

Thursday 1 October

Luke 10:1-12 • St Thérèse of the Child Jesus (Lisieux) (Memorial)

By an interesting coincidence, today we are celebrating the memorial of a contemplative nun, St Thérèse, on the day when the Gospel reading records Jesus sending out seventy disciples on their first missionary journey. On the face of it, we are looking at two very different vocations: one a life dedicated to contemplative prayer, the other a life of activity, of preaching the gospel and bringing freedom to those who have been impaired by sickness, sin or even the oppression of the evil one. However, St Thérèse actually thought of herself as a missionary. She was devoted to praying for all those who are engaged in more active mission in the world.

The heart of St Thérèse's spirituality, usually known as 'the little way', is to carry out the very ordinary, everyday tasks of our life as a simple sacrifice of love for God. To perform our responsibilities with love is our way of responding to and returning the love God has for us. St Thérèse said that she wanted to become 'love in the heart of the Church'. We can see that she had a deep understanding of the reality of the Body of Christ. We are so united with one another in Christ that if we ourselves grow in love and holiness, it will increase the love and holiness within the whole Body of Christ. This is a reminder to each one of us that, like St Thérèse, even though we may not be called or chosen to go out into the world with a particular missionary vocation, insofar as we let the love of God motivate our everyday activities, we nevertheless contribute to the great mission of the Church. We also will share St Thérèse's vocation of being 'love in the heart of the Church'.

There is also another exciting dimension to the spirituality of St Thérèse. She was only twenty-four years old when she died! Before dying she said that she wanted 'to spend her heaven doing good on earth'. St Thérèse had a profound understanding of the 'communion of saints'. Saints also have an effect and influence on the whole Church and Body of Christ. In 1927, St Thérèse was named as the principal patroness of all missionaries and of the whole mission of the Church. Let's ask for her intercession for our own life and vocation.

Nehemiah 8:1-12 • Psalm 18(19):8-11

Luke 10:1-12

Friday 2 October

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

We have it from the lips of Jesus himself that each of us has a guardian angel appointed to be our protector and guide during our life on earth (see v. 10). His testimony about the existence of angels reveals something of the greatness of God whose creation includes so much more than the material world. Not only does humankind have a spiritual aspect, but there is a whole realm of spiritual beings, created even before the material universe.

The fact that some of the angels have been given a responsibility towards men and women reveals something of the high regard God has for human beings. While the angels are pure spirits, human beings are of a composite nature – made up of both spirit and flesh. Psalm 8 tells us that God made humankind ‘a little lower than the angels’ (v. 5 KJV) and yet, to the glory of God, the angels perform service towards human beings (Heb. 1:14). Angels are God’s messengers and it is clear from Scripture that their greatest desire is to see God’s plan and purposes fulfilled on earth. This is evident from Jesus’ description of the scene of joy in heaven when a sinner repents of their sins and returns to God (Luke 15:10), and also we are told took place when Jesus ascended into heaven bringing his and our human nature into the very heart of the Trinitarian life.

Blessed John Henry Newman wrote a wonderful poem called *The Dream of Gerontius*, which describes the journey of a soul through the gates of death and into the very presence of God. On the basis of the redemptive work of Christ, the soul receives salvation. Edward Elgar, the great composer and former organist at St George’s Church in Worcester, wrote a magnificent oratorio using the text of this poem. One of the themes that Newman’s words and Elgar’s music highlight is the role that the soul’s guardian angel plays in leading the soul to God’s presence and to salvation. It is difficult not to be moved by the revelation of the love our guardian angel has for us. In Elgar’s work, when the soul is judged to be saved, the angel sings, ‘Alleluia, my work is done!’

‘O 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, to rule and guide. Amen.’

Baruch 1:15-22 • Psalm 78(79):1-9

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

Saturday 3 October

Luke 10:17-24

The reading today from the Gospel is full of joy. The seventy disciples returning from their mission were rejoicing because they saw demons overcome through the power of the name of Jesus. Strangely, Jesus confirmed the authority he had given his disciples over the evil spirits, and yet he said that they were not to rejoice over this, but rather to rejoice over the fact that their names were written in heaven. We also read that ‘At that same hour, he [Jesus] rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...”’ Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!” (vv. 21, 23 NRSV).

Luke is the evangelist or gospel-writer who usually notes when people are filled with joy. Think of the infancy narratives, especially the account of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, when joy fills Elizabeth, the child in her womb and Mary herself. Mary’s joy issues in her great prayer, the Magnificat: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour’ (Luke 1:46-47 NIV). Luke realizes that joy is the result of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In today’s reading, it is Jesus himself who rejoices in the Holy Spirit. His joy also issues in a prayer of blessing the Father.

Perhaps we are being led to understand why Jesus told his disciples to rejoice because their names were written in heaven. Was Jesus really hinting at the grace of the Holy Spirit that was at work in the disciples as they went out on the mission Jesus had given them? The enigmatic phrase ‘your names are written in heaven’ suggests that the disciples have a real link with heaven, ultimately with the Father, just as Jesus himself knows the Father. This thought is confirmed by Jesus’ own words: ‘no one knows...who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him’ (v. 22). Being in a relationship with Jesus and being given, through the Spirit, a share in his mission in the world really means that we are being drawn into the very heart of the life of the Trinity, knowing the Father as Jesus does and knowing the grace of the Holy Spirit. We are indeed blessed!

‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...From now on all generations will call me blessed...’

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

Luke 10:17-24

Sunday 4 October

(B) Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time • Mark 10:2-16

Our Sunday Gospel readings are taken from Mark's Gospel, while the weekday readings are from Luke. So today we interrupt the Lucan sequence and read about the way Jesus handled an attempt by the Pharisees to catch him out by a question on the lawfulness of divorce. Clearly, the law of Moses permitted some form of divorce. Jesus, however, referred them back to God's original plan of creation. In creating human beings male and female, it is evident that, in God's purpose, man and woman are made for each other, for communion in an unbreakable bond. In a real sense, the union of man and woman in marriage reflects the 'image of God'. God also is communion – a union of relationship between the Father and the Son. Over the centuries the Church has come to understand that the love that unites the Father and the Son is no less than the Holy Spirit. By referring back to creation, and to the time before the fall of humankind and the entrance of sin into human relationships, Jesus is also announcing the salvation that he has come to bring about and its effect within the relationship and vocation of marriage.

In a profound way, we can see a link between today's reading and the reading from Luke yesterday, which spoke of our participation in the heavenly life of the Trinity. The work of redemption brought about by Jesus, in which we are given a share through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, has the effect of restoring to humanity the full purpose of God's creation because in Jesus the power of sin and the Fall can be overcome, and because the gift of the Spirit enables us to live again as 'the image of God'. The love and communion that characterizes the relationships within the Trinity can be reflected now within the relationship of marriage.

This profound truth does not automatically transform the marriage relationship so that it is no longer without difficulties and trials. It is, however, a revelation that married people have access to an immense resource. The power of the cross of Jesus can overcome the power of sin, which threatens to break down our relationships. The gift of the Spirit brings into every marriage open to the Spirit the very love of God himself. This gives a whole new meaning to the proclamation from the marriage service 'what God has joined together, let no man put asunder'.

Genesis 2:18-24 • Psalm 127(128)

Hebrews 2:9-11 • Mark 10:2-16

Monday 5 October

Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the best known and most loved of all of Jesus' parables. Few fail to be touched and moved by the image of compassion unexpectedly shown by the unknown Samaritan. Few also fail to desire to imitate this compassion, even though this desire is not always matched by our practice.

But the parable has some hidden depths, which can bring about the very transformation that we desire. Almost inevitably our attention is drawn to the Good Samaritan. We see, equally inevitably, that the man on the road to Jericho represents anyone who might be in need of help and compassion. What is hidden in these images, however, is revealed in a passage from Isaiah – Isaiah 1:1-6. There are particular echoes in the parable of the Good Samaritan that lead us to conclude that when Jesus told his parable, he had this Isaiah text in mind.

In this text, God is speaking about Jerusalem and Judah (the chosen people of God): he declares that his people have turned their backs on him, even though he had formed and nurtured them like a loving parent. As a result, they have become bruised and wounded from head to foot – and, significantly, there is no one to bandage their wounds or pour oil upon them! If we are right in thinking that Jesus had this Isaiah text in mind, then we can identify the man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho – who had turned his back on Jerusalem, the place of the temple, the dwelling place of God, and was headed for what is in fact the lowest point on the earth, Jericho, at the north end of the Dead Sea, 300 meters below sea level! This man represents God's chosen people, Israel, but is also an image of the whole fallen human race, who have become bruised and wounded because of sin and the work of the evil one.

This light given to us from the Old Testament helps us to realize that, in fact, we are also that man on the road to Jericho – each of us damaged and fallen. Now we see, as new revelation, that the unknown outsider, the Samaritan, is Jesus himself. He has lifted us up, bandaged and anointed our wounds, and taken us to the inn, to be taken care of until he returns. We are the recipients of his divine compassion. As we receive it, it can spread to others.

Jonah 1:1–2:1-2, 11 • Jonah 2:3-5, 8

Luke 10:25-37

Tuesday 6 October

Luke 10:38-42

In the light of what we saw yesterday about the deeper meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is significant that today's reading begins with Jesus entering a village, 'where a woman named Martha opened her home to him'. If we understand the parable rightly, we will see that a critical issue is that we receive the divine compassion of the Good Samaritan – Jesus himself, who came to heal our fallen condition. Like Martha, we are also to receive Jesus into our house.

But that is not the whole story. Martha had a sister, named Mary. Mary, we are told, sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching, while Martha was busy – the text says 'distracted' – with much serving. 'Mary', says Jesus, 'has chosen what is better, and it is not to be taken away from her' (v. 42 NIV).

It is, therefore, one thing to receive Jesus into our house; it is another to sit at his feet and listen to his teaching. Jesus was not criticizing Martha's service. Her service came from a generous spirit. And yet she became resentful of her sister, who sat at Jesus' feet. Service needs to be done, but listening to Jesus is a greater priority. In fact, there is no need to oppose one with the other. Both are important. However, it is easy to think that our need to serve excuses us from listening to the Lord's teaching.

There is something about our fallen nature that resists spending time in prayer or reflecting on God's Word. It is precisely this aspect of our fallen condition that Jesus, the Good Samaritan, has come to heal. Martha and Mary both represent fallen humanity, like the man on the road to Jericho. But Mary seems more willing to acknowledge her need and to open her life to the divine compassion of Jesus. We can imagine that the time she spent with Jesus resulted, in the end, in her greater willingness to serve.

Contrary to our normal way of thinking, time given to the Lord in prayer and reading Scripture rarely means that we have less time for our other duties and responsibilities. Often, when we begin our day with prayer, our other tasks are undertaken with a greater sense of doing God's will or of doing the tasks in the power of the Spirit, especially when we commit our whole day into the Lord's hands.

Jonah 3:1-10 • Psalm 129(130):1-8

Luke 10:38-42

Wednesday 7 October

Luke 11:1-4 • Our Lady of the Rosary (Memorial)

Lord, teach us to pray! The disciples had seen Jesus at prayer a number of times. They realized that the prayer of Jesus was not like the prayers (psalms) that they usually prayed. Jesus seemed to experience an intimacy with God and, furthermore, he addressed God as his Father. His message was a proclamation of a new presence of the kingdom of God on earth. His own prayer exemplified that the kingdom of God was present in him. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to share in the same relationship with God that he himself clearly experienced.

Jesus' response to their request was to tell them 'to say this when you pray'. What followed was a somewhat shorter version of 'the Lord's Prayer' than the version to be found in the Gospel of Matthew. It is the fuller Matthean version that is most familiar to us and is the version that has been at the heart of the Church's prayer and liturgy. But in what sense does 'the Lord's Prayer' teach us how to pray? Is it therefore something more than simply a prayer?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that the Lord's Prayer is 'truly the summary of the whole gospel'. It also quotes St Augustine, who wrote: 'Run through all the words of the holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer' (paras. 2761–2). St Thomas Aquinas described the Our Father as 'the most perfect of prayers'.

The Lord's Prayer is Jesus' filial prayer. By saying these words we enter into the same relationship with the Father that Jesus enjoys. The petitions of this prayer express the heart of Jesus' desires and gradually transform our hearts to desire the same things. Praying the Lord's Prayer is only possible because of the reconciliation Jesus won for us through his death and resurrection, and because of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts. As Paul wrote, the Spirit dwelling in us makes us cry out, 'Abba, Father' (see Rom. 8:15).

While it is very easy to say the Our Father almost without thinking of the words, today, let's spend a little more time with each phrase, asking the Holy Spirit to show us their meaning. And let's ask the Spirit to make each petition the actual desire of our heart.

Jonah 4:1-11 • Psalm 85(86):3-10

Luke 11:1-4

Thursday 8 October

Luke 11:5-13

Albert Einstein – who, remember, was a physicist – was once approached by an earnest young student seeking advice on his doctoral dissertation. His rather surprising advice was, ‘Study prayer; we have to find out more about prayer’! We have a problem with prayer, and this problem is that we are nowhere near as adventurous, bold, confident and reckless in our abandon as God wants us to be. On the contrary, we are cautious, conservative, measured and reserved in our approach to God. Our problem is that we haven’t really grasped Jesus’ radical approach to prayer.

Jesus understood that the best way to enable us to digest his radical approach to prayer was by teaching us to pray the Our Father and by giving us parables or stories. The parable of the Midnight Visitor holds true in every age and culture. No one likes being woken in the middle of the night – it isn’t funny and it isn’t clever – and we know that even good friends or close family members would struggle with such an imposition. Be honest: if we interpreted the parable literally, how many of us would wake up our next-door neighbour because we needed three loaves of bread!

Despite the protest from the sleepy-head neighbour, what clinches the man’s success is his boldness – to borrow from our Jewish brothers and sisters, the chutzpah of the man, his sheer nerve. So the moral of the parable is: be as bold as bold can be in prayer! Don’t hold back: step out in faith and approach God with wild abandon and a certain recklessness (just as you would if you needed three loaves of bread in the middle of the night).

We tend to be bolder in prayer when we are desperate, when all else has failed! This is only human. However, today’s parable invites us to cultivate an attitude of boldness and confidence in prayer at all times. If you want to deepen your faith – boldly ask the Lord. If you want to overcome a certain sin or weakness – boldly ask the Lord. If you want to understand a mystery of faith – boldly ask the Lord. Don’t be afraid; don’t hold back; make your own the message of this radical and life-changing parable.

Lord, I ask that I may receive, I seek that I may find, I knock that the door of revelation may be opened to me, and my heart may sing with the joy and gladness of the Lord.

Malachi 3:13-20 • Psalm 1

Luke 11:5-13

Friday 9 October

Luke 11:15-26

In days gone by, if the Church was concerned about a film or a book which they feared might undermine faith, they would caution against Catholics viewing or reading it or even censor it. For example, Cardinal Hume urged Catholics to veto the Monty Python film *The Life of Brian* and likewise, when the film *The Exorcist* went on worldwide release, many bishops advised their parishioners against seeing it. The problem with this kind of censorship is that although it comes from a good place, it can have the opposite effect to the one intended: the caution creates its own curiosity, making what has been censored even harder to resist. The Church no longer has an Index of forbidden books and today, when the film industry is so huge and films are streamed into people's living rooms, this kind of advice is passé.

The interesting thing is that *The Exorcist* is about the power of the Church's sacraments to overwhelm and conquer evil. In the story one of the priests, a trained psychiatrist, believes that much so-called demon possession can be explained by psychiatry. An older priest recognizes the role of medicine in treating psychosis and extremes of behaviour but upholds the reality of evil and of personified evil. This is the position of the Church today: it teaches clearly and unequivocally that an evil being called the 'devil' or 'Satan' exists and through sin this being has 'a certain domination over man' (CCC 407). The Anglican churchman David Watson once said: 'I have seen the manifestation of demonic power in the lives of individuals which would make it very hard for me to deny the existence of evil as an intelligent force.'

Only Christ has overcome the devil and the sign of his victory is the cross. The protection of the cross is the blessing of all baptized believers, but we play a part in resisting temptation and turning to the Lord. In today's Gospel Jesus taught about an evil spirit which seemingly recolonized a demon-possessed man. The battle for control of our minds is waged by the evil one. This is why St Thomas More said: 'Occupy your minds with good thoughts or the enemy will fill them with bad ones.' By clinging to the Lord we prevent the enemy from gaining a foothold in our lives.

Holy Spirit, please teach me to fight Satan with the sword of truth, the shield of righteousness and the armour of prayer.

Joel 1:13-15; 2:1-2 • Psalm 9:2-9, 16

Luke 11:15-26

Saturday 10 October

Luke 11:27-28

The Greek word for 'blessed', makarios, which occurs twice in the exchange between Jesus and the woman in the crowd, literally means 'happy'. For when we are blessed, then we are truly happy. Mary was truly blessed in her role as Theotokos (Mother of God), but we all are truly blessed when we hear God's word and obey it. Mary obeyed God's will supremely when she said 'Yes' to his plan of salvation – that she, although a virgin, would conceive and bear a child. We should resist the idea that this was easy for Mary – she must have suffered as she struggled to understand what God was asking of her.

Discerning God's plan for our lives can be a tricky and time-consuming business but perhaps we go about it in the wrong way. Clearly God can and does speak to some people very directly and very specifically, but, for most of us, it is a case of us grappling with the issue before God in prayer. However, where we can go astray is that we can get bogged down with the detail and lose sight of the bigger vision. In one sense, whether God wants you to be a priest, a religious, a doctor, a barber or a candlestick maker is neither here nor there. Over and above a specific vocation God wants us to be joyful, enthusiastic, happy children of God. God's will for us is that we have a sure and sound grasp of his love not only for us personally but also for every single human person.

In this sense, discerning God's will is not as difficult as we think. God's will is that we bear witness to a life of love. God's will is that we serve others without counting the cost. God's will is that we cultivate a merciful heart, rooted in a living sense of the debt of sin we have been forgiven. It is also helpful if we bear in mind the following simple truths: there is nothing however small or apparently indifferent which has not been ordained or permitted by God. And bear in mind always that God is wise, good, powerful and merciful, and is able to turn events which seem utterly disastrous and terrible to the good of those who love him.

Lord, teach me to do your will, to listen to your voice, and respond with an open and willing heart to your prompting and leading.

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

Luke 11:27-28

Sunday 11 October

Mark 10:17-30 • Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

The Sunday Times publishes a rather disconcerting list called 'The Sunday Times Rich List'. The collective wealth of the individuals on this list runs into billions upon billions of pounds, with the richest person having a total wealth of something like £13 billion! Quite why The Sunday Times wants to flaunt such wealth and why people jockey to be on these lists is difficult to understand, but it certainly offers an insight into human nature. Blessed John Henry Newman once said, 'All bow down before wealth.'

Money, wealth, possessions and status impress and bewitch us, but faith points to a deeper reality. The ultimate reality, of course, is that wealth is transitory and fleeting and no one, no matter how wealthy they are, can take their riches with them beyond the grave. Long ago Egyptian royalty, believing they could, were buried in their tombs with their gold and possessions to provide a cache for the afterlife.

Jesus confronts the rich, clearly teaching that inheriting the kingdom of God is not compatible with wealth and riches. In order to have treasure in heaven, a rich young man is told to sell everything he has. Perhaps not surprisingly this proves too daunting for the would-be disciple and he departs from the Lord dejected.

Despite the seriousness of the encounter it is rather amusing that the disciples are staggered by the Lord's handling of this situation. Perhaps they saw less a disciple and more a donor or sponsor – someone who could support their cause financially. The disciples perhaps knew that there was no way this rich young man was going to relinquish his wealth. Of course, without a grace of revelation he could not. This is why Jesus says that what is impossible for us is possible for God. Only God's grace can convince our hearts that there are no pockets in a shroud, that we can't take our wealth, riches or possessions with us.

The Spirit worked in the lives of many rich men and women in history – e.g. St Francis and St Ignatius of Loyola – to prompt them to give away their wealth in order to follow Christ. These saints did so because they glimpsed the treasure of Christ, the riches of the kingdom, the wealth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

Lord, what a wretched person I am. Only you can set me free from my love of possessions and money.

Wisdom 7:7-11 • Psalm 89(90):12-17

Hebrews 4:12-13 • Mark 10:17-30

Monday 12 October

Luke 11:29-32

Jesus was dogged throughout his life by demands for signs and then, when he performed them, by questions about in whose authority he acted. This attitude of demanding and insisting is really a cloak for unbelief and hardness of heart. The miracles spoke for themselves and Jesus explained clearly on many occasions that they were not just signs of his divine power but of his Father's mandate. Those who resisted and questioned Jesus had closed minds.

The Lord challenged his critics to consider that he was the sign of Jonah – the reluctant prophet who preached the message of repentance to the Gentile Ninevites (Jon. 3:5). The Queen of Sheba, another Gentile, left her dominion to see for herself the wisdom and wealth of King Solomon (1 Kgs. 10:1-13). Neither the Ninevites nor the Queen of Sheba were demanding or sceptical or unbelieving – the Spirit was working in them and they responded with open hearts and minds to what God was doing in their midst.

We could say that Pope Francis is leading a revolution in the Church right now. Since the beginning of his pontificate he has shown himself to be a prophet with a radical message: he wants a Church of the poor for the poor, a merciful and forgiving Church, with wide and open hearts, devoted and dedicated to our call to be Spirit-filled evangelizers. By what authority does he act? He acts by God's authority because he stands in the shoes of the fisherman, St Peter, and sits in his seat in an unbroken line of apostolic succession. There is a way in which we can discern in the message and life of Pope Francis what God is saying to us. Are our minds and hearts open?

This month the bishops meet in Rome for the Synod of the Family. Our hope and prayer is that they will be open to what the Spirit is doing today and the direction in which God is leading the Church. There are difficult pastoral issues to face and discuss. For example, how can the Church reach out to those who are divorced and remarried and therefore cannot be admitted to Holy Communion? We have to be able to hold out the hand of mercy and friendship to all who feel themselves separated or estranged from the Church and her sacraments.

Lord, breathe your Spirit upon the Church that we would be a people who, having received mercy, hold out mercy, goodness, kindness and forgiveness.

Romans 1:1-7 • Psalm 97(98):1-4

Luke 11:29-32

Tuesday 13 October

Luke 11:37-41

Today there exists a certain sensitivity about bringing into sharp focus the behaviour and attitudes of the Pharisees. Since inter-faith dialogue has made such great strides, there is a feeling that we should not be too critical of these religious leaders. This is true, of course, but it could also be said that no one was more critical of the Pharisees than Jesus himself. It is next to impossible to read the Gospels without encountering the tension between them and the Lord. Perhaps we will strike a balance if we remember two things: first, that Jesus loved the Pharisees and, second, that there is something of the Pharisee in us all.

So, having got that off our chest, back to Jesus' encounter with a Pharisee over a meal. Jesus was not the easiest of dinner guests, it has to be said. The Pharisee was a little indignant, to say the least, that Jesus had ignored the ritual washing before the meal. What isn't always appreciated is that the Pharisees had gone well beyond the law regarding ritual cleansing. The only Scripture in the Torah on this subject is Deuteronomy 8:10, but the emphasis here is on giving thanks and praising God for the blessing of food – no mention is made of ritual cleansing. The Talmud, a raft of rules and regulations introduced by the Pharisees over time, created a religion whose intention was to glorify God but became side-tracked by legalism and rules made by men.

Jesus' challenge of the Pharisees speaks to us today because Christianity is fundamentally a religion, a faith, of the heart. We fast to give glory to God, not to draw attention to ourselves or our own righteousness. We go to Mass because we want to give praise and thanks to God, not because it is simply an obligation. We give to charity, not because we have to but because we want to express our preferential love for the poor. Make no mistake: Jesus loved the Pharisees and Jesus loves us, and the Holy Spirit is constantly at work within us to cleanse our hearts, set us free from legalism, and soften our hearts, creating in us pure and grateful hearts.

Lord, I repent for the ways I sin against your goodness and rely more on my own righteousness than the righteousness of Christ – not to us, not to us, O Lord, but to your name give the glory.

Romans 1:16-25 • Psalm 18(19):2-5

Luke 11:37-41

Wednesday 14 October

Luke 11:42-46

The Pharisees loathed Jesus. They utterly despised him and, despite their religious sensibilities, they wanted him dead. The reason – very simple really – was because he exposed their hypocrisy and threatened the status quo. The Lord brought into the light that old chestnut in which religious people enjoy the perception of being generous to the poor, devout and staunch in their faith, whilst privately not caring two hoots. The Pharisees' concern was for the externals of faith while their hearts were bleak and empty. This 'dead behind the eyes' faith is as real today as it was then.

Pope Francis fights this kind of thing all the time. He recently chided his own curia about the temptation of relishing ecclesiastical privilege and esteem and seeking worldly pleasures. Perhaps not surprisingly, his admonition was greeted with mute applause – virtual silence was their stern reply. The Pharisees were happy to pay tithes on herbs which didn't need to be tithed in order to be seen to be fulfilling their obligation. They were happy to be acknowledged publically for what they were not privately. Jesus compared them to unmarked graves. Graves were painted white to warn people away because contact with the dead meant ritual defilement. Jesus' condemned the Pharisees because they burdened the people with religious minutiae whilst neglecting the more important issues of charity, mercy and forgiveness.

But do we fall into the same trap? What current practices amount to paying our tithe of 'mint and rue and every herb' whilst letting ourselves be distracted from 'justice and the love of God' (v. 42)? It's all about staying focused on the essentials and not getting weighed down in the detail. The key essential of our faith is mercy because mercy reveals the love of God. Pope Francis has declared a Year of Mercy, commencing on 8 December 2015, in order to encourage us to reflect on this virtue. He has a vision of the Church being the Church of the poor, the Church of mercy and forgiveness. We all fall short of God's glory in many ways. God is truly calling us to strive for holiness. However, we must guard our hearts against looking down on others, thinking of ourselves as more righteous than others, and praising God with our lips while our hearts are far from him.

Lord, protect me from having a harsh and judgemental spirit; teach me to pray with heartfelt sincerity, 'God, have mercy upon me a sinner.'

Romans 2:1-11 • Psalm 61(62):2-9

Luke 11:42-46

Thursday 15 October

Luke 11:47-54 • St Teresa of Jesus (Avila) (Memorial)

St Teresa of Avila once said: 'It is no small misfortune and disgrace that, through our own fault, we neither understand our nature nor our origin.' In essence this was the problem of the Pharisees and from such blindness we are not immune. We too can suffer from a lack of self-awareness and are in need of the gift of self-knowledge.

The problem, however, is that these blessings, for that is what they are, come at a price. The process of being taught by God about our true nature and origins is not easy because invariably Christ bids us to follow him and die, so that we can rise to new life. The prophet Jeremiah taught that more than anything else the human heart is deceitful (Jer. 17:9). The Holy Spirit gives us his wisdom because there are two equal but opposite errors we can fall into regarding self-knowledge. The first is that, seeing our sin and our fallenness, we fall into despair and cling to an overly negative self-image. The second is that we can resist the conviction of sin and insight into our hearts, and this makes us hard-hearted and hard-headed.

The Spirit leads us to a place where we can see our drives and impulses, and we come to appreciate in ever-deeper measure the lavish mercy of God. This interior process, truly a work of the Spirit, protects us from the sin of hypocrisy, the sin Jesus identified more than any other in the Pharisees. Jesus reserved his harshest condemnation for hypocrisy and the pretence and illusion of holiness or righteousness. Far from defending and upholding the tradition of the Jewish prophets, the Lord held the Pharisees responsible for the murder of Abel (Gen. 4:8) and Zechariah, who was chief priest during the reign of King Joash of Judah (837–830 BC). He was killed in the grounds of the temple for his ministry of calling the people back to worship the Lord (2 Chron. 24:17-22). Jesus accused the Pharisees of having the key to knowledge but keeping the people in darkness.

We have to beware first of the Pharisee in ourselves – we should pray for our clergy, for those charged with teaching the faith, and for ourselves, that they receive the gift of self-knowledge and resist the temptation to self-deceit and hypocrisy.

'It is a great grace of God to practise self-examination, but too much is as bad as too little.' (St Teresa of Avila)

Romans 3:21-30 • Psalm 129(130):1-6

Luke 11:47-54

Friday 16 October

Luke 12:1-7

Jesus was beginning to attract large crowds – on this occasion Luke describes ‘a crowd of many thousands’ (v. 1 NIV) – and some were even being trampled in their eagerness to see and hear him. In an age without a microphone or sound system, speaking to a crowd this large must have had its challenges.

It is striking that Jesus uses the appellation ‘friends’ when addressing the crowd (v. 4). His words are comforting, consoling and deeply reassuring. At the heart of his teaching is this simple truth: ‘do not be afraid’ (v. 4 NIV). And yet, the truth is, we are often afraid. Since the beginning of time, kings, tyrants, totalitarian regimes and governments have held on to power through force, violence and murder.

Jesus faces this threat head on with the simple teaching, ‘do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more’ (v. 4 NIV). The One we should fear is not the one who murders, kills and destroys, but the One who is Eternal, who is Lord of life and death. Jesus is teaching us basically to fear the Lord.

Fear of the Lord is not a virtue we hear much about these days, but it was cherished by the ancients and seen as the beginning of wisdom. There is a way in which this great virtue needs to be recovered in our own time and in our own lives. What does it mean to fear the Lord? Consider that God who governs the sun and the moon, the oceans and the earth, the stars and the cosmos, also knows when a mere sparrow falls to the ground. Consider that the awesome power of the Almighty, revealed in the tumultuous waves or the shifting of tectonic plates, is the very same God, and Father, who counts the hairs on every human head. God is worthy to be loved and worthy to be feared.

A healthy fear of the Lord is the key to living a life in the power of the Holy Spirit. We all need a sense of perspective: What matters most to us in life? What are our priorities? Is death the ultimate tragedy or the beginning of a new life?

Jesus, help us to put aside our concern for ourselves and our fears. Give us a right understanding of death and a proper fear of the Lord that we may receive God’s wisdom and light.

Romans 4:1-8 • Psalm 31(32):1-2, 5, 11

Luke 12:1-7

Saturday 17 October

Luke 12:9-12 • St Ignatius of Antioch (Memorial)

Today we celebrate the feast day of St Ignatius of Antioch. Born in Syria, Ignatius converted to Christianity and eventually became Bishop of Antioch. In the year 107, on a visit to Antioch, Emperor Trajan forced the Christians there to choose between death and apostasy. Ignatius would not deny Christ and thus was condemned to be put to death in Rome.

Ignatius is well known for the seven letters he wrote on the long journey from Antioch to Rome. Five of these letters are to churches in Asia Minor, urging the Christians there to remain faithful to God and to obey their leaders. He warned against heretical doctrines, and urged the bishops to feed the people with the solid truths of the Christian faith. The sixth letter was to Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who was later also martyred. The final letter begs the Christians in Rome not to try to stop his martyrdom: 'The only thing I ask of you is to allow me to offer the libation of my blood to God. I am the wheat of the Lord; may I be ground by the teeth of the beasts to become the immaculate bread of Christ.'

Ignatius bravely met the lions in the Circus Maximus. He was a living example of one who was not afraid of those who can kill the body (v. 4). He could not and would not deny Christ and looked beyond the confines of this world to the next. We may not have to die for our faith as St Ignatius of Antioch did, but every day we are called to die to self and live for Christ.

'No early pleasures, no kingdoms of this world can benefit me in any way. I prefer death in Christ Jesus to power over the farthest limits of the earth. He who died in place of us is the one object of my quest. He who rose for our sakes is my one desire. The time for my birth is close at hand. Forgive me, my brothers. Do not stand in the way of my birth to real life; do not wish me stillborn. My desire is to belong to God. Do not, then, hand me back to the world. Do not try to tempt me with material things. Let me attain pure light. Only on my arrival there can I be fully a human being. Give me the privilege of imitating the passion of my God.'

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

Luke 12:9-12

Sunday 18 October

(B) Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Mark 10:35-45

Lord Acton said, 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Few in human history have attained absolute power, but those who have bear eloquent witness to its corrupting influence. For brief moments of history Hitler and Stalin held this kind of power and used it to dominate, subdue and murder millions of human beings. Jesus recognized the all-too-human trait which finds delight in 'lording' it over others. He identified it in the rulers of the Gentiles but also in the Pharisees and leaders of the Jewish people. The reason people seek power is because they desire recognition, affirmation and esteem. Henry Kissinger said that power is the greatest aphrodisiac.

Jesus challenged this thirst for power head on, teaching that his followers must not live like this. If we aspire for greatness, then we must serve. If we want to be first, then we must be last. Who is greater: the one who sits at table or the one who serves at table? Jesus made service and humility the greatest virtue.

Nevertheless, power plays are often rampant in parish life, and clergy and lay people alike indulge in extremely unattractive displays of 'lording' it over others. We all know that at the heart of all 'power plays' is insecurity, and the desire to dominate or control others says more about the person doing it than the poor soul at the receiving end, although knowing this doesn't make it any easier to bear.

In order to make our parishes and homes places of service, those who hold positions of power must do as Jesus says and must serve. Easier said than done, of course, but what is impossible for us is possible with God and the grace of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit works in us primarily to help us change the way we think – because it is in the renewing of our minds that we give birth to the new humanity, the new creation, which is Christ in us the hope of glory. Pope Francis leads the way by being proud and happy to be the servant of servants.

Lord, teach me to serve others and to resist the temptation to lord it over others or think of myself as greater or better, but rather to take to heart and live the way of Christ – the way of love and the way of service.

Isaiah 53:10-11 • Psalm 32(33):4-5, 18-20, 22
Hebrews 4:14-16 • Mark 10:35-45

Monday 19 October

Luke 12:13-21

Our attitude to money, sex and power says a lot about us. Their use or abuse involves every sin and every virtue. One way in which we come into money is through inheritance, and in Jesus' day rabbis (rather like lawyers today) were approached to settle disputes surrounding a dead person's legacy. Jesus is invited to get involved but refuses. Instead, he seizes the opportunity to teach about our lust for money, riches and wealth by telling a parable about a rich fool.

They say, don't they, that only the good die young? Well, that's a myth, of course, because every human being, no matter how good, rich or wealthy, dies. Death is the one single reality which puts money, sex and power into their true perspective: they are all transitory, fleeting, and not in and of themselves the meaning of life.

The pursuit of wealth, as opposed to the pursuit of happiness, can be a consuming obsession. Today we have the super rich. Never has so much wealth been possessed by so few people. Never has it been more true that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. Felix Dennis, a very wealthy man, devised the phrase 'comfortably poor' to indicate a man who had a mere £200,000 in his current account. Of course, such language is crude, coarse and immoral.

The parable of the Rich Fool, like all of Jesus' parables, was spoken as an aid to examination of conscience. The question is: are you the rich fool in the parable? We don't tend to think of ourselves as foolish but there is a way in which the 'fool' reveals an aspect of all our fallen natures. We all tend to be short-sighted, we don't naturally think of others but rather of ourselves, and we don't live our lives in the awareness that today could be our last day on earth. If we are blessed to have money, then we carry responsibility to reach out to the poor. If we are blessed to have material possessions, then we need to guard against selfishness, and the way we do this is by counting not just our money, but our blessings. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.

'If you have money, consider that perhaps the only reason God allowed it to fall into your hands was in order that you might find joy and perfection by giving it away.'
(Thomas Merton)

Romans 4:20-25 • Luke 1:69-75

Luke 12:13-21

Tuesday 20 October

Luke 12:35-38

Down through the centuries many have prophesied the exact date, time and location of Christ's second coming. One such soothsayer took out several very expensive adverts in The Times newspaper warning people of the second coming of a Messiah and that he was probably living in Brick Lane, in the East End of London. Perhaps those who posit such ideas need a psychiatrist more than they need a priest. Whilst conjecture, speculation and prophecy seem to come with the territory of the second coming, Scripture, echoed by the Church's tradition, is clear: no one knows either the day or the hour when Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of the Living God, will return in glory. But return he will: this is an article of faith. The earliest Christian affirmation of this belief was probably the word Maranatha, which is Aramaic for 'O Lord, come'.

At the ascension of the Lord into heaven the angels said to the apostles: 'This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). Nevertheless, exactly how and when this will take place will always remain veiled. Jesus himself says, 'But of that day and hour no one knows...but the Father only' (Matt. 24:36).

Despite the fact that we don't tend to hear much about the second coming these days within the Catholic tradition, this isn't because the teaching isn't there – for example, the Catechism of the Catholic Church refers to it very clearly (see, e.g., paras. 673, 674). The Church teaches that the second coming is imminent – in other words, it could happen at any time, even today. Now some may scoff at this idea and consider such thinking as fundamentalist or simplistic, but 'imminent' means 'imminent'!

Do you long for the return of Christ? Do you groan and moan for the return of the King? The Spirit works within us to create this longing, this moaning and groaning for Christ's return. He came in humility; he will return in glory. The planet earth will not continue forever – our world is finite, as are we. Remember the words of that old hymn: 'This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.'

The Spirit, the Bride and every single believer cry out with heartfelt faith and conviction, 'Come, Lord Jesus, come.'

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

Luke 12:35-38

Wednesday 21 October

Luke 12:39-48

We are living in the age of the Church and the age of the second coming. We don't tend to hear too much about the 'end things' these days. Why this is so is not entirely clear, but there is a way in which some doctrines, whilst rooted in the creed and central to the patrimony of revelation, are somewhat sidelined. Also, although few clergy would confess to this, some of the 'end things' don't settle too easily on modern ears and they struggle to know how to communicate these essentials teachings. Theologians refer to the study of such matters as 'eschatology'.

The problem is – and it really is a problem – that the Scriptures and therefore the liturgy of the Word show no such sensitivity. These truths are proclaimed in the liturgy, but if they are not unpacked or explained, their impact upon us is limited – they will go in one ear and out the other. This is not only tragic, it is actually a scandal because it is one of the three central truths of Christian revelation – Christ died for our sins, he rose for our salvation, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Today's reading goes straight for the jugular on what our attitude should be regarding Christ's return – the message is clear and very simple. We need to be ready at any moment for one of two events: Christ's return or our own death, because after death we will be judged.

We tend to think of judgement as a fearful event. In a way this is the result of the preaching of old, which put the accent very much on God's wrath as opposed to God's love and mercy. The truth is none of us can stand before God's judgement confident of our righteousness and faithfulness. Rather, we can only throw ourselves on his mercy. You see, we often focus on the things we do for God. However, it is not our perfection or holiness which dazzles God. God is after all supremely holy in and of himself and is surrounded by a myriad of angels. No, it is our misery, our wretchedness, our sinfulness upon which his love and mercy is poured out.

Lord, create in me a heart which longs and groans for your second coming. Teach me to rest in your mercy, to be secure in your love and to pray for your return as Lord and King.

Romans 6:12-18 • Psalm 123(124)

Luke 12:39-48

Thursday 22 October

Pope St John Paul II • Luke 12:49-53

(Optional Memorial in England and Wales)

On looking at today's reading we may well be utterly baffled to find the Prince of Peace declaring, 'Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division' (v.51). What on earth can Our Lord have meant?

Perhaps the best place to start is to look at the context of these remarks. In fact, all of this chapter from Luke's Gospel, as we've seen over the last few days, concerns itself with the challenges that face the disciples, the opposition and divisions that lie ahead, all the difficulties of following Jesus' way. Today's verses therefore continue this theme, and Our Lord's words here certainly leave his followers in no doubt about what was to come.

First though, Jesus challenges his followers with his call for a 'baptism of fire', a phrase that has, of course, entered the language. The first two verses (vv 49-50) should be read in the context of an earlier passage in this Gospel. Here John declares to his followers: 'I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Luke 3:16). That is, John uses the purifying agent of water; Jesus, as he says himself in today's reading, will use the superior purifying and refining agents of the Holy Spirit and fire. In Acts 2 Luke will go on to show how the fire of the Holy Spirit accomplishes its work in human beings, at the first Pentecost of our Church.

The apparent paradox of the Prince of Peace bringing the sword of division, even within families, may also be better understood in the context of an earlier passage from this Gospel. At the presentation in the temple Simeon tells the Mother of God, 'Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against ... that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed' (Luke 2:34-35). In other words, Jesus will present (and still does!) a challenge, particularly to earthly authorities. Peace will not be obtained at any cost, especially at the cost of compromising God's word. In the meantime, we must, of course, continue to love our enemies, but be prepared to stand up, and, metaphorically at least, fight for the teachings of the one who is the way, the truth and the life.

Romans 6:19-23 • Psalm 1:1-6

Luke 12:49-53

Friday 23 October

Luke 12:54-59

The context in which Jesus spoke was an agricultural society in which being able to read the signs of the weather was crucial. Passed down through the generations this ability to read the weather signs holds true even today: red sky at night shepherd's delight, red sky in the morning shepherd's warning. Jesus' message was clear: if we can interpret the weather, then we should also be able to interpret the signs of the times.

What are the signs of our times? What is God doing in our lives and in our world right here, right now? Of course, the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills and God is always at work in our own lives and in the world. However, we can both intuit and sense that God is doing something new and exciting among us. In order to interpret the signs, we look very much to Pope Francis, the one appointed and anointed by God to lead the Church and we listen carefully both to his witness and his teaching.

Pope Francis is preparing us to enter a holy year, devoted to exploring the theme of mercy. The goal of the year is to deepen our understanding of God's merciful love and compassion and, as we become rooted in this revelation, to bear a more authentic witness to God's love in the world. A sign of our times is perhaps a lack of mercy and tenderness. There is a perception that those with a religious vision or perception of the world tend to be judgemental, intolerant and lacking in mercy.

In fact, this is a caricature: true faith deepens our humanity. Far from making believers arrogant, intolerant and lacking in mercy, faith deepens their sense of being a beggar before God and causes their hearts to be filled with gratitude to God who pours out his love and mercy upon us. The merciful heart is always a heart which recognizes that there but for God's grace go we.

Pope Francis is calling us then to be agents of mercy, ambassadors of God's goodness, kindness and forgiveness. We are to be signs of peace in the world, signs of contradiction and witnesses of the cross. We are to be men and women who serve God and our neighbour in humility and love.

Lord, make me an instrument of mercy, a sign of your love and an authentic witness to the power of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world.

Romans 7:18-25 • Psalm 118(119):66, 68, 76-77, 93-94

Luke 12:54-59

Saturday 24 October

Luke 13:1-9

A central message of the Christian faith is repentance and change. No matter how much we try, and many do, to pooh-pooh and push under the carpet the notion that we are sinners in need of repentance, this essential truth of our faith is here to stay. Sin is sin, whatever name we choose to give it. We are sinners, and no matter how much we protest with our good works and self-righteousness, the call to repent and turn back to the Lord is ever fresh, ever new and always crucial to our lives.

Today's reading recording two tragic incidents – one more gruesome than the other but both involving loss of life – is unique to Luke's Gospel. The first incident was the killing by Pilate of some Galileans who were offering a sacrifice, probably in the Jerusalem temple at Passover. The ancients, along with many moderns, associated random tragedy with divine retribution. This idea is captured most eloquently in the book of Job: 'Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed' (4:7-9 NIV). Jesus refuted this erroneous but well-established mindset when speaking about a man suffering from blindness: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life' (John 9:3).

The second example Luke refers to involved a building construction accident at the Siloam reservoir at Jerusalem. For Jesus, neither good fortune nor tragedy is an indicator of spiritual condition because God's sun shines on both the righteous and the unrighteous (see Matt. 5:45). Nevertheless, many do fall into a way of thinking about tragedy and accidents which is unenlightened and unedifying. As St Augustine taught: 'God does not do evil, but does cause that evil should not become the worst.' In other words, out of all manner of evil and suffering God still works out his eternal plan for each one of us. Furthermore, God is always close to the broken-hearted. He is the God of all comfort and the Father of mercies.

Lord Jesus, the worst sin and evil that has ever happened was your death on the cross, but through the power of grace and love you conquered this evil and all evil. Your name be adored and praised.

Romans 8:1-11 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Luke 13:1-9

Sunday 25 October

Mark 10:46-52 • Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Bartimaeus is a light, a beacon and a paragon of true discipleship. His conversion and subsequent healing are the result of his own active seeking-out of the Lord. On his own initiative he cries out: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me' (v. 47) and refuses to be silenced when onlookers rebuke him – instead 'he cried out all the more' (v. 48). Is there a more moving, profound and heartfelt prayer in all of Scripture? Can you make this your own prayer? Have you ever cried out to the Lord, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me?'

It is fascinating that Bartimaeus is the one and only person in St Mark's Gospel to address the Lord as 'Master'. This expression occurs again on the lips of Mary Magdalene when she meets the risen Jesus near the empty tomb (John 20:16). Bartimaeus reveals a discipleship stripped bare of pretence down to its raw reality: Jesus is Lord, he is Master, he is the One who saves and he is Life. Despite being blind, Bartimaeus is gifted with amazing spiritual sight. He sees what many others did not see – including at times the disciples themselves. Although not blessed with the gift of physical sight he had the gift of insight and this grace opened him up to receive the light of revelation.

We need the same gift in order to have insight both into our own blindness and also how we can be blind to the things of God in our own life and in the world around us. We can be blind to the blessings in our lives. We can be blind to our own sin but strangely clear-sighted about the sin of others. We can be blind to the beauty of God's creation. We can take our example from the enthusiasm and boldness of Bartimaeus in approaching the Lord for healing and sight. He threw himself upon the Lord's mercy and goodness and we can do the same, confident that the Lord hears our prayers and wants more than anything else to give us every spiritual blessing and grace.

Lord, pour out your Spirit that I may receive new insight and may throw myself upon your mercy and receive the grace of revelation in a deeper and richer way, moving me to proclaim with heartfelt love: Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jeremiah 31:7-9 • Psalm 125(126)

Hebrews 5:1-6 • Mark 10:46-52

Monday 26 October

Luke 13:10-17

It seems inconceivable that, faced with a miraculous healing, the synagogue ruler should say: 'There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath' (v. 14 NIV). Jesus meets this dark ignorance with a wisdom and clarity which humiliates those who held this view.

Religious legalism is an ugly vice. Pope Francis is an enemy of this kind of behaviour and has shown the world a kinder, gentler and more tender face of faith, personally reaching out to those who have suffered from cruel legalism. For example, when a single mother, having been refused baptism by her parish priest, wrote to him in her anguish and rejection, Pope Francis invited her to the Vatican so he could baptize her baby. He also recently invited a transgender man, who had been cruelly ostracized by his parish community, to meet with him, so that he could extend to him the hand of friendship and support. The Pope has a heart for prisoners, AIDS sufferers and those on the margins of society. He is the very antithesis of religious legalism, and we should thank God that we have a Pope with such a warm and open heart to others.

Why does legalism so often rear its ugly head? It is hard to say, truth be told, but our hearts are naturally hard and inclined to judge and look down on others. The Holy Spirit working in our lives protects us from this spiritual malady which chokes and smothers the life of the Spirit. Pope Francis pointed to a remedy when he prayed: 'Lord, let there not be a lack of prophets among your people. Lord, free your people from a spirit of clericalism and aid them with a spirit of prophecy.' A prophet is one who has in his heart the promise of God. The prophets among us hold in their hearts the promises of God found both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, they contemplate the ways God works among us in the present, and through the gift of discernment they point to the way God is leading us forward into the future.

Lord, let us not forget your promise. Let us not grow tired of going forward. Let us not close ourselves in with legality but live lives of freedom knowing we are sons and daughters of the living God.

Romans 8:12-17 • Psalm 67(68):2-7, 20-21

Luke 13:10-17

Tuesday 27 October

Luke 13:18-21

The older we are, the harder it is to change. Our thinking and therefore our actions become deeply ingrained and habits are formed. So here's something to get our minds around: Jesus taught the parables, including the two we are reading today, to challenge the way we think and to invite us to change.

We can't know for sure if Jesus taught the two parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast or Leaven against the backdrop of the indignation he incurred from the religious leaders, offended at his healing of the woman who had been bent over for eighteen years. However, it is likely he did. In essence, the two parables point to the fact that we often fail to see the ways in which God is working in our midst. We don't know how the mustard seed grows to become a large tree or how the yeast works its magic in flour, but they do and the results are there for all to see. It is easy to just look at the external and fail to see what is going on underneath: we fail to probe deeper to discover the mysterious and hidden.

Blessed John Henry Newman said: 'To live is to change, and to change often is to become more perfect.' We tend to think of change as being from the outward to the inward, but it is the other way around. God changes us from within, and this change impacts the way we live our lives. At baptism God planted the mustard seed of faith deep in our hearts, embedding it in the yeast of his grace. Many of us, baptized as infants, cannot remember this event but this grace is continually at work in our lives. It is this blessing which is constantly producing the fruits of the Spirit: love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity and so on.

It is perfectly acceptable to be greedy for grace! Are you greedy for God's grace? Every time we read Scripture, frequent the sacraments, pray for those who have hurt or offended us, God's Spirit is poured out into our hearts and minds and we receive the grace to change the way we think and the way we act.

Lord, thank you for the blessing of faith and the anointing of grace which I received at baptism and which is constantly at work to help me to grow as a child of the Father.

Romans 8:18-25 • Psalm 125(126)

Luke 13:18-21

Wednesday 28 October

(Feast) SS Simon and Jude • Luke 6:12-16

Today we celebrate the feast day of two great saints and apostles of the Church – St Simon and St Jude. While Luke refers to the latter as Jude, Matthew identifies him as Thaddaeus. Scholars suggest that Jude the apostle is not the author of the letter that bears this name but that it was another Jude. Of course, Jude originally shared the same name as Judas of Iscariot but Judas was shortened to Jude because of the shame and disgrace that came to be attached to it.

Simon, on the other hand, is mentioned in all four lists of the apostles in the Gospels and on more than one occasion he is referred to as Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were a sect who were fanatical Jewish nationalists. They resented the Roman occupation, considering the payment of taxes to the Romans as blasphemy, and longed for a Messiah who would liberate them from the shackles of their oppressors. They represented in many ways the legacy of the Maccabees, who stood for a Jewish nation independent and free under God. The Zealots were the main players in the Jewish uprising against the Romans which ended in the destruction of the temple in AD 70. No mention is made of Simon's conversion but no doubt he renounced the way of violence for the way of love.

Little is known of SS Simon and Jude but what we do know is that they were chosen by Christ. Many were called but few were chosen, and Jesus chose these two men to belong to the Twelve Apostles. We also know that in order to follow Christ they walked the path of repentance and holiness and, after the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, they dedicated their lives to proclaiming the gospel.

Just as they were called, so too we are called. As the bishops at Vatican II so eloquently put it: 'Just as Christ was sent by the Father, so also he sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit. This he did so that, by preaching the gospel to every creature (cf. Mark 16:15), they might proclaim that the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, had freed us from the power of Satan (cf. Acts 26:18) and from death, and brought us into the kingdom of his Father' (Sacrosanctum concilium 6).

Saints Simon and Jude, pray for us.

Ephesians 2:19-22 • Psalm 18(19):2-5

Luke 6:12-16

Thursday 29 October

Luke 13:31-35

The Jewish people are our elder brother in faith. As God's chosen people they were privileged to receive abundant blessings from God, including the Torah, the Prophets and the Psalms. The great leaders of the Jewish faith, Abraham and Moses, are also our fathers in faith. We share with the Jewish people a longing for the coming of the Messiah. However, while the Jewish people look for the Messiah's first coming, we long for his second coming.

Since Vatican II the Church has reached out in a spirit of dialogue and respect to the Jewish people. In this the bishops are echoing the sentiments of St Bernard of Clairvaux who said: 'For us Jews are Scripture's living words, because they remind us of what Christ our Lord suffered. They are not to be persecuted, killed or even put to flight.' We are encouraged to revere their faith, as so much of our own faith is rooted in their tradition and history. However, where we part company is that for Christians Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Lord's anointed, the Saviour and Redeemer of humankind. He is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

The first Christians were from the Jewish nation and then Gentiles were welcomed in. Nevertheless, while Christ was on earth, many Jewish people rejected him. Today, we witness close-up and personal the impact of this rejection upon the Lord, moving him to express a profound lamentation for his people. The Lord, adopting a feminine metaphor, compares himself to a mother hen, longing to gather up her chicks. The problem was that they were not willing.

The Spirit leads us to understand this sense of grief and loss and to pray for the gift of faith for all men and women who do not recognize Jesus as the Son of God, but especially our Jewish brothers and sisters. We pray for the grace of revelation and the gentle work of the Spirit which opens up hearts and minds to the Lordship of Christ. One day, we will be united with them and we will pray together with glad and joyful hearts: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Lord, we esteem the Jewish people as our brothers and sisters in faith. We, like them, long for the Messiah's coming and look forward to the day when Jesus Christ will be revealed as Lord of heaven and earth.

Romans 8:31-39 • Psalm 108(109):21-31

Luke 13:31-35

Friday 30 October

Luke 14:1-6

Pope Francis must be a bit of a nightmare for the Roman Curia. His relaxed, easy-going, Latino approach to life has certainly ruffled a few feathers and raised a few eyebrows over the years since he became Pope. He has a kind of healthy and rather amusing approach to pomp, circumstance and the trappings of his centuries-old office. Pope Francis is very conscious, it seems, that he stands in the shoes of the humble fisherman. He refuses to wear the traditional red papal leather shoes, preferring instead his old cobbled pair. He refuses to travel in the papal limo, preferring instead an old clapped-out Ford. He has declined to have the kind of security fitting for a leader of state, even saying no to bullet-proof glass. He refuses to be a prisoner of the Vatican but rather its liberator. We should thank God that he is our Pope.

Today we join Jesus seated at a kind of banquet, given, it would appear, in his honour. Many of the religious establishment of the day were there, watching to see whether he would step out of line. It is very likely that the sick man was a fellow guest but, remarkably, when he was healed by Jesus there was no joyful celebration but only stony silence. The law of the Sabbath had taken precedence over the law of God's life and grace.

What is at the heart of the matter here? Jesus was constantly challenging preconceptions about God and how to live by faith. He clearly loved the Pharisees – it is a nonsense to suggest that he didn't. On the whole they were good men devoted to God and his law but they were closed to what God was doing in their midst.

At the World Youth Day in Brazil in 2013, Pope Francis urged the young people present to mess things up in their parishes when they returned home. He meant that, when following God's will, we may have to step out of line and challenge the status quo – we need to respect what has gone before but be open to what the Spirit is doing in our midst now. Pope Francis is ruffling feathers and upsetting the status quo, but he is living by the Spirit, and what we know for sure about the Holy Spirit is that he blows wherever he wills.

Lord, teach me to be open to the work of the Spirit in your world today.

Romans 9:1-5 • Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20

Luke 14:1-6

Saturday 31 October

Luke 14:1, 7-11

The story is told of the famous boxer Muhammad Ali that on one occasion, on a flight to an engagement, the aircraft ran into severe turbulence and began to shake violently. The passengers were all instructed to fasten their seatbelts straightaway. Everyone complied except Ali. Noticing this, a stewardess approached him and asked him to fasten his belt. Ali replied, 'Superman don't need no seat belt.' The stewardess looked sternly at the world boxing champion and said: 'Superman don't need no plane either.' The boxer immediately complied.

Today's reading addresses that old chestnut of pride versus humility, and Luke hones in on a rather lavish dinner party to which Jesus had been invited at a prominent Pharisee's home. Luke, the master storyteller, observes how the guests were watching Jesus and Jesus was watching the guests. Jesus noticed how keen some guests were to secure the most important seats in order to gain recognition and status. How these guests must have squirmed as Jesus seized this prestigious social occasion to teach about humility.

Now humility is a tricky subject because the second you think you're being humble, you probably aren't. Who are the humble? What does it mean to be humble? The thing about true humility is that those who are humble don't see it that way at all. Their focus is on loving God and serving their neighbour. Humility is a grace because it is rooted in a healthy understanding of who we are and who God is. We can often think that being humble is having a negative image of ourselves and an inflated one of the importance of others. This is a mistaken understanding.

Perhaps the first step towards gaining humility is to grasp the simple truth that we are all created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). It doesn't matter who we are – brain surgeon or beggar, rich or poor, righteous or unrighteous – God created every single human person with an inalienable and profound dignity. The second step towards humility is acknowledging that God is great and to be praised. Put simply, the humble look to God as the source of all true greatness, because God alone is almighty, all powerful, all loving and everlasting.

Lord, grant me the grace of humility and help me to learn the lesson that if I exalt myself I will be humbled and if I humble myself I will be exalted.

Romans 11:1-2, 11-12, 25-29 • Psalm 93(94):12-18

Luke 14:1, 7-11