

Daily Reflections

Wednesday 1 October

Luke 9:57-62 • St Thérèse of the Child Jesus (Memorial)

Jesus was a radical. He was a revolutionary. He was a renegade. He was a threat to national security and stability. He died young and changed the world. St Thérèse of Lisieux, whose feast we celebrate today, was also a radical. She was also a revolutionary. She was no threat to national security but she died young and changed the world. Jesus ushered in a revolution of the Spirit – a radical call not to arms, but to holiness; not to rebellion but to be saints. But, like every call-up, it requires a radical and life-changing decision, indeed decisions. Jesus makes that clear in today's Gospel reading.

The man who asked that he be allowed to bury his dead father before answering Jesus' call was very likely the elder son to whom this solemn responsibility fell. The burial of one's next of kin was a very serious obligation in Israel, taking precedence over the most important religious festivals. Jesus' response, 'Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God' (v. 60), seems harsh and unreasonable to our ears. As does his response to the disciple who wants to follow him but simply wants to say farewell to his family first – surely a reasonable request. Again the Lord's response falls uneasily on our ears: 'No one who puts his hands to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' (v. 62). The Lord spoke into a specific situation in time but his words speak to every human heart – that is the power of God's word.

St Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, died at the tender age of twenty-four from tuberculosis, but her witness and writings will speak to believers until the end of time. She left everything to follow Christ – she left the dead to bury the dead and did not return to say farewell to her family. This decision very likely broke her parents' hearts (although both are causes for canonization). Today we ask for her prayers and intercession that we may lead lives of radical holiness and strive to be holy as God is holy.

'Acknowledge your nothingness before God. Expect everything from the good Lord just as a child expects everything from its father. Worry about nothing; seek only to gather flowers; the flowers of God's grace and blessing; moment by moment; day by day.' (St Thérèse of Lisieux)

Job 9:1-13, 14-16 • Psalm 87(88):10-15

Luke 9:57-62

Thursday 2 October

(Memorial) The Guardian Angels • Matthew 18:1-5, 10

The Christian life is attractive and wonderful at so many levels and understood as a great force for good in the world. Believers all through the ages have fed the poor, clothed the naked, set up hospitals and schools, and reached out to those despised and loathed by society. What is not to like, appreciate or understand about that? However, in the period known as the Enlightenment (1750–1850), the philosophers who spearheaded that movement entered into a conflict with faith which set reason and faith in opposition to one another. According to Christian understanding, faith is a meeting of the two: reason serves faith, and faith leads reason.

This Enlightenment thinking has filtered down through history and, as a result, our belief in the supernatural has waned or faded, even as Christians. Nowadays we are far more comfortable with expressing our faith in practical ways than in spiritual ways – through social action, care and service of our neighbour, and indeed care and service of the environment. However, sooner or later, we encounter a problem and have to face up to the fact that our faith is rooted in revelation and an understanding of the world which embraces that which cannot be seen – as, for instance, today when we celebrate the existence of our Guardian Angels.

Each of us has a guardian angel watching over us. Their existence is not a fairy story or a quaint teaching from our childhood – it is an article of faith. Pope St Gregory the Great taught that there are nine orders of angels, namely, angels, archangels, virtues, powers, principalities, dominations, thrones, cherubim and seraphim. Angels are pure spirits sent to serve and protect those who will inherit salvation – namely the baptized. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that ‘From infancy to death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading them to life’ (para. 336).

Today thank God for your guardian angel and for his loving care in giving us these mighty protectors. Remember, too, that we can call upon our guardian angel to help us in the problems and challenges we face every day.

‘Angel of God, my Guardian dear, to whom his love commits me here, ever this day (or night) be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.’

Job 19:21-27 • Psalm 26(27):7-9, 13-14

Matthew 18:1-5, 10

Friday 3 October

Luke 10:13-16

One of the problems with reading the words of Jesus in the Scriptures is we can't know the tone of his voice, its resonance, its pitch and delivery. Throughout the centuries preachers have put their own interpretation and, in the case of today's reading, most likely would have assumed a harsh and condemning tone. But there is another possible interpretation. Perhaps Jesus' tone wasn't harsh, condemning and indignant as he castigated those towns which had rejected him. Perhaps his tone was one of deep sadness, almost an appeal resonant with such profound love, mercy and compassion that, had we heard this teaching in the raw, so to speak, we would have been moved to the very core of our being, leading us to weep bitter tears of repentance.

We do not weep enough. We do not weep tears of repentance enough. Many of the mysteries of our faith can only truly be understood through tears and weeping. This is certainly true of repentance. When we kneel in prayer and allow our tears to flow, we come in touch with the mystery of sin and the mystery of the call to repent of our sin. We touch reality; we come into the presence of God.

Now here is the key to this mystery: we truly enter the mystery and gift of repentance through the gateway of Mary, our Mother in faith, the Mother of Sorrow. Mary will help us to understand this great and humbling mystery of repentance, which is as sweet as honey and as bitter as aloes. Mary is the one who accompanies us on this journey which each one of us must take. We take it with our mother, weeping and on our knees.

We are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of 'suffering with'. There is a globalization of indifference at work in the world and in our own lives which has taken from us the ability to weep. We need to ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty in the world, in ourselves and in those who anonymously make socio-economic decisions that destroy and ruin people's lives.

Lord God, grant us the charism of mercy. Move us to weep tears of sorrow, repentance and joy at the tender mercy of the Father who loved us so much that he sent his only Son.

Job 38:1, 12-21; 40:3-5 • Psalm 138(139):1-3, 7-10, 13-14

Luke 10:13-16

Saturday 4 October

(Memorial) St Francis of Assisi • Luke 10:17-24

Joy and the Holy Spirit are motifs of St Luke's Gospel. Joy and the Holy Spirit are motifs of the life of St Francis of Assisi. Joy and the Holy Spirit are motifs of the papacy of Pope Francis. Joy and the Holy Spirit are motifs of the Christian life.

Jesus was filled with joy and the Holy Spirit because the disciples received the gift of revelation from God the Father. God the Father delights to give us revelation; he delights to give us insight and understanding into the hidden things of God. If we want to be filled with joy and the Holy Spirit and give God the Father great pleasure, we need to turn to him and ask for this precious gift of revelation.

What is the gift of revelation? It is receiving insight into the truths of our faith directly from the Holy Spirit. We receive these treasures as we approach God with the right heart and the right attitude. Mainly this attitude is expressed on our knees and with tears. We cannot demand or insist on receiving this gift, but what we do know is that God gives it to the humble, the unschooled, the uneducated and people of simple faith.

We need to recover the gift of joy in living the Christian life. This gift is closely related to blessings – the blessing of repentance and the blessing of revelation. Our problem often is not that we expect too much from God but that we expect too little. God wants us to have a boldness and confidence in approaching him. We need the gift of revelation to understand more clearly God's plan for our lives.

After his dramatic conversion St Francis thought that God was calling him to rebuild the parish church at San Damiano, literally brick by brick, when, in fact, the Lord was calling him to be a key part in the renewal of the universal Church, the mystical body of Christ on earth. St Francis lived such a holy life that he is often referred to as the 'second Christ'. As layman and later a deacon – he was never ordained a priest – he holds out to lay people the hope that we too may aspire to be saints – for this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus.

Lord, grant me a deeper revelation and understanding that you are calling me to live a joy-filled and holy life and to be a Spirit-filled evangelizer.

Job 42:1-3, 5-6, 12-17 • Ps 118(119):66, 71, 75, 91, 125, 130

Luke 10:17-24

Sunday 5 October

Matthew 21:33-43 • Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

The purpose of Jesus' parables was to provoke those listening to them to ponder, think and reflect. On hearing his parable of the Vineyard, the chief priests and Pharisees knew immediately that it was addressed to them. Luke informs us: 'When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard [Jesus'] parable, they perceived that he was speaking about them' (v. 45). The parable clearly riled and unsettled them, and 'They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet' (v. 46 NIV).

In his parable of the Vineyard Jesus used images that the chief priests and Pharisees would have been very familiar with. Vineyards with absent owners were common enough in Palestine at the time, and putting them in the hands of tenants with the intention of earning an income from them made sense both from an economic point of view and also as a security precaution. As Jesus told his story, his listeners would have been reminded of passages from the Old Testament in which the prophets compared the nation of Israel to a vineyard. For example, Isaiah wrote, 'For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting' (Isa. 5:7). This rural image captures perfectly the idea of God's care for his people and the expectation of fruit in their lives. The vineyard is clearly the kingdom of God, the owner is God and the messengers are the prophets, who in Israel's history had often been ignored or badly treated. The unruly tenants in the parable undoubtedly represent the Pharisees, who refused to recognize the work of God in their midst.

The Pharisees did not understand the signs of the times. God is always at work among his people. Pope Francis is a prophet among us – he is a prophet of the joy of the gospel. The Holy Spirit is calling his Church to recover blessings and graces that have been lost: especially our sense of joy and happiness, our hope and our vocation to witness to the gospel of joy.

Lord, you call us to be workers in your vineyard and to bear fruit for you. May we always be open to your word even when it is hard for us to hear, and so help to build your kingdom by our words and deeds.

Isaiah 5:1-7 • Psalm 79(80):9, 12-16, 19-20

Philippians 4:6-9 • Matthew 21:33-43

Monday 6 October

Luke 10:25-37

It seems remarkable that the parable of the Good Samaritan, like the parable of the Prodigal Son, is unique to Luke's Gospel. These parables' distinctive style and warmth illustrate Luke's remarkable gift for storytelling or, to be more specific, for capturing Jesus' storytelling and parable-telling in a unique and special way. If we are honest, this parable about a Samaritan who goes out of his way to help his fellow human being speaks to us about social action. And this is a very apt and fitting interpretation: we are called to be good samaritans who reach out in mercy and compassion to those who are beaten up and wounded by life and in need of practical help and support.

It is, however, not the only possible interpretation. Origen, a Scripture scholar from the early Church – and, to be fair, many of the early Fathers, including SS Irenaeus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine – adopted a very different approach: an allegorical approach. The allegorical method invites us to go on a journey with the Spirit who leads us to taste and see that the Lord is good by penetrating further and further into the meaning of the Scriptures.

Origen saw in the good samaritan not himself or others but Christ himself. Jesus is the Good Samaritan and we are the wounded traveller. The journey from Jerusalem to Jericho is a symbol of the journey Adam took from paradise to the world. The priest represents the law, which cannot heal and save us – for it is by the law that we become conscious that we are sinners. The Levite represents the Old Testament prophets who pointed to the One who was to redeem us. The traveller's wounds are the wounds of sin and disobedience to God. The beast on which the wounded man was carried is Christ's body carrying fallen man to the inn, which is the Church providing healing, recovery and restoration to the sons and daughters of God. The manager of the inn is the clergy and those called to minister to God's people. The Samaritan's promise to return is a reference to the hope of glory, the blessed hope of the Church, the return of Christ.

'How kind the good Samaritan

To him who fell among the thieves! Thus Jesus pities fallen man,
And heals the wounds the soul receives.' (John Newton)

Galatians 1:6-12 • Psalm 110(111):1-2, 7-10

Luke 10:25-37

Tuesday 7 October

Luke 10:38-42 • Our Lady of the Rosary (Memorial)

We can learn a lot about ourselves from the character we identify with most when we hear or read a Scripture passage. Yesterday, in connection with Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, we suggested that most of us would identify with the good Samaritan and seek to do good works and deeds. Few would identify with being the wounded traveller. So, as we look at our Gospel today, are you a Martha or a Mary?

Historically there has been a tendency to see a tension between the Church apostolic and the church contemplative; the Church of action versus the Church of prayer and devotion. Of course this way of thinking is wrong: the church is both – our love for God gives birth to our love for our neighbour. Judging by the parable of the Good Samaritan, Martha should have been praised for her practical service of Jesus. In fact, her action is neither praised nor condemned but rather she is challenged to consider her priorities. Too harsh? Many might think so in view of the fact that there was work to be done. But that is the point, isn't it? There is always work to be done, but never enough time to devote ourselves to what is most important – prayer and coming into the Lord's presence.

The gospel is not first and foremost a social gospel – as laudable as service of others is, in all its rich and myriad forms. The gospel is first and foremost about a life-giving and life-enhancing relationship with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. We need to find time to listen to his word. Devotion to Jesus is the one thing that is required. Perhaps – and this is where this teaching gets tough – if our service is not rooted in our prayer and love of God, it can simply be a kind of self-love.

We do the gospel a terrible disservice when we reduce it to a gospel of serving others. Why? Because people who have no faith are capable of loving acts and impressive self-sacrifice. We don't need to be a believer to reach out to the poor, help our fellow human beings, and be a humble servant. We do, however, need to be a believer in order to sit at the feet of Christ and learn from him who is gentle and humble of heart.

'Prayer is the best weapon we possess, the key that opens the heart of God.' (Padre Pio)

Galatians 1:13-24 • Psalm 138(139):1-3, 13-15

Luke 10:38-42

Wednesday 8 October

Luke 11:1-4

Jesus is the Master of prayer. The Our Father is the prayer of the Master. Each word of the Lord's Prayer comes directly from God (John 17:7). The Our Father is our first prayer and the foundation stone of all prayer. No one can pray the Our Father without the Holy Spirit. God the Father sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts so that we can cry out to God, 'Abba! Father!' (Gal. 4:6). Jesus gave us the words to pray to the Father and sent the Spirit so that these words would become for us 'spirit' and 'life' (John 6:63).

The Our Father is a gift from Jesus to the Church and has been prayed since its very earliest days. According to the Didache (an ancient Christian writing), the early Christians would pray the Our Father three times a day. It replaced the 'Eighteen Benedictions' which formed part of a faithful Jew's prayer. Still today the Our Father remains an essential part of our liturgical life and prayer. St John Chrysostom said: 'The Lord teaches us to make prayer in common for all our brethren. For he did not say "My Father" who art in heaven, but "Our Father", offering petitions for the common body.' We can only discover the true meaning of the Our Father within 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 kind of knocking on the door of the 'Banquet of the Kingdom' as we anticipate receiving the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Our Father also expresses our hoping and longing for the return of Christ. For since Christ's Ascension Jesus' return in glory has been imminent. When we pray the Our Father we are confessing our faith in God's goodness and eternal love but also professing and witnessing to our confidence that we are truly children of God upon whom the Father has lavished his love and mercy. To know God as Father is a remarkable grace and blessing. We sometimes forget that 'flesh and blood' cannot reveal God as Father – we perceive this truth not through human reason alone but through faith, through the grace of revelation.

Praise be to the Father, the Lord of heaven and earth, whom we are privileged to call 'Abba', 'Father', the God of compassion, mercy and forgiveness.

Galatians 2:1-2, 7-14 • Psalm 116(117)

Luke 11:1-4

Thursday 9 October

Luke 11:5-13

Prayer is not for the faint-hearted: it is often difficult and challenging. If prayer were easy, everyone would be doing it. Well, actually prayer is a lot easier when we need something, when we are desperate and literally on our knees. Then it comes to us very easily and naturally. When caught up in a difficult or life-threatening situation, people often say, 'I am not religious but I have never prayed so hard in all my life.'

Jesus' teaching on prayer is one of Christianity's best-kept secrets. We are familiar with the Our Father and recognize it as the supreme prayer (as we saw yesterday). However, today's reading reminds us that Jesus had much more to say about prayer. At the heart of this teaching, which is unique to Luke's Gospel, is the idea of approaching God with boldness and confidence in his goodness and providence.

Imagine the scenario Jesus paints for us. For a man to wake his neighbour at midnight to ask him for help in providing for his guests, that neighbour would have to be a pretty good friend. It is hard not to admire the petitioner for his sheer boldness, almost recklessness. He doesn't really care what his friend will think of him, or perhaps he just knows that his friend loves him and will help him – all he has to do is wake him up. The God we approach is not asleep and, like a father, he is responsive to our needs, wants and intercessions.

What the Lord is addressing in his teaching is an attitude of heart: the way we approach God, the way we approach prayer. We have developed a kind of false humility in these matters. The problem is not that we don't approach God: it is that we are not bold or confident enough in our approach. We don't even tend to think of this as being wrong or sinful: actually we regard it as a kind of virtue and strength. We don't want to be too presumptuous or to overstep the mark. Our approach is one of caution, reserve and limitation. Perhaps we fear being disappointed. That is why we need to pray three things: Lord, teach me to pray; Lord, increase my faith; Lord, I repent of my unbelief.

Lord, teach me to ask and to believe I will receive; to seek and to believe I will receive; to knock and to be expectant that the door will be opened.

Galatians 3:1-5 • Luke 1:69-75

Luke 11:5-13

Friday 10 October

Luke 11:15-26

Jesus spoke a lot about the devil, Satan or Beelzebub. And as a matter of fact so does Pope Francis, who seems acutely aware of the evil one and his nefarious ways. It seems that from the beginning the Lord was keen to expose the devil and his schemes. It is impossible to read the New Testament without having to grapple with the existence of personified evil. Most people, believers or not, recognize the reality of evil. Its existence and manifestation confronts at all turns – be it the bombing of the Twin Towers on 9/11, the murderous campaign of a serial killer or the sexual abuse of a child. Evil is evil – we recognize it and recoil from it.

The intellectual giant C.S. Lewis pointed out that there are two equal and opposite errors we can fall into regarding the devil: the first is to be preoccupied with him excessively, the second is not to think about him at all. The vast majority of us fall into the latter category. Why is this, since it is impossible to read the Gospels without confronting the dramatic nature of Jesus' deliverance ministry? Nowadays we probably put many expressions of demon possession down to epilepsy or undiagnosed mental illness – and rightly so. Nevertheless, in recognition of the existence of demons and their continued impact on human beings today, most dioceses have an exorcist. We also partake in a rite of exorcism whenever we renew our baptismal promises.

Pope Francis, who is keen that we have a lively sense of both God and the demonic realm, told worshippers recently:

We have a temptation that grows: it grows and infects others. For example, let's look at gossip: I'm a bit envious of this or that person and at first I'm just envious inside and I need to share it and go to another person and say: "But have you seen that person?"...and this gossip tries to grow and infects another and another...This is the way gossip works and all of us have been tempted to gossip...I too have been tempted to gossip! It's a daily temptation. And it begins in this way, discreetly, like a trickle of water. It grows by infecting others and in the end it justifies itself...But look out because the devil is present! The devil is here...even in the 21st century! And we mustn't be naïve, right? We must learn from the Gospel how to fight against Satan.

Galatians 3:7-14 • Psalm 110(111):1-6

Luke 11:15-26

Saturday 11 October

Luke 11:27-28

Good goods come in small parcels, right? Today's Gospel is only two verses long. Not much to go on there you might think. But you would be wrong! Depth beyond depth, treasure beyond treasure, riches beyond riches.

The woman who cried out, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you' (v. 27 NIV) could never have realized the significance of her words, but, indeed, blessed for all generations would be the woman who gave Jesus birth and nursed him (Luke 1:48). Jesus seized this moment to teach about where the true source of blessedness is to be found: in verse 28 we discover that the blessed are those who hear God's word and obey it. This is tantamount to a Christian formula: blessedness = hear God's word and obey it. Essentially this is what being a disciple of Jesus Christ is all about.

When all is said and done, the essence of the Christian life is to be blessed and holy. And we set about being holy and blessed by learning to obey God. But how do we obey God? We obey God by learning to hear his voice. For we cannot obey or follow that which we do not hear or understand. The question then is how clearly or well do we hear God speak to us and, unpacking that question further, what kinds of things does God call us to hear and obey?

We can be sure of a number of things that God says to us. As one example, God says to each one of us, 'Be joyful today.' We don't like to think of joy as a command but it is. God wants us to find a deep and lasting joy in our relationship with him. As another, God says, 'Live the Sermon on the Mount; put into practice the Beatitudes.' We know this because Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with these words: 'Every one...who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock' (Matt. 7:24). If we listen and obey, our heavenly Father promises us that we will know the joy of heaven and witness to life to the full!

Lord, help me to make the decision to set aside even a small amount of time to spend with you, so that your love will have a chance to penetrate my life more deeply.

Galatians 3:22-29 • Psalm 104(105):2-7

Luke 11:27-28

Sunday 12 October

(A) Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Matthew 22:1-14

The kingdom of heaven is compared to a wedding feast that a king gives for his son. However, the special guests he invites refuse to come. A second invitation receives the same response and the invited guests even murder the messengers. So 'the king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city' (v. 7). Then the king sends his servants out onto the streets to invite anyone they find. They collect people from anywhere and everywhere until the wedding hall is filled with guests.

The main points of the parable are clear. The king represents God. He was the one who sent Jesus. The wedding feast represents salvation, which will be an occasion of great joy. The first people invited are the people of Israel. The invitation is a simple one: 'everything is ready; come...' (v. 4). Israel is offered God's grace in the Lord Jesus Christ, but the invitation is rejected and despised. The ill-treatment of the servants represents Jewish persecution of preachers and prophets. The anger of the king is a hint of the coming fall of Jerusalem. The second invitation is the gospel as it goes out to the Gentiles. God offers his salvation first to his Chosen People, but if they will not receive it, God will turn to those whom everybody despises! The Gentiles will be powerfully brought into the kingdom of God.

What is interesting about the parable is, however, that it does not end there. Attendance at the banquet is insufficient in and of itself. Something else is needed. Seeing a man who is not dressed in proper wedding attire, the king questions him in rather a cool manner, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' (v. 12). When the man is unable to answer, the king has him ejected from the banquet. The punch line of the parable is sobering: 'many are called, but few are chosen' (v. 14). The wedding clothes signify the grace of our baptism – baptism is both the gateway to the Christian life and empowers us to live a life of grace. We have been invited to the wedding feast but we must respond to the call of our vocation to live a holy life, day by day.

Lord, today may I put on the garment of salvation and remind myself of the great grace of baptism with which we are clothed.

Isaiah 25:6-10 • Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20

Matthew 22:1-14

Monday 13 October

Luke 11:29-32

We do not live by faith alone: we live also by reason. If reason does not inform faith, it veers into superstition and becomes fanciful. The Christian faith is rooted in historical fact; Jewish and Roman historians documented Jesus' existence. Nevertheless, the cry of a sceptical humanity from the beginning has been, 'Prove it' or 'Give us a sign, some evidence to support your claim.' Jesus did perform miracles, he did reveal himself through his works and miracles, but ultimately, as he makes clear in our reading today, he himself is the sign.

Jesus compares himself to Jonah, at whose coming the Ninevites reformed their lives (Jon. 3:5). Jesus, like Jonah, had a message of salvation. The Queen of Sheba travelled to Israel to investigate the rumours of Solomon's wealth and wisdom (1 Kgs. 10:1-13). So open to God's will and plan was she that she journeyed over land and sea in her quest for the truth. These pagans were more open to God's work among them than Jesus' own people. Among them was one greater even than Solomon but they refused to recognize him.

Jesus' teaching constantly probes our attitudes and our heart. One of the problems of the Christian life is that we can grow dull, cold-hearted and indifferent. Parish priests can grow weary and reluctant to embrace a new movement of the Spirit in their midst; lay people can grow self-righteous and complacent – confident of their own religious attendance and duties. We can all make our own pronouncements about who is open to God and who is not. But the Spirit doesn't work like this: God's Spirit is at work all the time in everyone. He leads us to repentance, conversion of heart and a change of life. This work of the Spirit will continue until the day we die.

The sign of Jonah – his 'entombment' for three days in the belly of the whale and his coming back to life again – is the sign of the resurrection. This is God's ultimate sign of his power and victory, and its light and truth will always attract and speak to the weary, the downtrodden and those seeking an authentic and meaningful relationship with God.

Lord, teach me to have an attitude of heart which is quick to confess my sin, eager to discern your will and ready to take up my cross and follow you.

Galatians 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1 • Psalm 112(113):1-7

Luke 11:29-32

Tuesday 14 October

Luke 11:37-41

The challenging thing about the Pharisees – and indeed about us, too – is that they were doing their best to follow God, but they were going off course. So blinded were they by their own sense of self-righteousness that they fundamentally misunderstood God and the spiritual life. But isn't this true of all of us? We are all prone to self-righteousness and often fundamentally misunderstand God.

On this occasion the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dine with him was 'astonished' that Jesus did not wash his hands before eating (v. 38). At the heart of the Pharisees' problem was an emphasis on the external and not the internal – the attitudes of the heart. The word 'Pharisee' comes from an Aramaic word meaning to 'divide' or 'separate': hence a Pharisee was someone 'separated from sin'. The Pharisees' religious observances, rules and duties gave them a sense of their own importance; they had lost sight of the need to rely upon the mercy and forgiveness of God.

We need to guard against the sin of the Pharisees by asking the Holy Spirit to grant us the gift of self-knowledge and self-awareness. The more focused we are on God, the less focused we will be on ourselves and the clearer our understanding will be of what our prayer to God should be every day: not, 'I thank you, God, that I am unlike others' but rather, 'God, have mercy upon me a sinner.'

So when we read today's Gospel we should extend a measure of compassion and kindness towards the Pharisees. They were good and devout men, but they had lost their way and therefore ended up rejecting the very Saviour for whom they were waiting. In so doing they rejected the plan of the God they worshipped and served.

There is a way in which the liturgy invites us to put ourselves in the shoes of these Pharisees and let Jesus' words to them speak to our hearts also. Recognizing that we are making the same mistake as they did will lead us to freedom and growth. For make no mistake, Jesus loved the Pharisees and wanted them, as he wants us, to repent and turn back to God.

Lord, grant me the gift of repentance leading unto life; grant me the gift of self-knowledge leading unto freedom. May I move and walk and have my being in the love and mercy of the Father.

Galatians 5:1-6 • Psalm 118(119):41-48

Luke 11:37-41

Wednesday 15 October

Luke 11:42-46 • St Teresa of Jesus (Avila) (Memorial)

Many years ago it used to be the practice for parishes to publish in their newsletter a list of those who had given the most through the year. The few rich, wealthy professionals – the doctor or the solicitor or the architect or the wealthy landowner – would be at the very top of the list while the poor farm workers – the majority – who had given so generously from their meagre earnings were placed at the bottom. Such a practice was clearly not in the spirit of the gospel! In the same token nowadays we have benefactors of all kinds of church-related projects seeking to have the best seats at banquets, their picture taken with a leading prelate, and plaques put up in their honour or wings of schools or hospitals named after them. Those who don't seek this kind of acclaim tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

Not much has changed over the centuries. In Jesus' day it was the Pharisees who revelled in their status as a religious elite. Interestingly, they were prone to insist on the best seats in the synagogue and were rather partial to being greeted, one can only assume in a rather grandiose way, in the market-place as they walked through (v. 43). Jesus gave them a reality check; he told them the honest truth and hit them where it really hurt. But the reason he did so was because he loved them profoundly. When he later wept over Jerusalem, on his way to his Passion, it was precisely his fellow Jews whom he was weeping over (Luke 19:41). When we really love someone, it hurts us to see them trapped in blindness and deception.

And that was the problem: the Pharisees were literally blinded by their perception of their own righteousness and devotion to God. They didn't understand or had lost sight of the fact that God looks at the heart. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus lamented that 'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me' (Matt. 15:8). Religion and faith have little to do with being powerful people, enjoying pride of place, lording it over others or appearing to be what we are not. Faith in God the Father is about being children of God, humbled by repentance but overwhelmed by the lavish mercy and forgiveness of God.

Lord, have mercy on me a sinner; lead me in the way of humility and salvation.

Galatians 5:18-25 • Psalm 1:1-4, 6

Luke 11:42-46

Thursday 16 October

Luke 11:47-54

Leading God's people is a serious responsibility. We should pray and intercede for those entrusted with this task: the Pope, the cardinals, the bishops, the priests, the deacons and lay people. We should pray that they would be those who proclaim Jesus and his teaching and lead us to him. This is the way of the gospel, and it is the gospel which gives us light and life.

Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees in the form of a number of 'woes' pronounced against them, shows how important it is to lead God's people in the way of truth and righteousness. Although the Pharisees had built 'tombs for the prophets' (thereby showing them great respect), they rejected the very One the prophets pointed to.

The Pharisees' rejection of Jesus meant that they had taken the key to knowledge away from the people (v. 52). They refused to accept Jesus and, in so doing, hindered others from believing in him. They themselves had become the stumbling block to others coming to know God. Their stewardship of the grace they had received was not bringing people life but, in fact, was doing the very opposite and leading them away from the life of Christ.

We believe that it is precisely in studying, reflecting, pondering and praying on the Word of God that we are all equipped to do the work God wants us to do. 'The best guide you can find to the correct path is the serious study of the Bible. There we can find rules for the conduct of our life and, in the lives of great figures, living images of a life with God whose actions we are encouraged to copy. Each person can concentrate on the area where they feel themselves to be lacking and find, as in a hospital, a cure for their particular trouble' (St John Chrysostom).

Lord Jesus, teach me not to lead others astray either in what I say and do or in what I teach. May I always proclaim you as the Way, the Truth and the Life and your Church as holding the key to knowledge, which is you, the Lord of Life, Christ the King.

Ephesians 1:1-10 • Psalm 97(98):1-6

Luke 11:47-54

Friday 17 October

Luke 12:1-7 • St Ignatius of Antioch (Memorial)

We can forgive people many weaknesses, mistakes and sins but there is something about the sin of hypocrisy which we find very difficult, even impossible, to forgive (although, of course, nothing is actually unforgivable). A priest or preacher who teaches his people that they shouldn't get drunk or commit adultery but is subsequently exposed as a drunk or adulterer is hard to bear. And so is a professor or teacher who insists that his students don't plagiarize because it is dishonest but is later found to be plagiarizing himself.

This kind of behaviour sticks in the throat, and if it is exposed by the national media, there is no mercy – no one likes a hypocrite. Our word 'hypocrisy' derives from the Greek hypokrisis meaning literally 'play acting', 'acting out' or 'feigning'. In *Paradise Lost* the poet John Milton wrote: 'For neither man nor angel can discern hypocrisy, the only evil that walks invisible, except to God alone.'

The sin of hypocrisy may not be discerned by man or angel and may indeed 'walk invisible' but Jesus was quick to expose it and bring it into the light. The problem with hypocrites is that they imagine that their private thoughts and actions are not seen by God when, of course, he sees everything. They lose sight of this fundamental truth and behave as if they act alone and with immunity but this is self-deceptive and dishonest. Before we become too indignant, however, the truth – and the truth can be hard to bear – is that there is something of the hypocrite in us all. We are all prone to self-deception and certainly most human beings have weaknesses, foibles and peccadilloes which remain hidden from others.

A good way to understand hypocrisy is that it is a form of lying – the hypocrite is lying to himself and others. As St John Climacus once reflected: 'Hypocrisy is the mother of lying and frequently its cause. Some would argue that hypocrisy is nothing other than a meditation on falsehood, that it is the inventor of falsehood, laced with lies.' God wants us to walk in the truth and live by the truth for when we do this, unlike the hypocrite who is really a prisoner of his own self-deceit, we are free.

'Hypocrisy is born of self-conceit, and self-conceit is contrary to being poor in spirit.' (St Gregory Palamas)

Ephesians 1:11-14 • Psalm 32(33):1-5, 12-13

Luke 12:1-7

Saturday 18 October

(Feast) St Luke • Luke 10:1-9

As a faith Christianity is fundamentally outward-looking and focused very much on winning hearts and minds to follow Christ. Nowadays it is much more politically correct to suggest that Christianity is about serving others and being nice than about people being sent out to preach, teach and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but this is exactly what we see Jesus doing in today's Gospel passage. We are, it has to be said, much more comfortable taking the tolerant and easy-going view, 'You believe what you like, we'll believe what we like, and we'll get on.'

A priest in a senior position within his diocese liked to say that he didn't 'do religion', the suggestion being that 'doing religion' was to do with God and Jesus and he was far too busy doing administrative and other such important tasks! The problem is that these laissez-faire attitudes fly in the face of the gospel message and the *raison d'être* of the Church, which is to evangelize and win souls for Christ.

It's all very well pointing this out but the question is how do we evangelize and win souls for Christ? There are, of course, many different ways, but one way is to encourage people to read the New Testament, particularly one of the Gospels. We at Bible Alive are confident in making the following proposal: we believe that if you give somebody a Gospel of Luke and encourage them to read it, or read parts of it with them, especially those parts only found in his account (e.g. the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son), they will be changed by the experience. It is amazing what the Holy Spirit can do in the life of a person who opens themselves up to the Word of God.

St Luke, who came from Antioch in Syria, was a doctor by training and a gifted historian and storyteller. His Gospel is a reliable and trustworthy account of the life of Jesus and his account of the early Church in the Book of Acts reads like an action-packed thriller. We encourage you today, on his feast-day, to set aside time to read some of his Gospel: it will lift your spirits, give you hope and move you to share the Good News.

Father God, we praise and thank you for St Luke's true and trustworthy account of Jesus' life, mission and teaching.

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

Luke 10:1-9

Sunday 19 October

Matthew 22:15-21 • Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

The Pharisees were ardent nationalists opposed to Roman rule and occupation. The Herodians, on the other hand, supported the Herods, who were puppet rulers for the Romans. However, the two parties normally at loggerheads were united in their common purpose of trying to catch Jesus out in order to expose and trap him. Their approach was as old as the hills: first they tried to ingratiate themselves to the Lord with flattery and then they moved in with their supposedly knock-out question: 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?' (v. 17). The stakes were high because if Jesus answered 'No', the Herodians would report him for treason, the penalty for which was death. But if he answered 'Yes', the Pharisees would denounce him to their people as disloyal and not a true Israelite.

Neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians understood whom they were dealing with. They were no match for the Lord of Wisdom. The denarius was a Roman coin made of silver. On one side was the portrait of the Emperor Tiberius and on the other the inscription in Latin: 'Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus'. The coin was issued by Caesar and was used to pay tax to him. In reply to his opponents' question Jesus utters words which speak down the centuries into every human heart and into every political reality: 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (v. 21). The state makes its demands on us and we are called, as good citizens, to pay our taxes, abide by the laws and contribute as best we can to the welfare of the state.

However, as accountable as we all are as citizens of our country, we are ultimately answerable to a higher power, a higher authority, to God and his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We must strive to be, as St Thomas More famously said, 'the King's good servant, but God's first'. This is especially important today in the face of government policy which stamps on the rights of the unborn child, ignores the cry for religious freedom and rides roughshod over conscience, because although citizens of the world we are first and foremost citizens of the kingdom of God, sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father.

'The clearness of my conscience has made my heart leap for joy.' (St Thomas More)

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6 • Psalm 95(96):1-10

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 • Matthew 22:15-21

Monday 20 October

Luke 12:13-21

The Torah laid down the rule that an elder son should receive double the inheritance of a younger one (see Deut. 21:17). Not surprisingly this led to all manner of disputes, which were typically taken to the rabbi to be sorted out. All we know about the man who asks Jesus for help in today's Gospel is that he has come into an inheritance and his elder brother is hoping to get twice the amount. He pleads with the Lord to get involved. Jesus is, however, quick to set him straight, 'Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?' (v. 14), seizing the opportunity afforded by the brief exchange to present a parable which goes to the heart of the matter of earthly riches versus heavenly riches.

The rich man in the parable has tunnel vision. He is not, we can fairly assume, a reflective or deep thinker: he lives for the moment, grabs what he can and thinks only of himself. As a result he has failed to understand one of life's fundamental and essential lessons, which is that life on earth is very brief and the one thing that is absolutely certain is that we cannot take our earthly riches with us. He is regarded by God as a fool (v. 20).

God does not want us to hoard our material wealth: he wants us to be generous and kind with it. So many of our readers are generous and make donations to our work with prisoners (International Prison Outreach) and missionaries all over the world (International Faith Outreach) by helping us to provide them with faith resources (subscriptions to Bible Alive, Bibles, books and so on). It is just this impulse to share and help others that the rich fool lacked.

'When we have money, we lose contact with God...What can we do with too much money? Put it in the bank? We must never get into the habit of being preoccupied with the future. There is no reason to be preoccupied with it: God is there. When the desire for money comes, with it comes the desire for the things money can provide: superfluous objects, beautiful rooms, luxurious food on our table, more clothes, admirers, etc. Our needs increase, and, because one thing leads to another, the consequence is endless dissatisfaction. God gives riches, and it is our duty to share them with those who are less favoured.' (Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

Ephesians 2:1-10 • Psalm 99(100)

Luke 12:13-21

Tuesday 21 October

Luke 12:35-38

Time and time again in his teaching Jesus urges his disciples to keep watch, be at the ready and be prepared. But what are we to keep watch, be at the ready and be prepared for? There are two realities which the Christian must live with – one we share with every human being; the second is an exclusively Christian concern which (sadly) many lose sight of.

The first reality for which we all must be prepared is death. We truly do not know the day or the hour when our time will come. We live in a society which is quite at home, at one level anyway, with being saturated with sex and sexual images, on the basis that it's an adult theme, but our society runs for cover at the very mention of another adult theme, namely death.

We don't talk much about it, find it hard to discuss and spend our lives running from it. Death is going to come to us all, no matter who we are, and we must live our lives in the light of this truth. This is not to be morbid or dark or depressing: it's a fact of life. We need to learn from the psalmist who, many centuries ago, prayed, 'So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom' (Ps. 90:12).

The second reality the Christian needs to be ready for is the return of Christ. But how many Christians are? How many give it even the slightest thought? It is, however, a vital truth of our faith and actually at the heart of every Eucharistic celebration. Since the beginning the prayer of the Church has always been, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.' No one knows when the Lord will return – only the Father knows (see Matt. 24:36).

What we do know, however, is that we are living in the final age of the world, the age of the Church, the 'last hour', and the renewal of the world is irrevocably underway. Since the ascension of Jesus into glory at the right hand of his Father, his second coming has been imminent (see Catechism of the Catholic Church 673). We must not grow tired or weary and we must not lose heart, but rather remain alert, keep watch and be prepared for our own death and the Lord's return.

'Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.'

Ephesians 2:12-22 • Psalm 84(85):9-14

Luke 12:35-38

Wednesday 22 October

Luke 12:39-48

When did you last hear a sermon or homily on the second coming of Christ? Although a central tenant of our faith, it is seldom referred to nowadays and many are reluctant to discuss it, preach about it or teach it, and rarely are we exhorted to pray for it, prepare for it and watch out for it! Indeed, as we touched on in yesterday's reflection, although the continual prayer of the Church is, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come', as individual Christians we are more likely to pray, 'Not just yet, Lord, not just yet!'

Why this reluctance and reticence? Why this discomfort and unwillingness to preach and proclaim this vital truth of Christian revelation? It is hard to know the answer exactly but clearly there has always been a genuine concern regarding the dangers of people focusing on the detail of Jesus' return – the when and the where – as opposed to simply being content in the knowledge that we cannot know these things but are called nevertheless to pray ardently for it and long for it! What we must not do is avoid the issue or pretend that Jesus does not address it explicitly, because he does, as illustrated in today's Gospel: 'You also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour' (v. 40).

The parable of the Wise Manager contrasts the behaviour of a wise and faithful manager, who proves his trustworthiness and faithfulness, with an unwise and foolish one who deceives himself into believing that his master's delay is an excuse to let his guard down and behave badly. A clear message of the parable is that God wants us to be loyal, faithful and obedient, and live as those who have a conscious and lively sense of Jesus' return in glory. We need both to re-awaken and re-discover this sense of the second coming of Jesus within and ask the Spirit to move us to long for it with deep sighs and groans. We do not know how to pray for this but the Spirit does, and he will help us. The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

'We preach not one coming only of Christ, but a second also, far more glorious than the first. The first revealed the meaning of his patient endurance; the second brings with it the crown of the divine kingdom.' (St Cyril of Jerusalem)

Ephesians 3:2-12 • Isaiah 12:2-6

Luke 12:39-48

Thursday 23 October

Luke 12:49-53

The Fast Show, a BBC comedy show famed for its running gags, catchphrases and hilarious characters, featured a sketch in which some young people chatting at a party were contrasted with an earnest young Christian woman seemingly pouring cold water on the party spirit by interjecting into the conversation such comments as, 'I had a great day today because I know that Jesus has forgiven me my sin' and 'The thing I always ask is what Jesus would have done'. She was made to look weird and out of place among her peers, and was ostracized and mocked (of course, all behind her back). The goal of these comedy writers was to capture the mood of the day (the zeitgeist), which is prone to mocking and ridiculing Christians for their faith.

The truth is that believing in Jesus and following his way in today's society invites ridicule and rejection. We are, without doubt, living in a secular society which is more comfortable without God than with God and wants to push religion and faith to the margins, ignoring the moral compass faith offers not just to us as individuals but to governments, society and culture.

Jesus brought fire to the earth – the fire of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit at work in us works against the spirit of the world and therefore inevitably causes division – and not just amongst those with whom we interact in society, but amongst our closest family as well. The Christian, like his or her Master, will always be a sign of contradiction.

As our world and society become more and more secular, Christians will need great courage to resist and stand firm. This will require a form of martyrdom – and perhaps, for some, even true martyrdom. These words from the great Scripture scholar Origen are as relevant today as they were in the second century: 'Let us enter the contest to win perfectly not only outward martyrdom, but also the martyrdom that is in secret, so that we too may utter the apostolic cry, "For this is our boast, the martyrdom of our conscience that we have believed in the world with holiness and godly sincerity."'

Father, you sent your Son to bring fire to the earth – the fire of holiness, truth and goodness. May I know the peace of Christ, which is the fruit of a good conscience and of standing firm in faith.

Ephesians 3:14-21 • Psalm 32(33):1-5, 11-12, 18-19

Luke 12:49-53

Friday 24 October

Luke 12:54-59

A people dependent upon agriculture, fishing and livestock were adept, by necessity, at interpreting weather systems. Thus it was common knowledge in first-century Palestine that the winds from the west came from the Mediterranean Sea and brought rain and storms. In contrast the warmer wind from the south came from the desert and carried with it the hot weather.

Jesus makes the point that his contemporaries knew how to interpret the natural world but not the spiritual one unfolding before their very eyes. They did not realize or grasp that they were living through and witnessing events that would transform the world for ever and that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah – God’s secret kept hidden but pointed to by the prophets of Israel and now revealed. They could interpret the weather – and thus make provision for the practical aspects of their lives – but not the signs of the times – and thus make wise provision in spiritual matters. Clearly exasperated by them, Jesus exclaims: ‘You hypocrites!...[W]hy do you not know how to interpret the present time?’ (v. 56).

What are the signs of the times that we are living through today? How do we judge them? What is happening today that impacts our spiritual lives and the living out of the gospel? The positive signs of our times are many: an increasing interest in the spiritual realm, a new awareness of the need to reach out and help the poor and marginalized around the world, and a growing dissatisfaction with values which seek only self-promotion and self-gratification. The negative signs of our times are many also: the rise of materialism, consumerism, moral relativism, the rejection of the value of human life and the ever-growing secular agenda. Have we got our spiritual eyes open?

One of the great prophets of our age, Pope Paul VI, said:

‘The split between the Gospel and 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)

Ephesians 4:1-6 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Luke 12:54-59

Saturday 25 October

Luke 13:1-9 • Six Welsh Martyrs (Feast in Wales only)

Natural or man-made disasters invite a range of profound theological and philosophical questions. The most obvious one is: Why? Others touch on issues like: Where was God? Why did it happen? Why does God allow such terrible things to happen? When the aeroplanes crashed into the World Trade Center Towers killing over 3,000 people on 9/11 or the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 was brought down in July this year, many voiced questions such as these. When the tsunamis hit south-east Asia on Boxing Day 2004 killing over 300,000, the world was justified in asking, 'Why?'

In today's Gospel Jesus is challenged by the crowd about recent tragedies in Israel. The view of the ancient world was that indiscriminate and sudden disaster was a sign of God's displeasure and judgement. Pilate had killed a number of Galileans, mixing their blood with the temple sacrifices. This cruel dictator thought nothing of having people killed while offering sacrifices in the temple (brutal acts, brutal times). Surely the terrible deaths of these Galileans must be a sign of judgement? Jesus refers the crowd to another tragedy in the region in which eighteen workmen had been crushed when a tower had collapsed.

Our forefathers assumed that terrible catastrophes befell those who were rebellious, sinful and enemies of God (Job 4:7; 22:5). Jesus points out the error of this way of thinking by asking the simple question: 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus?' (v. 2). The Lord doesn't wait for a reply but answers the question for them: 'I tell you, No.' He then expresses a central teaching of Christian faith: the need to repent and believe the gospel. We are all equally fallen, we all share in original sin, we all need God's grace and we must all commit ourselves to walking as repentant pilgrims as we journey through life. We are not called to judge: we don't know why some die in terrible accidents and others in their sleep. There is a profound mystery to life which we must learn to revere and respect. The teaching of Jesus, however, is clear: every one of us must understand our need to turn away from sin, embrace the gospel and produce fruit for the kingdom.

Lord Jesus, I proclaim that I will put on the garment of repentance. I am not ashamed to confess my utter need of God's grace and mercy.

Ephesians 4:7-16 • Psalm 121(122):1-5 • Luke 13:1-9

(In Wales: Heb 11:33-40 • Ps 15(16):1-2, 5-11 • Jn 12:24-26)

Sunday 26 October

(A) Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Matthew 22:34-40

Jesus expressed the heart of the Ten Commandments when he said: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (vv. 37-39). He brought together the first three of the Ten Commandments under his first commandment to love God, and the remaining seven commandments under his second commandment to love our neighbour. He also declared that this was the heart of the teaching of the law and the prophets (v. 40). Why does God require us to love not only him but also our neighbour?

God has revealed himself to us as 'a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exod. 34:6). He has shown mercy toward us by forgiving us our sins, reconciling us to himself and adopting us as his beloved children. Because of the mercy and kindness that he has bestowed upon us, he demands that we, in our turn, respond to him with love, and with heartfelt appreciation and gratitude for all that he has done for us.

But since God the Father has shown mercy to every single person that he has created, he also requires that we do not withhold mercy and kindness from his children, since they are our brothers and sisters. If we really understand what God has done for us all, then we are compelled to imitate God's kindness and mercy toward all people. If we fail to show mercy and kindness, then our hearts remain hardened, revealing that we have not understood what God has done for us. Furthermore, if we are harsh with one another, then God's anger will blaze out against us (Exod. 22:21-24). The servant who owed his master a great deal of money and was released from his debt was himself bound to release his fellow servant from the very small debt that he owed him. Because he refused to release his fellow servant, his master's anger blazed out against him (Matt. 18:23-35). In the same way, we will provoke God's anger if we lack mercy toward our neighbour.

Lord Jesus, help me to live out the heart of the commandments by loving God and my neighbour to the best of my ability.

Exodus 22:20-26 • Psalm 17(18):2-4, 47, 51

1 Thessalonians 1:5-10 • Matthew 22:34-40

Monday 27 October

Luke 13:10-17

When we read the Bible, our minds and hearts touch another world. We are given a window into God's world and our world is turned upside down. Take today's incident. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue when he saw a woman who was permanently bent over. Luke informs us that she had suffered this condition for eighteen years. The Lord, clearly moved by her plight, invites her over to him and declares: 'Woman, you are freed from your infirmity' (v. 12). He then lays his hands on her and she straightens up and praises God (v. 13). What a wonderful intervention of God into our world! We should marvel at Jesus' power to heal and restore because it highlights the inbreaking of God's reign into our world and is a sign of future glory when all sickness and death will be no more.

Do you believe in miracles? Do you expect God to intervene in our world? Or do you think that such miracles don't happen in our modern, sophisticated, scientific world? Actually disciples of Christ don't have an option. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is beautifully crisp and clear on the matter:

By following Jesus his disciples acquire a new outlook on illness and the sick. Jesus associates them with his own life of poverty and service. He makes them share in his ministry of compassion and healing: "So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them." The risen Lord renews this mission ("In my name they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover") and confirms it through the signs that the Church performs by invoking his name. These signs demonstrate in a special way that Jesus is truly "God who saves". (paras. 1506-1507)

We must guard against the hardened attitude which resists God's intention to heal and restore. Otherwise, we can be rather like the synagogue ruler we encounter in today's reading. He cannot bring himself to praise God for the wonderful healing he has just witnessed, but rather wants to complain and criticize. The Lord humiliates his critics by exposing their cruelty and legalism – they would rather break the Sabbath for an animal than for a human being.

Lord Jesus, I believe in miracles and praise God for the sacraments through which your grace, mercy and power are given.

Ephesians 4:32–5:8 • Psalm 1:1-6

Luke 13:10-17

Tuesday 28 October

(Feast) SS Simon and Jude • Luke 6:12-19

We don't tend to spend the night in prayer up a mountain before making important decisions! Jesus did, though, and one such occasion was the night before he chose the twelve disciples. The motto here of course is: big decision – big prayer. We don't know how Jesus prayed on the mountain but we can be sure that he praised his Father, that he acknowledged him as the Lord and the Creator, and gave him glory and honour. Jesus' choice was perfect because the Twelve went on to transform the world – they set the world alight with their faith and witness. They demonstrate that God's grace can take hold of anybody and mould them into effective instruments of the gospel.

Prayer helps us to see and understand things differently. Prayer offers us light where there would otherwise be darkness. Prayer allows us to receive God's wisdom and guidance so that our minds are not governed by our own views and prejudices. Through prayer we see people differently and understand things from a new and more enlightened angle. Indeed, given what we know about the disciples, Jesus' choice is testimony to the power of God to change and transform. Peter was far from being a rock, James and John were ambitious and fanatical, Matthew's financial dealings were dubious, and Thomas was a sceptic and cynic at heart.

Today we celebrate the feast-day of two other fine apostles: Simon and Jude. Simon was nicknamed 'the Zealot' either because of his zeal for his nation's independence or his passion for the Torah. Tradition has it that he laboured for the gospel in Egypt and Persia and was eventually martyred there. The New Testament refers to Jude only three times (Luke 6:16; John 14:22; Acts 1:13). He must not be confused with other Judes, namely the Galilean revolutionary (Acts 5:37), the owner of a house Paul stayed in (Acts 9:11), the emissary to Antioch (Acts 15:22) and the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). Very little is known about Jude: tradition has it that he served God in Persia and Mesopotamia where he was martyred. A popular devotion has grown up around Jude and he has become the patron saint of hopeless causes – needless to say, many of us invoke his help, protection and intercession.

Jude, patron of hopeless causes, pray for us. Jude, patron of frail humanity, pray for us. Jude, patron of the fraternity of the fallen, pray for us.

Ephesians 2:19-22 • Psalm 18(19):2-5

Luke 6:12-19

Wednesday 29 October

Luke 13:22-30

It is said that the door into the kingdom of heaven is so low that the only way through it is on our knees! Jesus has some very interesting things to say about doors, but we will come to that later. Jesus was asked one of those everlasting and searching questions – you know the type – pertinent, astute and relevant for every age and every generation. The question was not trite, light or shallow but deep, profound and fundamental: ‘Lord, will those who are saved be few?’ (v. 23).

What precipitated this question we do not know. Perhaps the questioner had noticed that many followed Jesus but few became disciples. The Lord’s response is sober and direct: ‘Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able’ (v. 24). We can be unclear in the way we think about salvation. Many people say things about salvation. They say things like: ‘I’ve never hurt anybody’, ‘I’m a good person, I haven’t murdered or committed adultery’, ‘I think I deserve to go to heaven – there are a lot of people far worse than me.’

This kind of attitude is fatally misguided and wrong. As C.S. Lewis so shrewdly observed: ‘We must not suppose that if we succeeded in making everyone nice we should have saved their souls. A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world.’ We need to understand that we cannot save ourselves – we are incapable of making ourselves right with God. Billy Graham was spot-on when he said: ‘There is no more urgent and critical question in life than that of your personal relationship with God and your eternal salvation.’

The gate or door to salvation is Jesus himself (John 10:9). He knocks on the door of our souls (Rev. 3:20) and invites us to acknowledge that he is the Lord. God created us without us but he does not save us without us. How then can we be saved? By turning to Jesus every day, acknowledging our need of him and asking for the grace to live out our vocation.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Way of Salvation, the Truth of Salvation and the Life of Salvation. In following you we find the key to life and we are guided and led by the Light of Life.

Ephesians 6:1-9 • Psalm 144(145):10-14

Luke 13:22-30

Thursday 30 October

Luke 13:31-35

It is an incredible fact that Jesus, who lived such a wonderful and glorious life, doing good, healing the sick, setting people free and restoring lives, was hated and despised by his own people. Perhaps this in itself says a lot about human nature. In today's passage the Pharisees warn him to leave Perea as Herod, who has jurisdiction over the region, wants to kill him. In fact, they too want to kill Jesus because he threatens their position as much as he does Herod's.

The Lord's response to them is robust and brusque. He says in effect: 'You don't frighten me with your threats – I have a mission to complete, and nothing in heaven or on earth can prevent me reaching my goal.' Jesus was always focused on his core mission and destiny: the cross of Calvary. God's plan of salvation from the very beginning involved Israel, his special, chosen and beloved people. Jesus knew that he would be rejected by his own, and this knowledge caused him great anguish and suffering.

The Jewish people are our elder brother in faith – they still pray for the Messiah who they believe is yet to come. Jesus' return is suspended until all of Israel recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and King. We pray that their hardened hearts will soften and join our prayers to those of Peter, who begged his people: 'Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old' (Acts 3:19-21). Paul took up this theme: 'For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?' (Rom. 11:15).

Lord Jesus, we believe that you will come again in glory, power and majesty. We believe that all men and women will bow down before you and confess: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' We pray for all those who reject you or trample on your Word or resist your work of salvation. We ask that your grace and mercy be poured out upon them so that they may receive a grace of revelation and acknowledge you as Lord, King and Messiah.

Ephesians 6:10-20 • Psalm 143(144):1-2, 9-10

Luke 13:31-35

Friday 31 October

Luke 14:1-6

The Pharisees were watching Jesus carefully to see if he would heal someone on the Sabbath, as he had done before. Possibly they had arranged for the man with dropsy to be at the Pharisee's house as a test for Jesus. It was forbidden to do any work on the Sabbath, and healing someone was regarded as work. The Pharisees' attitude was not a healthy one. Rather than being open to what Jesus had to say, they were anxious to catch him out. They cared more about their rules and regulations than about the health of a sick man. They did not rejoice that a man had been healed; they were more concerned about maintaining what they saw as the purity of the Sabbath. In effect they had lost their perspective: when we come to care more about keeping religious regulations than helping our fellow human beings, something has gone wrong with our attitudes.

Jesus had a clearer insight into the Sabbath than the Pharisees. He knew that the heart of religion is to love God and our neighbour, and rules should be there to help this, not hinder it. The purpose of keeping the Sabbath was for people to have a day dedicated to God, but the Pharisees had come to see the rules as an end in themselves. As Jesus said on another such occasion, 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath' (Mark 2:27). He exposed their hypocrisy by pointing out that they would help an ox or an ass that fell into a well on the Sabbath, but resented the healing of a sick man. They refused to be drawn by Jesus' question: 'Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath, or not?' (v. 3). Their silence is deafening (vv. 4, 6). Legalism had hardened their hearts.

Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it (Matt. 5:17). He fulfilled the law by living a life in the power of the Holy Spirit. The grace of our baptism enables us also to live not by the letter but by the spirit of the law. If we allow God into our hearts and minds he will guide us to act out of true love for him and one another, and then our actions will always be in accordance with his will.

Lord Jesus, grant us the wisdom to know what is truly important, and the love to serve you and others in all we do.

Philippians 1:1-11 • Psalm 110(111):1-6

Luke 14:1-6