This can be difficult and demanding.

The widow in Jesus' parable is only asking for what is hers by right – the Torah taught that as a widow she deserved special treatment (Deut. 24:17-22). Why the judge behaved in the way he did is hard to know: Was he lazy? Was he afraid of her adversary? Or was he simply, as many corrupt officials are, just indifferent to the suffering and anguish of others?

Whatever the reason, we know two things about him: (1) he didn't fear God and he didn't care about his fellow human beings; and (2) he had not accounted for the sheer dogged persistence of this poor widow. She basically wore him down so that he had no choice but to give into her requests. The punch line is clear: if a dishonest and unscrupulous judge will listen, how much more will God the Father listen to our requests, our needs, the cry of our hearts?

The Holy Spirit can heal our minds and hearts so that we grow in trust and confidence in God. For often lack of faith or unbelief can be at the root of our lack of perseverance. There is a way in which trust and confidence in God requires some work on our part – but this work isn't onerous or tiresome. It does, however, require us to ask the Lord for insight and clarity about our own hearts. This leads then to a life-giving repentance, a turning back to God, a reaching out to God's grace and blessing which like the dew refreshes and revitalizes our inner spirit.

Lord, grant me the grace to be faithful and persistent in prayer.

Wisdom 18:14-16; 19:6-9 • Psalm 104(105):2-3, 36-37, 42-43

Luke 18:1-8

Sunday 15 November

Mark 13:24-32 • Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

In our reading from Mark today there is a clear allusion to the apocalyptic imagery of the prophet Daniel: 'In my vision at night I looked and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven' (Dan. 7:13 NIV). Jesus is this Son of Man and a central truth of our faith is that he will come again. 'Faith in Christ has never looked merely backwards or merely upwards, but always also forwards to the hour of justice that the Lord repeatedly proclaimed. This looking ahead has given Christianity its importance for the present moment' (Spe salvi 40).

As we move towards this special Year of Mercy the Spirit invites us to rediscover a fresh and new appreciation of this central teaching of our faith. We need, as it were, to uncover and seek out a grace of revelation, so that this essential doctrine can impact our lives. That is not to say that we become fanatical or unduly anxious or focused in an unhealthy way on the second coming. Rather, it means we seek to pray and reflect on the 'last things' in a way which expands our vision so that we look beyond the moment, indeed look beyond history.

At the heart of the teaching of the second coming is the Lordship of Christ. Theologians of old used to speculate about how, if humankind had not fallen, whether Christ would indeed have been incarnate. Without the fall and sin would we have needed a Saviour or simply a King, the Lord and Creator? Most of us wouldn't have time to ruminate on such ideas, but live in a world of mortgage or rent payments, bills to pay, mouths to feed. It is precisely in this reality of daily life that we can live out our hope in the second coming. You see, whatever challenge, suffering or hardship we face in life, one day all of human life, all of human history, indeed the very cosmos will be wrapped up and come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Lord of heaven and earth, we pray and long for your return, and ask for the grace to stay awake and keep watch, ushering in the glorious return of Christ, the Servant King, our Lord and Saviour.

Daniel 12:1-3 • Psalm 15(16):5, 8-11

Hebrews 10:11-14, 18 • Mark 13:24-32

Monday 16 November

Matthew 25:31-46 • St Margaret of Scotland (Feast in Scotland)

Today we celebrate the feast of St Margaret of Scotland. She was born in 1046 and was a member of an ancient English royal family. When King Canute and his Danish army invaded England she fled to Europe. Her return to England proved precarious and she fled north to escape the marauding army of William the Conqueror. Off the coast of Northumbria bound for the continent she was blown off course and ended up in Fife. Providentially for Margaret, the Scottish king, Malcolm II, offered her sanctuary and went on to marry this beautiful and intelligent young woman in 1069. Their union was a happy and fruitful one, with Margaret bearing the king eight children. She brought her Catholic faith, knowledge of European manners and a sophistication which helped establish the standing of Scotland.

Queen Margaret was devout and prophetic, with a conscience informed by a social teaching which saw her not only establish Sunday as a day of rest but found monasteries, churches and hostels.

Margaret lived a good and holy life, caring especially for the poor and orphans. It was this piety that caused considerable damage to her health with the repeated fasting and abstinence. In 1093, as she lay on her deathbed after a long illness, she was told that her husband and eldest son had been ambushed and treacherously killed at the Battle of Alnwick in Northumbria. She died shortly after aged just forty-seven. She was buried alongside Malcolm in Dunfermline Abbey and the reported miracles that took place in and around her tomb supported her canonization in 1250 by Pope Innocent IV.

‘O God, who called your servant Margaret to an earthly throne that she might advance your heavenly kingdom, and gave her zeal for your church and love for your people: Mercifully grant that we who commemorate her this day may be fruitful in good works, and attain to the glorious crown of your saints; through Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.’

1 Mac 1:10-15, 41-43, 54-57, 62-64 • Ps 118(119):53, 61, 134, 150, 155, 158

Lk 18:35-43 (Proper of Saints: Prov 13:10-31 • Psalm 127(128) • Mt 25:31-46)

Tuesday 17 November

Luke 19:1-10

The story of Zacchaeus is unique to Luke's Gospel. Zacchaeus was a very wealthy man by the standards of first-century Israel. This was no mere tax collector like Levi (Matt. 9:9). He was a district supervisor and got rich not only on the back of his own people but also his own tax collectors. This man wasn't just a 'sinner': he was the lowest of the low, pond life, the very detritus of Jewish society. He was loathed with a great vengeance. Whereas most Jews would have avoided him like the plague Jesus doesn't wait to receive an invitation – rather he invites himself. It is a wonderful example of the shepherd going after the sheep – seeking out and saving one lost sheep (v. 10).

Just as the devil often has some of the best tunes he also has some of the best people. Zacchaeus was rather like Peter – spontaneous, jovial, warm-hearted, impetuous but also sincere, self-aware and deeply genuine. Consider this: Zacchaeus, despite his wealth, shows not the slightest hesitation in climbing the sycamore tree, nor does he hold back from admitting publicly and openly his guilt, sinfulness and repentance. Jesus embraces him as a son of Abraham, which would have infuriated the religious police of the day.

Jesus' mercy towards Zacchaeus is the kind of mercy we are called to show to every human person no matter who they are. The truth is, and the truth can be unpalatable at times, that no one is beyond redemption, no one beyond the pale. Think about those our society considers beyond the pale – the paedophile, the child abuser, the child murderer, the serial killer, the drug dealer, the corrupt politician or businessman... But here is the thing: the list is endless and never-ending but so is God's mercy and forgiveness and grace. God's mercy is so wide, so deep, so long and so broad that it stretches to infinity and beyond – God's mercy is eternal and everlasting. It was precisely this quality of mercy which transformed and changed Zacchaeus' life, and it was this kind of love which made him turn his life around. It is this kind of mercy, love and forgiveness that people need to experience in our parishes, in our workplaces and in our homes.

Lord, pour out the fire of your love into my heart that I may have a heart of tender mercy and kindness towards others and witness to the saving love of Christ.

2 Maccabees 6:18-31 • Psalm 3:2-7

Luke 19:1-10

Wednesday 18 November

Luke 19:11-28

Matthew has a different version of today's parable (25:14-30). His version is different in that he has three servants and different sums of money. His 'talents' are much larger than Luke's minas, which literally means gold coins. Luke has a kingly coronation because of the anticipation of God's coming reign (v. 11). The reference to a faraway country is an allegorical reference to Jesus' ascension into heaven where he received the Father's glory and awaits the time when he will return.

Since the ascension we have been living in the time of the second coming. We, like the servants in the parable, are watching and waiting for our Lord's return. We are called not to be idle but to preach, witness to and prepare for Christ's return (Acts 1:8-11). We are called to be witnesses of the new life of Christ – this is our vocation.

What is interesting about the parable is the way the king rewards faithfulness and punishes laziness and indifference. The king's largesse seems unreasonable. The point is, of course, that God shows even greater largesse and is even more lavish in pouring out his grace – whereas God created us without us we are saved and redeemed through co-operating with the measure of grace God has given us.

None of us can save ourselves – this is the unmerited mercy of God – but with great grace comes great responsibility. God has given us everything we need to become saints – for that is the bottom line. We have received the same grace, the same outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as Peter, Paul, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena and Thérèse of Lisieux. Our task or challenge is to make this investment of grace work for us so that there is a return.

We do this in life, so why should we be surprised that this is how it is in the kingdom of God? We judge a tree by its fruit and so, too, we are judged by the fruit (of the Spirit) we produce in our lives. There is an interesting principle at work in today's reading and it is this: grace produces more grace and this gives birth to even more grace. This is what the servants were rewarded for – investing wisely the blessing they had received, not squandering or wasting it.

Lord, by your grace may I produce a rich harvest of fruit and blessing in my own life by being a faithful and obedient disciple.

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

Luke 19:11-28

Thursday 19 November

Luke 19:41-44

What moves you to tears? What makes you sob and weep? Of course, the answer to these questions reveals much about us. Jesus wept during his ministry. He wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35) and he wept over Jerusalem (v. 41). He wept because of his people's resistance, refusal and rejection of him and his message. His cry was heartfelt and moving: 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes' (v. 41). Scripture scholars suggest that Jesus foresaw the day of Jerusalem's destruction by Rome in AD 70.

Weeping is an important expression of emotion because when we weep we reveal our heart – and where our heart is, there will our treasure be. We sometimes weep because of gain, but we mainly weep because of loss. Jesus wept because the people of the holy city of Jerusalem were blind to God's plan of salvation unfolding in their midst.

St Monica wept over her wayward son Augustine, as he would recall many years later. 'What was it, my God, that she sought from you with so many tears, except that you would not let me sail away?' Despite her prayers Augustine did indeed sail away but in time he would become very grateful to God for his mother's weeping: 'My mother, your faithful servant, wept more for me than mothers weep over their children's dead bodies. By that spirit of faith which she had from you, she saw my death, and you graciously heard her.'

Like Jesus, like Monica, we too have our own anguish and deep concerns which move us to the core of our being and make us weep. The grace of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives teaches us to pray for others who are far away from God, or to put that more accurately, who believe themselves to be so when, in truth, God is close to every human person – it is just that it is hidden from them. We weep that many do not know the love of God in their hearts, we weep that many do not know God's mercy or forgiveness and we weep for those caught in the trap of vice, sin or darkness.

Lord, melt my heart so that, like the Father, I may reach out to those who are dear to me with the love, mercy and forgiveness of the gospel.

1 Maccabees 2:15-29 • Psalm 49(50):1-2, 5-6, 14-15

Luke 19:41-44

Friday 20 November

Luke 19:45-48

Picture in your mind's eye, if you will, Jesus cleansing the temple of its money-lenders and traders. In conjuring up the drama of this moment in your imagination, you will quickly realize that our image of a Jesus meek and mild is a long way from the Jesus revealed to us in Scripture.

Bear in mind that Jesus didn't just overturn their tables or disrupt their trading – he literally kicked them out of the temple. The house of prayer had become a den of iniquity; the sacred was being made the secular. Our churches, thankfully, are not hubs of commercial activity or locations for money-lending and loan sharks. A church, just like a temple, is for worship, not for the world.

What are we to make of today's reading? Certainly it reveals Jesus as having incredible physical presence and strength. The Jesus meek and mild gave way to the Jesus mighty and strong. It is interesting that believers are often caricatured as being rather weak, timid and tepid whereas the Master himself was far from this. We are not being called to clear out any churches, or temples for that matter, but we, as temples of the Holy Spirit, are called to drive out from our lives everything that defiles the temple of our heart, mind and spirit.

The challenge we have is that, rather like the temple authorities of Jesus' day, we can turn a blind eye to things that we know just aren't right. We can also tolerate corruption and ways of thinking or attitudes which we know are separating us from enjoying the presence of Christ. How do we drive out these imposters from our lives? God's work of mercy (although it may not seem so at the time) is to convict and convince us of sin. This is the spiritual equivalent of a cleansing of our temple. We can't do it our own – we need the Holy Spirit to help us turn over the tables and stand up to the merchants of sin, and we need his strength to throw them right out of our lives. This cleansing is the way to peace and deep joy.

'Perfect prayer does not consist in many words but in the fervour of the desire which raises the heart to Jesus. Love to pray. Feel the need to pray often during the day. Prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of himself.' (Blessed Mother Teresa)

1 Maccabees 4:36-37, 52-59 • 1 Chronicles 29:10-13

Luke 19:45-48

Saturday 21 November

Luke 20:27-40 • The Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Memorial)

The phrase ‘too clever by half’ applies to today’s encounter between Jesus and the Sadducees. There was tension between the Sadducees and the Pharisees rooted in, amongst other things, theology. Interestingly, the Sadducees were from the Jewish aristocracy and the Pharisees represented the middle and upper-middle classes. It is said, isn’t it, that aristocrats and the working classes get on fine, it’s the aristocrats and the middle classes who despise each other. Well, this was certainly the case in Jesus’ day: the two groups were locked in an ideological battle.

In a nutshell, the Pharisees believed in the afterlife and the resurrection of the body; the Sadducees did not. It was, however, the Sadducees who picked a fight with the Lord, and it is in Jesus’ response to their contrary question concerning the resurrection that we are presented with the Lord’s teaching on the resurrection of the body. Jesus’ answer flummoxed them, rendering them (as his answers so often did) silent.

We don’t tend to dwell too much on the resurrection of the body but this teaching is crucial to our faith for we believe in the resurrection of the whole person – body and soul. We are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) and we are destined to rise again with Christ – body and soul. As Paul taught, ‘If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain’ (1 Cor. 15:14).

There is a way in which our faith in our future resurrection should be a living hope – a reality which permeates our lives. Our belief in the resurrection then is two-fold: we believe that Christ rose again from the dead but we also believe that through him, with him and in him we too will rise again at the last judgement. The soul will be separated from our physical bodies at death – we are dust and unto dust we return (Gen. 3) – but Scripture teaches we will be given a new resurrection body: ‘the body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body’ (1 Cor. 15:42, 44). This is our ultimate destiny, to which we can look forward in faith.

Lord, teach me to cherish my body and to nourish my soul because both are destined to inherit the gift of eternal life on the last day.

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

Luke 20:27-40

Sunday 22 November

(Solemnity) (B) Christ the King • John 18:33b-37

Today's feast-day, Christ the King, is a relatively new one in the Church's history. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in his encyclical *Quas primas* (1925). He introduced it because he saw in the rise of secularism a denial of Christ's authority and lordship. Of course, like Pope Francis today, Pope Pius was a prophet who foresaw the rise of Nazism and Communism, both ideologies which resented the authority of Christ. Jesus is a King, but he is a Servant King. He turned on its head the idea of kingship because he came to seek and save the lost and die on the cross. What earthly king would do this? An earthly king exists to be served, not to serve. Jesus said: 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

It is evident from our Gospel passage today that Pilate sensed Christ's Kingship. He said to Jesus, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.' Pilate said to him, 'You are a king, then!' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth' (John 18:33b, 36-37 NIV).

When the Lord returns in glory he will come as King, but he came first in humility, born in a stable, riding on a donkey and dying on the cross. Although the idea of servanthood is not a la mode today, the truth is we are all servants of the King. Through a grace of revelation we glimpse that God the Father's plan was that we would worship the Son – the Lord of heaven and earth, the King of the Cosmos. When this plan was thwarted through the Fall God did not renege on his plan but sent the Son to redeem us. We identify power, authority and dominion in terms of lording it over others but in God's mind kingship is rooted in divine love. Human kings have come and gone in history whereas Jesus Christ is King yesterday, today and forever.

Lord, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord of heaven and earth to the glory of God the Father.

Daniel 7:13-14 • Psalm 92(93):1-5

Revelation 1:5-8 • John 18:33b-37

Monday 23 November

Luke 21:1-4 • St Columban (Feast in Ireland)

Today's reading is brief, powerful and elegant, touching us at a simple but deep level. This poor widow's gesture of generosity and humility entered the English language long ago in the phrase 'the widow's mite' and continues to speak to every generation of believers.

Of course, this incident reveals a great deal about how God thinks about our own generosity of heart. Much of Jesus' teaching is an inversion of what the world understands – in this sense Jesus truly did turn the world upside down. By drawing attention to this widow's giving, he was teaching that generosity is not measured by the amount given but by the attitude or disposition of the heart.

Christian faith is primarily about two virtues – humility and generosity – and the poor widow had both in abundance. In fact, perhaps we would do better to refer to her as the 'rich widow'. In the ancient world, if a widow had no extended family to provide for her, she was destitute, for this was an era without social benefits or state handouts. Despite her plight, however, the widow in the temple had a profound sense of gratitude to God, which she expressed in a raw and naked way. While others gave from their disposable income and excessive wealth, she gave, Jesus tells us, everything she had to live on and threw herself on the love and mercy of God.

Most of us seldom give other than from our disposable income. In one sense this is understandable as we have an obligation to be good citizens and pay our bills, etc. Nevertheless, giving in such a way that we have to do without or deny ourselves is a work of grace in our lives and requires us taking a step of faith. The Holy Spirit is a fire which melts our hearts, anointing us with the gift of goodness, kindness and generosity.

We can all suffer from a kind of compassion fatigue which can make us rather hardened and inured to giving. The Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom to discern where our almsgiving and generosity should be directed. The Spirit also purifies and cleanses our hearts so that our hearts become like the widow's, open and responsive to others, not just with the gift of our money, but of our time, our mercy and our prayers.

St Columban, pray for us. Give us generous and open hearts, eager to give generously as we have received so generously.

Proper of Season: Daniel 1:1-6, 8-20 • Daniel 3:52-56 • Luke 21:1-4
(Proper of Saints: Isaiah 52:7-10 • Psalm 95(96) • Luke 9:57-62)

Tuesday 24 November

(Memorial) St Andrew Dung-Lac and his Companions • Luke 21:5-11

Are you a prophet of doom or of hope? For you, is the glass half empty or half full? Do you look on the bright side of things or on the dark side of things? Do you give in to the temptation to view human life and history with a certain dread and cynicism?

These are fair questions, but reading today's Gospel you could be forgiven for adopting a more negative, doomed-filled approach. Not that we are going to walk down the street shouting at the top of our voices, 'The end is nigh, the end is nigh', as many soothsayers, cranks and delusional souls have done down the ages. Nevertheless, there is no escaping the fact that Jesus spoke often about the end of human history and truly almost every generation since time began has known 'nation rising against nation'.

Pope Francis said recently that global conflict at the moment is so prevalent that we could speak of a fragmented World War Three. The Middle East especially is rife with war, conflict, strife and tragedy. God knows, we see in our time many of the things Jesus was referring to. Just think of the recent earthquake in Nepal, at the base of Everest, which saw 5,000 people perish and the Ebola crisis which has claimed many lives across Africa and continues even today.

So what do you make of all this? The truth is that one day the world will end, one day our beautiful planet will die. And deep down we all know that our lives, too, are fragile and each one of us will succumb to death. This in and of itself could move us to despair, but the gospel gives us hope, challenging us to look to Christ and see in him the answer to life's most difficult questions. In fact, the only truly difficult and imponderable question is this one: is death the end? The answer to this mystery is that in Christ death is not the end but the beginning. The blessed hope of the Church is the return of our Saviour and Lord, for which we long and pray. We combat negativity, darkness, despair, delusion and cynicism with this simple prayer:

Come, Lord Jesus, come, for you are the Chosen One, the Lord's Anointed. In you, with you and through you we do not fear death or the end of the world but look to the new heavens and the new earth and eternal life.

Daniel 2:31-45 • Daniel 3:57-61

Luke 21:5-11

Wednesday 25 November

Luke 21:12-19

One of the great blessings of Vatican II, a fruit of the Council we could say, was the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church, published by St John Paul II. In and of itself, it is a remarkable fact that those of us who lived through the publishing of this magnificent work did so under the direction of a Pope who is also a saint! How blessed are we!

What is remarkable about the Catechism, however, is the depth into which it goes unpacking and explaining our faith. Most likely there are teachings in the Catechism that we may not even realize form part of Catholic teaching. Take this, for example: ‘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).

What do you make of this teaching and what do you make of today’s Scripture forewarning of a terrible time of suffering and persecution? The truth is that, for most of us, practising our faith doesn’t involve too much suffering, rejection or persecution, unlike many parts of the world where believers suffer terribly for their faith. However, we do live in a secular society where, funnily enough, tolerance of people’s faith is a watchword except, it would appear, when it comes to Christianity. And in recent years Christianity has itself become a byword for intolerance and bigotry, and believers suffer in the workplace and in their homes and families for practising their faith.

Make no mistake, the teaching of the Church is clear: since the ascension of Jesus we have been living in the ‘end times’. We strive then to live watchful, prayerful lives rooted in the love and mercy of God. We don’t rely on our own wisdom but on the Father who will give us his light and wisdom whatever trial or suffering we are called to endure.

Lord, teach me not to fear persecution or trial or suffering or ridicule but to rely on the Father to give me words and wisdom to witness to the gospel of life.

Daniel 5:1-6, 13-17, 23-28 • Daniel 3:62-67

Luke 21:12-19

Thursday 26 November

Luke 21:20-28

There is no escaping it: November is a sombre and sober month. The Church, in its liturgy and especially in the liturgy of the Word, is at pains to remind us of the realities of heaven, hell, purgatory, the second coming, judgement, the final judgement and, oh yes, not forgetting death. It is often said that there are four last things, but when you get down to it, there do seem to be rather more than four. All four Evangelists show no desire whatsoever to preserve or protect us from the reality of the 'last things'. It is almost as if they want us to face up to these truths with great hope and confidence.

And maybe that is the point: all this talk of heaven, hell, purgatory, judgement, the second coming and death isn't meant to depress us – but rather the opposite, to give us hope and joy. How can this be, you might protest? The simple truth is this: Jesus' return is imminent (CCC 673) and our vocation invites us to pray, long and groan for his coming. However, we seldom do so, mainly because we get entrenched and ensconced in the immediate concerns of daily living. The Spirit, however, is always at work, moving us to pray for Christ's return, because human destiny and human history will all find fulfilment when Christ returns in glory and power.

How this will happen is a mystery which is beyond the human mind to grasp. The gospel writers and the writers of the apocalyptic books of the Bible such as Daniel and Revelation try to capture these realities in language and imagery that can be disturbing and upsetting, but this is because they are speaking about matters that are beyond our comprehension. There is always the subtle temptation to simply ignore the fact that our lives on earth are finite, that one day we will die and that ultimately Christ Jesus is the Lord of human history, time and the cosmos. Nevertheless, don't be afraid to pray and reflect on the 'last things': far from depressing us such truths will give us light and hope because nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Spirit and the Bride, the Church, pray continually for the return of Christ, the Bridegroom, the Messiah, the Lord of heaven and earth. Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Daniel 6:12-28 • Daniel 3:68-74

Luke 21:20-28

Friday 27 November

Luke 21:29-33

How good are you at interpreting the signs of the times? What are the signs of the times we are living in?

We live in a time of blessing and a time of curse, a time of plenty and a time of want, a time of social media and yet a time of deep loneliness and despair. Among the blessings of our age are technology, medical advancement and wealth generation which ensures a good quality of life for many. Among the curses is the reality that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer, so that the disparity between the haves and the have-nots is increasing day by day. Other curses are the prevailing world views which stand in opposition to God, such as hedonism (a love of pleasure), relativism (there is no right or wrong) and secularism (this world is all there is). And, in sharp contrast, the religious fundamentalism which creates terrorists who are prepared to murder, maim and destroy, all in the name of God. God knows we need wisdom to interpret the signs of the times.

One sign of the times that never changes is that the kingdom of God is near. The kingdom of Christ is always near because God the Father is closer to us than we are to ourselves. This kingdom – the kingdom of truth, justice, love and upholding human dignity – cries out to be witnessed to. Never has there been a greater need to witness to Christ and the power of his word. In these times people are desperate to cling to that which is solid, reliable and everlasting, and that which is solid, reliable and everlasting are the words of Christ.

The primary task of every believer is to make known the words of Christ. We are to be signs of contradiction, men and women who bear witness to a different way of living. Where the sign says ‘hate’, we must put ‘love’; where it says ‘division’, we must put ‘unity’; where it says ‘envy and jealousy’ we must bear witness to the love of God being poured into our hearts. The greatest sign of our time is the sign of joy and the witness of mercy. Ask yourself: are you a sign of God’s joy in the world? Are you a sign of God’s mercy in the world?

Lord, make me a sign of your love as I seek to serve the world in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Daniel 7:2-14 • Daniel 3:75-81

Luke 21:29-33

Saturday 28 November

Luke 21:34-36

Tomorrow we enter the season of Advent and our journey to the joy of Christ's birth begins. Advent is a time of preparation and it could be said that in our Christian life we always need to be watchful, ready and prepared.

In many ways this idea of being prepared is built into our culture and way of life. Teachers are constantly preparing their pupils for exams, midwives prepare women for childbirth, businessmen and women prepare budgets, and sportsmen and women, musicians and artists put in hours of training in order to prepare to showcase their talent. The spiritual life is no different and simply echoes this natural state of preparedness.

But what is it we need to be prepared for? There are three things: the first is for our own death, the second is for the second coming, and the third is for the Lord to work his grace and blessing in our lives. The motto of a good Christian, then, like the motto of a good boy scout or girl guide, is: be prepared. That's the theory, at least.

Unfortunately the reality is often somewhat different. In today's Scripture the Lord highlights three areas of human weakness: dissipation, drunkenness and being consumed by the anxieties of this life. Few of us are not afflicted by at least one of these human weaknesses, and some are unfortunate enough to be prone to all three. Pope John XXIII said that there were three ways to a man's ruin, and he identified wine, women and agriculture as the three culprits in his day, wryly observing that his father chose the most boring one – agriculture! Medieval theologians referred to this human tendency to sin as 'concupiscence' – succumbing to the powerful urges and desires of the body, particularly sexual sin. God knows we are all prone to being weak in these areas and God also knows that in these areas we all need grace and healing.

People of faith are often accused of needing a crutch to get through life and of avoiding reality or seeking a refuge from reality. But this simply isn't true: in fact, faith is constantly urging us to face up to reality and the ultimate reality is God.

Lord, create in my heart and instil in my mind a living sense that one day I will stand before the Son of Man where all I will be able to do is throw myself on his love and mercy.

Daniel 7:15-27 • Daniel 3:82-87

Luke 21:34-36

Sunday 29 November

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 • First Sunday of Advent (C)

Advent is a special, holy and anointed season in the Church's year, during which we rejoice in the first coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ, long for his second and praise the Father for the opportunity to invite the Lord into our lives in a new and exciting way.

Thus, the vital and living truth of the second coming should be integral to our contemplation and wonder during the weeks prior to Christmas Day. But if we are honest – and it is good to be honest (at least with ourselves) – we don't tend to give much thought to this most profound and life-giving truth of our faith. We are too caught up in the here and now to think very much of the hereafter. Why is this?

We shouldn't be too hard on ourselves, although we should be firm in our resolve to bring to mind this heavenly truth. Perhaps the reason why we don't think too much about the Lord's return is because we fear being too heavenly-minded – whereas in truth the call of the gospel is to be just this: heavenly-minded.

The prayer of the Church since the ascension of Jesus into heaven has been, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.' We share this longing and yearning with the Jewish people, our elder brothers in faith. While they pray and yearn for the coming of the Messiah for the first time, we long for his second coming. The revelation that God became man, born of a virgin, proved a stumbling block for many, Jews and Gentiles alike, but the hearts of those who believe and accept it are filled with light and joy.

What should be the disposition of our hearts as we move through this holy season? Hopeful, expectant, repentant, contrite and joyful – sure in the knowledge that unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, the wonderful Counsellor, mighty God, King of Kings and Prince of Peace.

'Father in heaven, our hearts desire the warmth of your love and our minds are searching for the light of your Word. Increase our longing for Christ our Saviour and give us the strength to grow in love, that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.' (Ancient collect)

Jeremiah 33:14-16 • Psalm 24(25):4-10, 14

1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 • Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Monday 30 November

Matthew 4:18-22 • (Feast) St Andrew (Solemnity In Scotland)

Today we celebrate the feast of St Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland. According to tradition, when Andrew saw the cross upon which he was to be crucified, he said: ‘O dearest cross, honoured as you have been by the body of my Master, long desired by me, my most cherished friend whom I sought constantly, take me from this world and give me to my Lord.’ What a warrior for Christ St Andrew was!

Andrew was by trade a fisherman, and when he met Jesus he was a disciple of John the Baptist. His brother was Simon Peter. Andrew was the first disciple to recognize Jesus as the Messiah (John 1:40), the first evangelist (he brought Philip to Jesus) and, tradition has it, the first missionary. Scotland is rightly proud of their patron saint but, belonging to the communion of saints, we all give thanks and praise to God for this mighty apostle.

Andrew is a wonderful example of what it means to be an evangelist. His own experience of the Lord compelled him to bring others to Christ. Many today are shy and reluctant to share their faith with others; we all console ourselves with the notion that we witness first by our actions, then with our words. There is a lot of truth in this but the problem is that we seldom get to the words, to sharing from personal experience how Jesus has transformed our lives. The reason the Church exists is to evangelize, and the question is, if we don’t evangelize, who will?

Standing as we are on the eve of the Holy Year of Mercy, we have before us a wonderful opportunity to step out in faith and be joyful and convincing witnesses. We do not need a new gospel – there is none – just the ancient kerygma, presented in a warm, confident and accessible way. The message of God’s mercy can burn in our hearts, transforming us into living witnesses with a compelling testimony of the saving mercy and forgiveness of Christ. We are God’s voice, we are his lips, we are his feet, we are those who can bring the good news. Whom should God send? Send us!

Lord God, in the spirit of the warrior evangelist St Andrew, may we witness with joy, enthusiasm and love to the life-changing message of God’s love and mercy revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 10:9-18 • Psalm 18(19):2-5 • Matthew 4:18-22

(In Scotland only: Wis 3:1-9 • Ps 30:3-4, 6, 8, 17, 21 • Rom 10:9-18 • Mt 4:18-22)