

There is certainly no fun in fundamentalism. Religious extremists of any kind are at the very least deeply unpleasant, at the very worst fanatical and dangerous. Ironically, it has to be admitted, religious fundamentalism is a kind of intellectual suicide because it insists on its interpretation of history and the facts. It tends to be unreasonable and entrenched, with no grasp of tolerance or the religious precepts of compassion, kindness and acceptance.

We tend to associate religious extremists with Islam, but Christianity has had its fair share through the years: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Witch Trials and the Index (books proscribed and condemned by the Church). Today, the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas, USA – surely a cult if ever there was one – pickets the funerals of soldiers killed in the line of duty, shouting out their vile tirade of God's judgement to the poor bereaving families. They appear to hate soldiers, homosexuals, fornicators and Catholics! And that's surely the point about fundamentalists: they tend to hate more than they love.

Hatred dressed up as religion is objectionable and insulting.

However, before we get too carried away, James and John, two of the Church's greatest sons, were prone to a spot of zealous fundamentalism: 'When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"' (v. 54 NIV). Jesus put an end to their silly bravado. We don't know how he rebuked them, but rebuke them he did: 'But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village' (v. 56 NIV).

The coming of the Holy Spirit transformed James and John, the 'sons of thunder' (Mark 3:17), into the apostles of love and life. The Holy Spirit always leads us in the way of love. The Spirit leads us away from being extreme, overly zealous and intolerant, so that we become committed, dedicated and compassionate followers of Christ. We follow Jesus Christ, who teaches us the way of love, the way of the Beatitudes, the way of the Sermon on the Mount.

'When I act as charity bids, I have this feeling that it is Jesus who is acting in me; the closer my union with him, the greater my love for all the sisters without distinction.'
(St Thérèse of Lisieux)

Zechariah 8:20-23 • Psalm 86(87)

Luke 9:51-56

For most of us the here and now is pretty much all-consuming. We are grounded, rooted even, in the things of this world: demanding jobs, mortgage repayments, educating children, caring for elderly parents, bills to pay, crises to manage – the list could go on and on. We are children of God, but also very much offspring of this world. The Church, however, has always urged us to fix our thoughts on the heavenly realm. This way of thinking is as right and proper as praying the Our Father; it is as Christian as, say, serving the poor or going to Mass. Writing to the believers in Colossae Paul instructed them, 'set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things' (Col. 3:1-2 NIV). Today, on the feast-day of the Guardian Angels, we are encouraged to do just this: to set our minds on things above.

Into this category of 'things above' fall angels and specifically our guardian angels. Do you believe in angels? Do you believe that you have a designated angel to watch over you? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: 'From the very beginning until death, human

life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. "Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life" (St Basil the Great). Already here on earth the Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God' (para. 336). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, 'Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?' (Heb. 1:14 NIV). Jesus said that the angels of children are constantly looking into God's face (Matt. 18:10).

Today we thank God for our guardian angel. Perhaps when we are safe in our heavenly dwelling in eternity, we shall learn of the many ways this angel helped and protected us during our life on earth. Then by God's grace we will thank them, but, because they are pure spirit and God's servants who do his bidding, they will say, 'We are unworthy servants; we were only doing our duty.'

*Angel of God, My Guardian Dear,
to whom God's love commits me
here. Ever this day be at my side, to
light and guard and rule and guide.
Amen.*

Nehemiah 2:1-8 • Psalm 136(137):1-6

Proper of Saints: Matthew 18:1-5, 10



It is clear that during the early years of the Church's life all the energy and focus was on evangelization. The Acts of the Apostles could equally be called 'The Evangelization Acts of the Apostles'. The first Christians were evangelists *par excellence*. They basically laid down their lives – some quite literally as martyrs – in order to share and witness to their faith.

Perhaps we think today that with so many Christians in the world the need to evangelize has reduced. There are, it is estimated, 1.2 billion Catholics on the planet. That is a lot of people! What we don't actually know is how many of that 1.2 billion practise their faith, how many have a living faith. We all know that in our own parishes there is a difference between the number of Catholics who reside there and those who actually attend Mass. It is estimated, for example, that there are over 5 million Catholics in the UK but only 1 million who practise. The ratio is similar in the USA, where there are 60 million Catholics but just over 20 million who practise.

It was against the backdrop of this reality that Pope John Paul II coined the phrase 'the new

evangelization'. He had in mind the need to reach out to those who were baptized as Catholics but no longer practise their faith. We, of course, refer to such people as 'lapsed'. People will often say, if the subject of faith comes up, 'I am a lapsed Catholic.' Being lapsed is positively *de rigueur* these days. Many celebrities like to let it be known that they were raised a Catholic and value some of the Church's teaching, but no longer practise their faith. Media types and sycophants nod approvingly, impressed by their openness and tolerance.

In the field of the new evangelization there is a lot of work to do and the prospect of a rich harvest. If we ask him, the Holy Spirit will give us creative, dynamic and inspiring ways to reach out to the lapsed. We do this most of all through warmth, friendship, genuine love and a real heart to bring those who no longer practise their faith back into the joy of belonging to a vibrant and active faith community.

Lord, by your grace may my heart burn with a love for the gospel and a corresponding desire to share my faith with gentleness, kindness and respect.

Nehemiah 8:1-12 • Psalm 18(19):8-11

Luke 10:1-12



We live in a pick-and-mix culture. We are spoilt for choice at so many levels. And we apply the same way of thinking to our faith. We like this doctrine or teaching, reject that one, accept the other. We like the 'sweet' aspects of faith: the comfort, the consolation, the beauty of the Scriptures, the peace of prayer. We are less comfortable with the bitter side: the taking up of our cross daily, the death to self, the teaching about hell, judgement and the second coming of Christ. We pick, we mix, we choose, we reject. The problem is, however, that Jesus is not the kind of person we can 'take or leave'. With him it is all or nothing!

There were times in his teaching when Jesus addressed the negative side of human behaviour and his teaching was 'bitter'. On such occasions he often pronounced a 'woe' on those with hard hearts towards God's ways – the Pharisees, for example (see Matt. 23:13-32). Now and then at *Bible Alive* we receive letters expressing the view that we are being too harsh on the Pharisees. Such letters are quick to point out that the Pharisees, scribes and teachers of the law were largely good religious men. The Lord however, concluded his

woes against the Pharisees with the statement, 'You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?' (Matt. 23:33).

In today's Gospel Luke records another occasion on which Jesus pronounced 'woe', this time in relation to towns which refused to repent. The two towns that would experience woe are Korazin and Bethsaida – Capernaum was condemned too but not with a woe! These towns were condemned by the Lord because they refused to listen to the gospel and repent.

The gospel will always involve a radical decision to follow Christ. There have been few more radical disciples than St Francis of Assisi, whose feast-day we celebrate today. St Francis heard God's call on him to rebuild the Church. At first he thought this meant physically with bricks and mortar, which he set about doing with great enthusiasm. He soon learnt, however, that the Church is rebuilt, renewed and reformed as we live repentant and holy lives, striving to be instruments of peace, advocates of the gospel and ambassadors of the kingdom of love.

'Deus meus et Omnia. My God and my All.' (St Francis of Assisi)

Baruch 1:15-22 • Psalm 78(79):1-5, 8-9

Luke 10:13-16

In the film *The Exorcist*, Fr Merrin prays over the possessed child, Regan, with this prayer: 'The power of Christ compels me.' He repeats this prayer with great authority and the demon retreats for a while. The Church has always upheld the existence of personified evil and the reality of Satan, demons and the demonic realm, as is demonstrated by the fact that each diocese in the world has an official exorcist.

In the story of Jesus sending out the seventy-two disciples the returning evangelists are beside themselves with joy as they recognize that in Jesus' name even the demons submit to them (v. 17). In the midst of their delight in being able to cast out the devil the Lord says something very enigmatic: 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven' (v. 18). What was he referring to here?

Through Scripture and tradition the Church offers an understanding of a cataclysmic confrontation between good and evil at the beginning of creation – what we can call 'pre-history'. An archangel called Lucifer or Satan was created good but through his own choice fell away from God's grace. As the bishops at the Lateran Council (1215) taught, 'The devil and

other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing.' Jesus, the God-man, who is the Eternal Son of the Father, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, witnessed this dramatic and devastating fall of Satan from God's grace. The Scriptures witness to the disastrous influence of the one Jesus calls 'a murderer from the beginning' (John 8:44), who often tried to divert Jesus from the mission he had received from the Father (Matt. 4:1-11) and continues to try and tempt his followers away from pursuing his path.

The very reason Jesus appeared was to destroy the work of Satan, the Evil One. Satan, however, is not infinite. He is only a creature and cannot prevent the building up of God's reign on earth. He always acts out of hatred for God, but we resist him in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the same way that Jesus sent out his disciples, he sends us out to proclaim God's kingdom and see Satan defeated in his name.

Christ love compels us – get thee behind me, Satan. Christ's cross compels us – get thee behind me, Satan. Christ's blood compels us – get thee behind me, Satan. Christ's name compels us – get thee behind me, Satan.

Baruch 4:5-12, 27-29 • Psalm 68(69):33-37

Luke 10:17-24

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" (v. 5). The Lord doesn't respond to their request directly but leads his disciples on a journey of discovery.

The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds there is but, the Lord tells his disciples, even if their faith is only as small as this tiny seed, they can command the very mulberry tree they see before them to uproot itself and transplant itself in the sea. Now that would be a miracle, wouldn't it? It doesn't seem to be a very helpful one, but it would certainly display the power of God. Perhaps for all of us it is not so much a question of needing more faith, but of putting into practice the small amount of faith that we already have. As we do so, we will find that our faith will grow and become stronger and deeper.

Faith is an entirely free gift from God. Faith is believing that God will do what he says he will do. Faith keeps our eyes focused on God and not on ourselves. Faith makes us taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, which is the goal of our journey here on earth. The disciples had a rather inflated

sense of the depth and stability of their faith. Jesus knew that in time they would desert him and that only after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost would they turn back and be strengthened in faith.

Faith is often lived in darkness and is frequently put to the test. Our experience of evil and suffering, injustice and death can contradict the gospel message of hope and love, and we can be tempted to give in to cynicism or despair. It is precisely at times like these that we need to turn to the witnesses of faith: Mary our Mother, Abraham, Moses, Peter, Paul and James. For they overcame the obstacles to faith and they believed often against hope that what God had promised would come about. 'Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for' (Heb. 11:1-2 NIV).

Lord Jesus, through the power of your Holy Spirit deepen within me the gift of faith and help me to serve you as a grateful but unworthy servant, the recipient of your bountiful grace and mercy.

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4 • Psalm 94(95):1-2, 6-9

2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14 • Luke 17:5-10

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, rather like the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is unique to Luke's Gospel. In and of itself this is fascinating and not a little intriguing. Were Matthew, Mark and John unaware of this parable, which has become one of Jesus' most well-known stories? So well known, in fact, that the idea of a Good Samaritan has become incorporated into the English idiom. We remember that the women who attended to the poor soldier who lay dying after being stabbed in Woolwich, London, some months ago were described as 'Good Samaritans' for doing so.

Jesus told the parable in response to a kind of cross-examination from an expert in the law. Was he trying to catch Jesus out? Interestingly, he asks the same question as the rich young man, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' (v. 25, cf. Matt. 19:16). Jesus compressed the essence of the religious life into two basic commandments: love God (Deut. 6:5) and love your neighbour (Lev. 19:18). The expert in the law pushed things further by asking, 'And who is my neighbour?' (v. 29). The meaning of the parable in this sense is clear: the Good Samaritan – a non-believer, a Gentile – was the neighbour. Neither the priest nor

the Levite had the will, the grace or the interest to help their neighbour. Their religion had, if you like, closed their minds and hearts, making them hard and unyielding.

Who is your neighbour? Our faith invites us to go beyond our immediate circle and reach out to people who fall outside our neat categories and boxes. We are called to love and care for people who might be unlovable by the standards of the world: prisoners, drug addicts, drug dealers, gypsies, travellers, people of different sexual orientation. Despite the social action element of the parable many Church Fathers saw that Jesus was in fact the Good Samaritan and we the wounded, bruised body on the roadside.

There is a profound depth to this parable which the Holy Spirit can open up to us. We are called to be merciful, but mercy is about understanding our need for redemption and salvation. This is the greatest human need: the need to know God's forgiveness, mercy and healing.

Lord, you are the Good Samaritan for you bind our wounds and heal us, and you bring us to the sanctuary of the inn, your Church, where we find peace, comfort and solace.

Jonah 1:1-2:1, 11 • Jonah 2:3-5, 8
Luke 10:25-37

Be honest: how do you react to today's reading about Martha and Mary? The idea of Mary neglecting important and necessary domestic work in favour of sitting at the Lord's feet can seem a bit rich. What planet was Mary on? It seems like the oldest excuse in the book to get out of some hard graft!

Was Mary really trying to avoid the hard work? Was she lazy or perhaps not especially gifted in the kitchen department? Our natural sympathies are surely with Martha. We quite understand Martha's rather blunt complaint: 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me' (v. 40). Judging from the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Martha should have been praised for her practical service of Jesus. Her action, in fact, is neither praised nor condemned, adding apparent insult to injury. Jesus is adamant, however, that Mary, despite appearances, has chosen what is better: sitting at the feet of Jesus, learning from him, leaning on him and being devoted to his word.

The Lord defended Mary and encouraged her in her devotion. Did

the Lord love Martha? Of course he did, but Mary chose, in that moment, what was better. We don't have all the facts behind the story but it is possible that Martha could have joined her sister in sitting at the Lord's feet. Maybe she was a fretter and one given to mither and over-prepare. Maybe Mary had done all she could, and it was right and appropriate that she break away and sit at the Lord's feet.

Mary did what Martha didn't do – she made time. We know in our own hearts that the decision to find time to pray is often harder than the decision to attend to work, write another email, make a telephone call and so on. Today we put out into the deep in expectation of encountering the Lord in a new way in prayer. Today we rejoice in the pearl of great price, the 'one thing' that is needed, which is to be still and know that God is God.

'Prayer means launching out of the heart towards God; it means lifting up one's eyes, quite simply, to heaven, a cry of grateful love from the crest of joy or the trough of despair; it is a vast, supernatural force that opens out my heart and binds me close to Jesus.'
(St Thérèse of Lisieux)

Jonah 3:1-10 • Psalm 129(130):1-4, 7-8
Luke 10:38-42

The true master of prayer is Jesus himself. The Our Father is the prayer of the Master. In the rich tradition of Christian prayer the Our Father has pride of place and is the foundation stone of all our prayer. We are taught to pray the Our Father by the Holy Spirit. Jesus gave us the words to pray to the Father and sent the Spirit so that these words become 'spirit' and 'life'. At the heart of the Our Father is an invitation for us to be bold and confident and dare to call God, the Creator and Lord of the Universe, 'Father, Abba' (see Gal. 4:6).

The Our Father is a gift from Jesus to the Church. When we pray the Our Father we receive the teaching directly from the Lord himself. According to the *Didache* (an early Christian writing) Christian communities would pray the Our Father three times a day. This was in place of the 'Eighteen Benedictions' which formed part of a faithful Jew's prayers.

The full meaning of the Our Father is supremely revealed in the celebration of the Eucharist. At Mass the saying of the Our Father is a summing up of all our

prayers, petitions and intercessions. It is also a knocking on the door of the Banquet of the Kingdom, anticipating our receiving of Holy Communion. In the Eucharist we pray for the return of Christ, and in a real way, when we pray the Our Father we are praying the prayer of the 'end times'. This is because more than any other prayer, it expresses our ardent longing for the return of Christ. Since Christ's Ascension Jesus' return in glory has been imminent. We are living in the end times, and in patience and expectation we pray, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

Today, we are invited to seek the intercession of Blessed John Henry Newman, who was raised to the altars during the papal visit of Pope Benedict in 2010. We ask the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to pour out his grace and blessing so that this holy man will be canonized for the greater glory of God.

*Lord, you are the kindly light
and every time I celebrate the
Eucharist and pray the Our Father I
proclaim your death, celebrate your
resurrection and look forward to
your coming in glory.*

Many people think they have a problem with God. What they really have a problem with, however, isn't God but their understanding of who God is. Even some believers – those who are devout, attend Mass on a Sunday and are very committed – can have a strange and dysfunctional understanding of who God is. They have a faulty or distorted way of thinking about God. This is because they don't invest time in reading the Scriptures, spending time in God's presence and learning more about their faith – in other words, in practising the disciplines that help us grow in faith.

For example, many think that God is cruel, harsh, angry, judgemental and intolerant. They think God has it in for them or is punishing them. They think God is indifferent, remote, distant, just not interested in their lives. They think God is down on them, down on fun, down on pleasure and down on human happiness. Strange but true. The truth is, in fact, that Jesus changed the way we think about God. In today's Gospel Luke captures so beautifully, elegantly and eloquently the compassionate, generous and giving heart of God the Father.

What we need now, more than anything else, is to rediscover the love the Father has for us. What we need is a correct, biblically based, prayer-inspired grasp of God, his nature, his attributes and his mind. We can only come to this through prayer, study and applying our mind (and heart). If we can come to know who God really is, it will transform our lives.

Jesus opened us up to a way of thinking about God which, even today, many find foreign and alien. It is as if we prefer to hold on to our own subjective and individual interpretation of who God is, rather than let our minds be renewed and refreshed by the Holy Spirit of God. God's ways are not our ways. God wants us to approach him with freedom and confidence. God wants us to be brazen and bold in turning to him. God wants us to be persistent and persevering in praying to him. God wants us to know that the Father gives good, abundant, wonderful gifts to his children.

*Lord God, you are our generous
and giving Father. We run to you in
our need, draw close to you in our
pain and approach you with the
freedom and confidence of children
of God.*

Jesus was accused of many things: of being a drunkard and a glutton, of keeping bad company, of working for Beelzebub (which means 'Lord of the Flies', a popular name for the master of the demons). People can say the daftest things often against overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Jesus was not a drunkard, he was not a glutton and he certainly did not work for the devil.

Sometimes certain scriptural verses should have a kind of warning attached to them, rather like some TV programmes which are preceded by an announcement warning: 'If you are offended by nudity, strong language or are sensitive to flashing lights, look away now.' In the case of the Scriptures it might say, 'If you are offended by the existence of the devil, demons and such like, skip over the following verses.' Of course, we are being facetious, because the point is that engagement with the devil and his cohorts was integral to Jesus' ministry. It could be said that it is quite simply impossible to read the Gospels and indeed the entire New Testament without encountering the devil, Satan or Beelzebub. The reason this is so is because Jesus had a deliverance ministry. He drove out the devil and performed exorcism.

St Peter, the first Pope, taught unambiguously and without compromise on the existence of the devil, warning that he roamed the earth looking for someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8-9). Pope Francis has already performed an exorcism and Pope John Paul II did so frequently. He said once, 'Anyone who does not believe in the devil does not believe in the gospel.'

We pray for deliverance from evil when we pray the Our Father, and while we cannot and should not blame the devil for everything – we have free will and must always take responsibility for our lives – he is often seeking to undermine our witness and erode our faith. Father Gabriel Amorth, a highly experienced and well-regarded exorcist, said, 'Thank heaven, the Church is upheld by the Holy Spirit. The gates of hell will not stand against it but they will do their utmost to.' We stand firm and resist the devil, holding the shield of faith, the sword of truth and the helmet of salvation.

Lord Jesus, even today you drive out the devil and his demons by the finger of God. Teach me never to underestimate the power of evil and always to resist it in your mighty Name.

Joel 1:13-15; 2:1-2 • Psalm 9:2-3, 6, 8-9, 16

Luke 11:15-26

We discover today another beatitude. True, it may not be recognized as forming part of the canon of these beautiful and blessed sayings of Jesus (see Matt. 5:3-10; Luke 6:20-22), but sure enough it is a beatitude: 'Blessed...are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (v. 28 NIV). The blessed, then, are those who hear God's word, receive it, meditate on it, cherish it, own it and then obey it. Simple, right?

Well, maybe not quite as simple as it at first appears. Hearing God's voice and obeying it is a paradox because it is both simple and yet complex and challenging. Simple because God does indeed speak to us and we are able, by God's grace, to obey his commandments and live a life pleasing to him. Complex and challenging because we are fallen and hard-hearted, and struggle in many ways to decipher the gentle voice of God. Like many things in the Christian life, growth, progress and maturity lie in us first examining our conscience. We turn the spotlight on ourselves first: we invite the light of the Holy Spirit to help us examine our conscience, show us how we resist the Spirit and then implore God for his help

and grace. This is key because if we wish to enjoy the blessing of God we need to be striving to obey him.

So perhaps as part of an examination of conscience we can ask ourselves: 'How well do I listen to the reading of God's Word at Mass? How well do I hear God's Word when I read it privately on my own?' The art of hearing God speak to us through his Word, like any craft or skill, requires application and some effort. St Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the great masters of the spiritual life, said, 'The word of God is not a sounding but a piercing word, not pronounceable by the tongue but efficacious in the mind, not sensible to the ear but fascinating to the affection.' How God speaks to each one of us is unique and deeply personal but his means are often the same: the Scriptures, in prayer, through others, in the liturgy, through the gift of providence which sometimes presents itself as coincidences.

Lord, you have blessed my life so much through the reading of Scripture. Help me to treasure your word and obey it so that it bears abundant fruit in my life.

Joel 4:12-21 • Psalm 96(97):1-6, 11-12

Luke 11:27-28

Every good parent teaches their child to say thank you from an early age. Ungrateful children are unpleasant creatures but what they need is training and forming in this most necessary social etiquette. Thanks and gratitude expressed bestows dignity on both the giver and the receiver. Without this a warm and generous gift or service falls on sterile, hard ground. There is much to learn in today's Gospel story of the grateful leper. We don't know his name but we know that he – a Samaritan – was one of ten healed and restored to health. Out of the ten he was the only one who was gracious enough to return and thank the Lord.

In first-century Israel the term leprosy covered any number of skin diseases, not only Hansen's disease (the medical term for modern leprosy). Like many diseases and illnesses, it was understood as a curse from God, a form of punishment, and lepers were thoroughly ostracized. Jesus always broke through social prohibitions and repressive injunctions in order to heal and serve the person.

The group of lepers Jesus encountered in today's reading was comprised of Jews (Galileans) and Samaritans. They discovered, through the suffering of their

disease, fraternity and friendship, breaking down the dividing wall which ordinarily separated Jew from Gentile. Under the restrictions of the Torah lepers had to avoid social contact with the general population (Lev. 13:45-46) and relied on hand-outs in order to survive.

Jesus gave a command – rather like Elisha did to the leper Naaman (2 Kgs. 5:10-12) – which was in a real sense a test of the lepers' faith and obedience. Again the Torah required that healed lepers show themselves to the priests, whose responsibility it was to judge whether the 'outcast' should be permitted to return to society (Lev. 14:2-3). Their obedience was richly rewarded as we know – all ten were miraculously healed. However, in a rather jarring moment in the life of Jesus, only the Samaritan returned to express his heartfelt thanks. God has healed and restored us in so many ways. We can strive to be like the grateful leper for he is a model of discipleship. His heart was full of praise, adoration, worship and thanks.

God, we thank you for your kindness, mercy and compassion, which he has so lavishly and generously poured out upon us.

2 Kings 5:14-17 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

2 Timothy 2:8-13 • Luke 17:11-19

Some years ago a priest said to his congregation, 'I am supposed to preach to you about the second coming but, to be honest, I don't know much about it or what it is all about.' At least he was being honest.

We tend to associate an emphasis on the return of Christ with a certain religious extremism and fanaticism. Those who do embrace this particular truth often do so at the expense of all the others and tend to become rather extreme and fanatical regarding dates and times and having special knowledge of such things. This is, of course, utter nonsense as times and dates, etc., are not known to us. Even Jesus didn't know when the end of the world would come and he told us quite clearly, 'But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father' (Mark 13:32). Nevertheless, the second coming is a central tenet of our faith. It is up there, if we might express it like this, with the incarnation and the resurrection in terms of God's intervention into our world.

Many Catholics are surprised to learn that the Catholic Church

teaches that the second coming is imminent (CCC 673). The Oxford English Dictionary explains that 'imminent' is derived from the Latin *imminere* and literally means 'overhanging, upon us and towards us it comes'. We might say, for example, of sailors stranded on a raft in the middle of the ocean, 'They were in imminent danger of being swept away.' St Francis of Assisi was asked what he would do if he was told one morning that the Lord would return in the evening. He said, in effect, that he would continue what he was doing – the point being, of course, that he was ready and prepared to be with the Lord.

We just don't know when the Lord will return – but return he will. We should pray for it and long for it and even groan for it. 'Come, Lord Jesus, come' is the prayer of the Bride, the Church, because this is the goal and purpose of human history. Let us make it our own prayer too.

Lord Jesus, you are the King of the Universe, the Author of Life and the Lord of human history. We pray together with the Spirit and the Bride for the return of our King and Lord.

Romans 1:1-7 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

Luke 11:29-32

Honestly, what were the Pharisees like? They were a difficult, obtuse group of men who, on the whole, gave Jesus nothing but grief during his public ministry. He simply could not win with them. How shockingly rude was the Pharisee who invited Jesus to his house as his guest but then offended against the spirit of hospitality by scrutinizing him, noting that he did not perform the ritual ablutions of washing his hands, face and arms before the meal.

The Pharisees were obsessive about their religion. They created the Mishnah, which was basically a development of the Torah but with their own interpretation of the law and guidelines on how to put their faith into practice in their daily lives. The problem with the Pharisees – and the problem with all forms of religious extremism – is that they used the ritual obligations of faith as a kind of weapon against others: a weapon to judge, condemn and criticize. For a devout Pharisee touching anything unclean, for example, shaking hands with a Gentile, contaminated them, rendering them ritually unclean. They emphasized the externals of religion and not the interior life – the ‘outside of the cup’ as opposed

to the inside. Their religious practice had the wrong emphasis, the accent was on the wrong thing. God desires our hearts, our love and our devotion. The Pharisees wanted public affirmation, recognition and the appearance of being holy and righteous.

We too must guard against an inner self-righteousness and arrogance which believes in some way that we are holier than others. It is a mysterious truth that saints, as they grow in holiness and closer to God, in fact become more aware of their own wretchedness and unworthiness. The Talmud itself says, ‘God wants the heart.’ Jesus’ teaching always addresses the spirit of the law; it was the Pharisees who were obsessed with the letter. We must, of course, strive to be faithful to the obligations and demands of our faith but, at the same time, we must guard our hearts against the spirit of the Pharisees, the spirit of self-righteousness and an attitude which says, ‘I thank you, God, that I am unlike other men. I do not steal, or commit adultery, but rather go to church and give to charity.’

‘Lord, have mercy upon me a sinner.’

Romans 1:16-25 • Psalm 18(19):2-5
Luke 11:37-41

Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees is often misunderstood. For sure, he did judge and condemn their hypocrisy, their legalism, their burdening of the people and their predilection for pride of place both in the synagogue and the market-place. He was not, however, critical of their religious practice in and of itself. They were deeply committed and devoted men. Their fasting, their tithing, their diligent ablutions and their desire to please God were all good and proper. They were zealous and expert at being religious. The problem wasn’t really with what they were doing but rather with the attitude of their heart.

In this sense, we could say that the way of Jesus is the way of the heart. Jesus revealed that, while being pleased with our religious observance, God looks at the interior disposition, the inner life. It is surprising that men steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures did not grasp this. To use modern parlance, they had lost the plot on this vital aspect of living a religious life. Right back in the time of the judges of Israel the Lord said to Samuel, ‘the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’

(1 Sam. 16:7). And that is the point, isn’t it? God sees what we do not see.

We, on the other hand, are more focused on the external and judge accordingly. We tend to have a faulty understanding of sin and what is offensive to God, deeming the sins of the flesh as especially wrong and depraved. In a rather twisted way we perceive our moral superiority – as we see it – as a strength or virtue in some way.

Yet Jesus reserved his sternest rebuke and condemnation for the Pharisees in a way that he never did for those caught in all manner of other sins. We never hear Jesus say to a prostitute or tax collector: ‘Woe to you! for you are like graves which are not seen, and men walk over them without knowing it’ (v. 44). In the Jewish faith anyone who touched a grave was rendered ritually unclean (Num. 19:16). The implication of Jesus’ condemnation was that by coming into contact with the Pharisees a person ran the risk of becoming unclean and defiled. Strong words, a hard-hitting message, a stern warning.

Lord, lead me in the path of righteousness – the way of the inner life, the way of the heart.

Romans 2:1-11 • Psalm 61(62):2-3, 6-9
Luke 11:42-46



Jesus is unrelenting in his condemnation of the Pharisees. It is as if they represent the very antithesis of what it means to follow God. His condemnation clearly offends them. As if he doesn't quite believe what he is hearing, one expert in the law protests: 'Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also' (11:45 NIV). Jesus presses on regardless, accusing them of the worst form of hypocrisy. They had built tombs for their prophets but they were the very ones who had murdered them. Indeed, God's prophet par excellence is at that very moment standing before them and they will crucify him. Stephen too will be stoned for accusing Israel of murdering the prophets (Acts 7:52-60).

Jesus calls his generation to account for the blood of God's messengers from Abel, the son of Adam and Eve (Gen. 4), to Zechariah, the son of Jehoida, the chief priest during the reign of King Joash of Judah (837-800 BC) who was killed in the temple when he tried to call the nation back to true worship (2 Chron. 24:17-22). Interestingly, for the Scripture scholars among us, the Lord quotes God directly as saying, 'I will send them prophets and

apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute' (v. 49). This is not, in fact, a direct quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures but his own summing up of Israel's history in relation to God's spokesmen and women.

It is as if the gloves are now off between Jesus and the Pharisees. It is game on. The stakes are high – for them the Lord is public enemy number one, a major threat to their position and, as they see it, the stability of the nation. They begin to plot his murder (as they did the prophets before him).

As Christians we have a reason to live and a reason to die. For us to live is Christ and to die is gain. The witness of the martyrs is so powerful because these men and women were not afraid to die for their faith – just like the prophets before them. In some countries around the world today believers are cruelly and mercilessly persecuted. We pray for them and give thanks for all believers throughout history who have stood firm in faith.

'I am the wheat of God. Let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.'
(St Ignatius of Antioch)

Romans 3:21-30 • Psalm 129(130):1-6

Luke 11:47-54



Today we celebrate the feast-day of the great saint and evangelist Luke. As the author both of Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, his is the most extensive contribution to the sacred text we know as the New Testament. He was without a doubt a gifted storyteller and organized his material with great flair and creative genius. The renowned Italian poet Dante called Luke the 'scribe of Christ's gentleness' because of his emphasis on Jesus' mercy, kindness and compassion. Luke was highly esteemed by the early Christian community as he is by us today.

What do we know about Luke? Information about his life is scanty, but we know he was a Greek-speaking Christian and possibly a convert of Paul. It is likely that he was based in Antioch, in ancient times in the currently deeply troubled country of Syria but in modern times a major city of Turkey. Scholars think he produced his classic work in the late eighties of the first century.

What is interesting about the Gospel of St Luke is that it was originally written as a two-part work (including the Acts of the Apostles) telling the story of the origins of Christianity from the

infancy of Jesus until the arrival of Paul in Rome around 60 AD. Scholars believe that Luke used Mark's Gospel as his template and weaved in some content from Matthew's Gospel but was able to source much new and original material from the oral tradition. Luke's emphasis is very distinctive. He puts the accent on Jesus' mercy and compassion and is especially keen to confront the selfish rich and highlight God's preferential love for the poor. Some of the most amazing and incredible stories of divine mercy are unique to Luke: the widow of Nain, the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the story of Zacchaeus.

Luke was first and foremost an evangelist. His Gospel is purely and simply the perfect evangelistic tool. You might like to consider giving someone a copy of Luke's Gospel and inviting them to read it. If they were to do so with an open heart they would come to know the love and mercy of God. Luke's Gospel has a power and efficacy all of its own.

Lord, as with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, may my heart burn with a love for the Gospel of St Luke as you open up to me the special power of this beautiful sacred and holy text.

2 Timothy 4:10-17 • Psalm 144(145):10-13, 17-18

Luke 10:1-9



It is an amazing truth that the name of Jesus is used as a swear word. Another amazing truth is that Jesus' name is not often used in polite company. Actually, even in religious circles, the very mention of the name of Jesus can create an odd silence and pregnant pause. Jesus' name can be rather like the war; we shouldn't mention it. Most amazing of all, however, is the truth that one day, we don't know when, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is our Lord and our King. One day, beyond time, after death, every creature in heaven and on earth will acknowledge the name of Jesus (Phil. 2:9-11).

Today, in the here and now, it takes a certain quality of courage to stand up for our faith. It is easier on one level to stand up for Christian values and ethics. People often talk about the Catholic or Christian ethos as if simply speaking in these broad terms says as much as we need to about who we are as believers. What would happen, we wonder, if someone said, say, to a head teacher, a parish priest or the head of a Catholic university, 'You talk a lot about the Christian or Catholic ethos, but what does that

mean and what part does Jesus of Nazareth play in that ethos?' It is likely that this question would be met by an embarrassed silence.

St Ignatius of Antioch, whose feast-day we celebrated yesterday, said, 'Don't just be known for being a Christian but for living as one.' Pope Paul VI, who penned probably one of the most authoritative and prophetic teachings on our call to be evangelists, put it like this: 'For witness, no matter how excellent, will ultimately prove ineffective unless its meaning is clarified and corroborated' – what Peter described as accounting 'for the hope that is in you' (1 Pet. 3:15). Pope Paul VI went on to say, 'The good news proclaimed by witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth are not proclaimed' (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 22).

Lord, teach me to be a witness but not just of ethos or ethics or morality but of the gospel of life, of your truth and your promises.

Romans 4:13, 16-18 • Psalm 104(105):6-9, 42-43
Luke 12:8-12



Today's Gospel contains perhaps some of the most disturbing words in the entire Bible: '[W]hen the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (v. 8). Imagine, if you will, how terrible, how awful it would be if, when the Bridegroom comes for his bride, there were in fact no believers on earth, not a single one. Unthinkable, isn't it? But Jesus' warning is as clear as day.

We can only truly understand verse 8 and its sober message in the light of the Parable of the Persistent Widow (another parable unique to Luke's Gospel). The parable is all about prayer and its two central pillars: perseverance and persistence. The truth is that in matters regarding faith it is easy to lose heart. There are many waves and undercurrents at work on the high seas of our lives which threaten to veer us off course so that we lose our way, become stranded and even shipwrecked. The wonderful attribute of the widow was her sheer boldness and confidence in approaching – wait for it – not a just judge but an unjust one (vv. 2, 6). The message of the parable is clear: if an unscrupulous and morally dubious judge can relent

towards a dogged and unusually persistent widow, how much more readily will God, the perfect Judge, hear our prayer.

Why does prayer seem so hard at times? Why do we sometimes feel that God does not hear or answer our prayers? The answer is contained in the word 'feel', because living by faith is not the same as living by our feelings. The Spirit helps us in our weakness by teaching us that faith is not rooted on the foundation of our feelings but on the sure rock of Christ. The widow had faith in the unjust judge although she had no reason to. We have faith in God and have every reason to. God is and always will be faithful to his promises but, in truth, we have to cling to the rock. St Francis de Sales said, 'Let us persevere in prayer at all times. For if our Lord seems not to hear us, it is not because he wants to refuse us. Rather, his purpose is to compel us to cry out louder and to make us more conscious of the greatness of his mercy.'

Lord Jesus, may I never give up in prayer but persevere and persist, believing that God hears.

Exodus 17:8-13 • Psalm 120(121)
2 Timothy 3:14-4:2 • Luke 18:1-8



Many think that money makes the world go round. Do you? Money and wealth have always been idols which human beings bow down before and give homage to. Greed, financial greed especially, is a long-standing human affliction. Many argue that the entire financial crisis and worldwide recession have their roots in greed, avarice and insensitivity to the needs of others. The rich man, if asked, 'Are you your brother's keeper?' would definitely answer, 'No, this is a dog-eat-dog world: it's each man for himself.'

We meet a similar insensitivity in the man who approaches Jesus with a view to settling a family dispute about inheritance. Rabbis were often called upon to intervene in such family conflicts. They performed a unique function by working with families to come to an equitable interpretation of the teaching of the Torah. Deuteronomy 21:17 lays down the general rule that an elder son should receive double the portion of a younger son. Jesus knows immediately that the man's question, 'Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me' (v. 13), masks greed and indifference to his previous teaching

about the dangers of wealth and money (11:39-42). True to form, he approaches the issue dynamically and laterally through a parable. The man in the parable is rich beyond our wildest dreams – think Richard Branson or Lord Alan Sugar, who are both worth over one billion pounds. In fact, he is so wealthy he doesn't even have room to store his goods (v. 17).

The punchline of the parable is really very simple but, nevertheless, it is very profound. The bottom line is that his attitude or philosophy to life – summed up by the crass motto 'Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry' – is a shallow, empty and meaningless one. His life is built on sand and, although cash and property rich, he is life poor because time is running out. Death is knocking on his door. As they say, there are no pockets in a shroud. All riches are transient. They fail, they corrupt and they cannot buy health or love. Before we judge the rich man, however, we should examine our own attitude to money, riches and wealth. Many of us are far wealthier than our brothers and sisters in the developing world.

Lord God, you love a cheerful giver. Create in me a warm and generous heart which always reaches out to the poor and needy in our world.

Romans 4:20-25 • Luke 1:69-75

Luke 12:13-21



We are familiar with the central teachings of our Christian faith: the incarnation (Advent and Christmastide), the resurrection (Easter) and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost). These interventions of God are key events both in history and in Christian revelation. Our faith is, if you like, rooted in them. There is still one key intervention of God in human history that has yet to take place: this is the return of the Lord, or the *parousia* in theological terminology. As believers we are called to anticipate eagerly this event. In our Gospel reading Jesus speaks about his expectations of that day.

The basic message or kerygma of the Christian faith is that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. The return of the Lord is, therefore, at the very heart of our faith. How odd then that we hear so little about it! How strange that we rarely hear it preached or mentioned from the pulpit! Are we ashamed of the teaching of the second coming?

We know that the early Christians believed that the return of Jesus was imminent. In anticipation some had stopped working (often an excuse for laziness and ducking

out of responsibilities we hasten to add) and others had decided not to marry. The truth is probably more straightforward in our generation: we don't particularly want the Lord to return; we don't pray for his return because we are quite happy here, thank you very much. Clergy, meanwhile, are a little embarrassed or reluctant to teach about something so otherworldly as the coming of the King on the clouds of heaven and the wrapping up of human history. Pretty heavy stuff on a Sunday morning, both for Father and for us!

Nevertheless, in the Christian life there are things that we might wish to skip over and ignore but we simply can't. The reason we can't ignore the truth of the second coming is because it is integral to our faith. It is we who need to change, not this sublime truth of our faith. Our Lord commands us: 'You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.'

Lord, teach me to pray and groan and long for your return. Not in a fanatical way but in a way which recognizes that your return ushers in the kingdom of heaven in a definitive way, and we become truly and fully sons and daughters of God.

Romans 5:12, 15-21 • Psalm 39(40):7-10, 17

Luke 12:35-38

Today we return to the much-neglected topic of the second coming. In today's parable the servant reveals his innermost thoughts, 'My master is taking a long time in coming' (v. 45 NIV). As a result of this delay standards slip, he starts to maltreat those in his charge and indulge in heavy drinking sessions. We may not turn to the bottle, but our hearts also grow cold and we are largely unprepared for the Lord's return.

The Christian life is underpinned by a very important principle: with great responsibility comes great accountability. This principle has repercussions for every aspect of our lives. We are blessed and privileged because of the graces we have received from God. It is as if the Lord says to each one of us personally, 'Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more' (v. 48).

We are called to be watchful and attentive to what we can call the 'facts of faith'. Of course, these facts are also truths but they are truths as reliable and as tested as facts. We

know that $2 + 2 = 4$: that is fact; we know as a fact that according to the principle of gravity, what goes up, must come down; we know as a fact that we must all pay taxes; and we know as a fact that we must all die. Well, the fact is that Jesus of Nazareth, who died, who rose on the third day and ascended into heaven, will come again in glory. We need to recover, in prayer, a living sense of how imminent the Lord's return is. We need to ask the Spirit to give us real insight into the fact that the Bridegroom is coming for his Bride. But is the Bride more like a bitter widow than a vibrant and radiant Bride?

From the beginning the Church has encouraged believers to pray, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.' Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we are partaking in some way in the heavenly banquet we will all enjoy when the Lord wipes away every tear and death is finally vanquished.

Christ died and rose again that he might be the Lord both of the living and the dead. Lord, keep me watchful and faithful to the end of my life, by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel reading tells us that Jesus came to bring fire to the earth. This is not the fire of wrath or anger or judgement but of the Holy Spirit (v. 49; Acts 2:3-4). The fire of the Holy Spirit has rained down on the earth and into the hearts of men and women since the Day of Pentecost. The fire of the Holy Spirit is similar in its properties to natural fire: it purifies, it cleanses and it divides.

Jesus asked his disciples then and he asks us today: 'Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth?' (v. 51). The answer to his question in the context of his discussion with his disciples is clearly no, but paradoxically, in another context, it could be yes. Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6), who won for us reconciliation with his Father. The dividing wall of hostility created by sin and the fall has been demolished.

There is no doubt that Jesus both unites and divides. What is the nature of this division? We are called to a radical allegiance to Christ, and this can bring us into conflict with the demands of family, employment and even the state. It is hard to accept that following Jesus brings us into conflict. Many

of us don't like conflict and indeed avoid it at all costs. However, the times they are a'changin'.

A newspaper columnist for The Times newspaper wrote recently that there was nothing to fear from Catholics because although they disagree with abortion and believe life is sacred and precious, they do not believe this enough to put themselves out very much. Very few, he pointed out, write to their MPs, very few protest, and only a rare and extreme group are prepared to engage in active protest. Legislation which undermined our values and ethos might get some mild resistance but nothing to worry about. He further suggested that Catholics have little fire in their bellies or fire in their heart for their teachings. This may or not be true but he has a point.

We stand, however, on the shoulders of saints and heroes of faith who did have fire in their bellies! They did not love the world but chose rather to obey God.

Lord, may the beauty of the gospel and the light of your truth set my heart on fire that I may be a courageous witness for you in the world.

Our brothers and sisters from the ancient world lived without the benefit of weather centres and frequent weather forecasts. Being a people of the land and the soil they relied on their own interpretation and became adept at understanding the signs pointing to coming weather patterns. It was common knowledge that the winds blowing in from the Mediterranean Sea in the West brought rain and storms. In contrast, the warmer wind from the desert in the South brought hot weather. They knew how to interpret the signs of the weather but not the amazing signs of God at work in their midst. In other words, they knew how to interpret the natural world but not the spiritual one. They failed to grasp that they were living through events that would change the world forever and that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah – God's secret foretold by the prophets and now in the fullness of time revealed.

What are the signs of the times today? How do we know that God is living and active among us? The election of Pope Francis is a sign of the times, for sure: his love

for the poor, his refusal to accept or embrace many of the elitist trappings of his office; his passion for the simple gospel message; and his love for God and Jesus. Another sign of the times is the new spiritual movements. The Holy Spirit is at work in our midst. The signs of the world are ever apparent and we do well to note them also: the rise of militant atheism, materialism, consumerism and moral relativism.

One of the great prophets of the modern world was Pope Paul VI. He wrote, 'The split between the gospel and the culture is without doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the gospel. But this encounter will not take place if the gospel is not proclaimed' (*Evangelii nuntiandi* 20).

Lord God, you gave courage to the Holy Martyrs. Grant us the grace to seek to understand the signs of our times and always be prepared to share with others the reason for our hope in Christ.

Rom 7:18-25 • Ps 118(119):66, 68, 76-77, 93-94 • Lk 12:54-59
(In Wales: Hebrews 11:33-40 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5-11 • John 12:24-26)

Pontius Pilate has gone down in history as the weak, spineless and cowardly procurator of the province of Judea who was caught up in the Passion of the Christ, and both literally and symbolically washed his hands of Christ. Since the Creed was formulated many centuries ago his name has been repeated by billions of people throughout history at every celebration of the Eucharist. His is a truly infamous name – alongside that of Judas Iscariot.

It will come as no surprise then that, as the police say of criminals, Pilate had form. He was notorious for his harsh rule and his insensitivity to Jewish religious feelings. In our Gospel today we hear from Luke about an example of this brutality, which without his reporting would have been lost to history.

It appears he had gratuitously killed some Jewish Galileans while they were offering sacrifices, probably in the temple and during Passover. Quite why he had them killed we don't know. Like any of the meaningless, pointless, senseless murders we hear of every day in our newspapers and on our TV screens, the killing of these poor men

reverberated around the nation and deeply shocked people. The only question a human being can ask in the face of such brutality is 'Why?' And the truth is, that there isn't an answer.

Jesus refers also to a construction accident. Scripture scholars suggest that this particular incident occurred at the Siloam Reservoir in Jerusalem. Popular wisdom at that time associated disaster and tragedy like this with some kind of punishment for sin (Job 4:7-9; John 9:2). Jesus refutes and demolishes this assumption for all time both here and also in the Sermon on the Mount: he tells us that God's sun shines on both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45).

The unfortunate people who died in these tragedies weren't any guiltier than anybody else. We are all guilty! Unpopular as this message is, an essential part of Jesus' message is our need to repent, turn away from sin and turn our lives over to God.

Lord Jesus, teach me that today is always the day of repentance, today is always the day of conversion, today is always the day of salvation.

Romans 8:1-11 • Psalm 23(24):1-6
Luke 13:1-9

Jesus spent a significant part of his ministry combatting the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. He clearly found their self-righteousness a sinister and destructive enemy of spiritual progress and maturity. They were in many ways the antithesis of everything he said and did. In today's parable, he addresses their behaviour head on but with a sense of parody and humour which is both amusing and powerful.

Perhaps one of the problems with the Pharisees was their overly simplistic approach to their religion. They fasted, they prayed, they gave to good causes and this made them pleasing to God – or so they thought. The state of their heart didn't appear to matter. As a case in point, the Pharisee in today's parable clearly sees nothing wrong in thinking that he is unlike other fallen and weak human beings, brazenly declaring, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get' (vv. 11-12 NIV).

Jesus exposes the interior mindset of the self-righteous, which is, in a nutshell, that they secretly believe that they are morally and spiritually superior to others. What caused

him to think like this? Surely the practice of faith – fasting, praying, giving alms – is pleasing to God? Indeed, if these acts are done with the right motive and from the right heart. Perhaps the problem with the Pharisee was that he had stopped examining his conscience and this prevented him from receiving the gift of self-knowledge. With self-knowledge he would have laughed at himself and would have been less pompous. He would have realized that it was by God's grace and blessing that he was protected from the sin and darkness others had fallen into. He would have thanked God but with a different kind of heart – a grateful heart, acutely aware that, but for God's grace, he would fall too.

It is, in fact, the broken, crushed and self-aware tax collector who is praised, for he adopts the position of the true disciple of Jesus. His prayer is the prayer of all penitents – and that is what we all are, repentant sinners with hearts full of praise, thanks and gratitude to God for his goodness, kindness and mercy.

Lord God, today I pray, 'Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.' Teach me that we are all saved by grace and justified by your mercy.

*Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14, 16-19 • Psalm 33(34):2-3, 17-19, 23
2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 • Luke 18:9-14*

The BBC programme *The Apprentice*, in which Lord Alan Sugar selects from sixteen candidates a partner for a new business venture, has been one of the corporation's greatest successes in recent years. The viewer is invited on a journey as the young entrepreneur is tested, challenged and frankly put through the mill. It makes for compelling viewing, with the weaker candidates falling early in the process and, as you would expect, the stronger candidates going all the way through to the final. Invariably, each potential apprentice is out to impress, with a sparkling CV and a raft of qualifications and achievements to their name. Lord Sugar has two advisors who work alongside the candidates, feeding back their observations in order to help inform his final decision – although that decision is always his.

Jesus had no advisors as he set about choosing his disciples/apostles but turned to his Father, spending the whole night in prayer to seek out his wisdom and light. Prayer, and often prolonged and intensive prayer, should perhaps inform our own major life decisions. We don't know what kind of prayer

the Lord offered up but we can be fairly certain that it was a combination of praise, supplication and intercession. The author of the letter to the Hebrews describes it thus: 'During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (5:7 NIV).

Despite his fervent prayer, the men Jesus chose were weak and fallible, flawed and feeble. Peter was impetuous, James and John were aggressive, Thomas succumbed to unbelief. To a man they were dull and slow to grasp Jesus' message. To a man, however, they were transformed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus saw what they would become. Jesus saw in them qualities which could perhaps only be grasped in prayer. He saw that with the help of the Spirit they would truly become the men God intended them to be.

*St Simon, pray for us that we may be filled with your apostolic zeal.
St Jude, pray for us that we may emulate your love for Christ and dedication to the Church.*

*Ephesians 2:19-22 • Psalm 18(19):2-5
Luke 6:12-19*

What is the kingdom of God like? To what can it be compared? Looking at two very ordinary and everyday entities – a mustard seed and yeast – Jesus answered both these questions.

What do this small seed and cooking compound have in common? They are ordinary, small and unnoticed and yet have a powerful punch and impact on their environment: the seed grows into a large mustard tree in whose branches the birds perch; the yeast works its way through the dough, making the loaf rise.

What do we deduce from these two examples about the kingdom of heaven? The Holy Spirit is in the ordinary events of life. Our walk of holiness is lived out day by day. Our growth in sanctity depends on how we react and respond to the challenges we face in the grind of daily living. However, the effect of living in the Spirit is that it has a powerful impact on our environment and those around us.

The saints of the Church understood this more than anybody. Padre Pio said once, 'Spin a little every day; thread by thread weave your design until it is finished and you will infallibly succeed. But be

careful not to hurry, because you will tangle the thread with knots and confuse the spindle. Therefore advance always and, even if you progress at a slow pace, you will travel far.' This was very much the same approach as St Thérèse of Lisieux, whose Little Way was about being holy in the routine and minutiae of everyday life. Serving God little by little, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, decade by decade until we reach our goal – the kingdom of heaven.

The virtues of faithfulness, persistence, obedience and duty go against the grain of modern living but they are at the heart of what it means to live a holy life. The mustard seed takes time to mature into a tree and produce fruit; the yeast needs warmth to work through all the dough. The fruit of the Holy Spirit takes time to mature in our lives and the goodness of God's life is worked out in the heat of the day and through the fire of the struggle of temptation.

Lord, keep me humble, give me patience, grant me wisdom and pour out your Holy Spirit that I may live a life of faithful and joyful obedience.

Romans 8:18-25 • Psalm 125(126)

Luke 13:18-21

The question posed in today's Gospel is a good one and one that has often been asked over the centuries: 'Lord, will those who are saved be few?' Some over the centuries have read the 144,000 referred to in the book of Revelation (7:4) far too literally and in so doing have led people astray. Revelation belongs to the apocalyptic genre of writing and was never intended to be taken literally in this way. Thank God for the wisdom of the Catholic Church which has always led its children away from this rather fundamentalist and literalist interpretation of the sacred text.

Perhaps indicating that the question, although a good one, does not invite a specific answer (because some things are simply beyond us to grasp), Jesus does not answer it directly. Rather he points to the reality that the door through which we must enter is narrow and many who strive to enter through it will not be permitted to. What is interesting is that the reason they are not permitted to enter is because the owner of the house does not recognize or know them. Our faith is an invitation for us to know the Lord. So rather than, 'How many will be saved?' the question should be, 'Do you know the Lord?'

To know the Lord is to enter the kingdom. Not to know the Lord is to run the risk of being separated from him. Perhaps, though, at the end of the day it is we who separate ourselves from God. God has given us the incredible gift of free will. Conversion to Christ invites us to live as Jesus lived, dependent and reliant on the Father.

In the Eucharistic prayer the priest prays on our behalf, 'Command that we be delivered from eternal damnation and counted among the flock of those you have chosen.' This is, of course, our prayer, our blessed hope. However, our prayer and hope is that God will be merciful to all men and women. God alone is the judge and he is far more merciful than we could ever imagine. We do not put the spotlight on others but only on ourselves. Woe to us if we do not preach the gospel; woe to us if we do not live lives worthy of the calling we have received.

'The pains of hell are not the greatest part of hell. The loss of heaven, its joy and bliss is the heaviest burden and woe of hell.'
(St John Chrysostom)

Romans 8:26-30 • Psalm 12(13):4-6

Luke 13:22-30



Were the Pharisees being helpful when they warned Jesus of Herod's intention to have him killed? Probably not, as they too would soon be plotting the very same thing. It is likely that the Pharisees had heard rumours of Herod's intention to drive Jesus out of Galilee. Jesus refers to him as a fox, perhaps indicating his cunning, because he was unwittingly driving Jesus to his place of destiny – the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus was a man of history but he was not subject to the vagaries of history. He was the Lord and Master of his life: he laid it down, he took it up. His hour would come and, like many of the prophets before him, that hour would come in Jerusalem. Jesus weeping for Jerusalem is a profoundly sad and moving moment in the Gospels. To describe it Luke adopts the feminine image of a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings for protection.

Jesus' death on the cross was engineered by the Jewish leaders. They rejected him as the Messiah and considered him a major threat to their nation. They themselves were not permitted to inflict the death penalty and so they persuaded Pontius Pilate and the

Roman army to do so. In reality, however, it was humankind who crucified the Lord. The Jewish people, in this sense, represented us all.

The Jewish people have always had and will always have a special place in God's heart. They are our elder brothers in faith. We esteem them and revere the work of God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a little-appreciated fact that those of the Jewish faith and those of the Christian faith share a belief in the Messiah's coming – they in his first coming and we in his second. However – and this is a deep mystery of faith – the glorious Messiah's coming is suspended until Israel recognizes Jesus, the suffering and crucified Lord, as the Messiah. Peter pointed to this when he said, 'Repent therefore...that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old' (Acts 3:19-21).

Lord, we pray for the Jewish people that their eyes and ears would be opened and a softening would come upon their hearts to recognize in Jesus of Nazareth the promised Messiah.

Romans 8:31-39 • Psalm 108(109):21-22, 26-27, 30-31

Luke 13:31-35
