

Jesus being invited to dine at a Pharisee's house was obviously not that unusual an occurrence (see also Luke 7:36; 11:37). In today's encounter we are informed that the individual with whom the Lord was dining was a 'prominent Pharisee' – a man, we can deduce, of some status and social standing in Israel at the time. Jesus mixed with everybody and was as comfortable among the poor as he was among the rich. He reached out to people whoever they were and whatever he discerned their need to be.

In this Pharisee's home Jesus clearly discerned that there was a need for humility, and so he taught on this key Christian virtue. Luke highlights that Jesus had noted how readily the guests vied for the seats which would mark them out as the most important people there. Was this also a problem at the Last Supper? 'A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest' (Luke 22:24). What is it about the human condition that makes us vie for rank in this way? What makes us so insecure that we need people to affirm us based upon a wide range of factors – our educational background, our family, our class, and so on?

We are all prone to this fault – even priests! Yet it is something that Pope Francis has rather turned upside down and on its head. Although aware that he is both the 'Bishop of Rome' and the Shepherd of the Universal Church, Pope Francis rather eschews the pomp and circumstance of his office. There is something very refreshing, of the Spirit and endearing about his approach. He has clearly made his own Jesus' teaching on humility: 'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted' (v. 11). As wonderful as Pope Francis is, the pre-eminent model of our humility is Jesus himself, for 'he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (Phil. 2:8).

Our vocation is basically an invitation to live a humble life, resting sure and secure in God's love for us. The humble know they are loved by God and they know that Jesus died for them. If they seek the affirmation and praise of others, they quickly repent, because they want their foundation and roots to be in Christ and Christ only.

'Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.'
(Jas. 4:10)

*Ecclesiasticus 3:17-20, 28-29 • Psalm 67(68):4-7, 10-11
Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24 • Luke 14:1, 7-14*

Today's Gospel is a kind of 'hold on to your seat' Scripture. The return of Jesus to his hometown is almost an embodiment of the gospel story in miniature. Jesus is, at first, embraced and welcomed, but things quickly turn sour as jealousy, suspicion and envy take hold.

Jesus was born in the religiously significant and commercially key city of Bethlehem but brought up in the obscure and little-known village of Nazareth. Perhaps Nazareth suffered from a small town (village) syndrome: its citizens were easily threatened and rather stuck in the way they thought about people – they certainly didn't like it when one of their own got ideas above his station.

As an observant Jew Jesus fulfilled his religious obligation to worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath. When the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him, we don't know whether Jesus chose the reading or whether this was the reading chosen for him. What we do know is that he read from Isaiah 61:1-2, which speaks of the restoration of Israel and points to the promised Messiah, the kingly Anointed One. Many of those hearing these words would have been very familiar with them and

perhaps would have allowed them to float in one ear and out the other. But Jesus' pronouncement at the end of the reading would certainly have made them sit up in their seat: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (v. 21).

This was an amazing and incredible moment in Jesus' ministry and indeed in the history of our faith. A thousand years of Israel's history came to its ultimate fulfilment in the reading of that Scripture in the synagogue of Nazareth. Were the people who shared this divine and wonderful moment amazed and excited? By no means. As is so often the case with the divine, the human was not too far behind. The jarring question was asked, 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' (v. 22 NIV). Jesus went from hero to zero, it would appear, in a matter of seconds. So quick was his descent that his own people wanted to murder him. But his hour had not yet come.

Lord, by a deeper grace of revelation and the fruit of prayer, may I grasp ever more deeply that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. Let every knee bow and every tongue confess that Jesus of Nazareth is God, King and Lord.

*1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 • Psalm 95(96):1, 3-5, 11-13
Luke 4:16-30*



Capernaum was Jesus' HQ (so to speak) during his Galilean ministry. Luke introduces us to a typical day in Jesus' life. At the synagogue the Lord is confronted with a man possessed by a devil. Luke leaves us in no doubt that a central part of Jesus' ministry was deliverance. He brought healing, freedom and liberation to those burdened and distressed by this evil oppression.

There is a way in which we moderns need to get our heads around demons. Scientific sophisticates that we are, we largely think of the devil and his entourage as too simplistic an explanation for the troubles and afflictions of humankind. We look to medical science and psychiatry primarily for answers to difficulties of this sort. This isn't what the Church teaches.

From the very beginning the Church has believed in personified evil – the devil and his minions, the demons. This devil is seen to be active from the very first pages of Scripture, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: 'Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy' (para 391) Satan or the devil was at first

a good angel made by God: 'The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing.' And the chief focus of that evil became human beings, whose lives they desired to infiltrate and destroy, in whatever measure they could. Peter warned: 'Your enemy the devil is on the prowl like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8).

The striking thing is that nearly all the references in the New Testament about the devil or demons come from a single source – the Lord Jesus himself. People will tell you that the devil is an invention of Peter or Paul, but they are mistaken. Today, Jesus continues to cast out the evil from our own lives – this is why we pray in the Our Father, 'deliver us from evil.' The Church teaches that demon possession is possible and this is why every diocese in the world should – at least in theory – have a priest nominated as the diocesan exorcist.

St Michael the Archangel..., come to the aid of man, who God created immortal..., and redeemed at a great price from the tyranny of satan. (Prayer to St Michael the Archangel)

1 Thes 5:1-6, 9-11 • Ps 26(27):1, 4, 12-14 • Lk 4:31-37
(Proper of Saints: 1 Thes 2: 2-8 • Ps 95(96):1-3, 7-8, 10 • Mt 16:13-19)



The rock upon which the Church was built was Simon Peter, a Galilean fisherman, a married man (1 Cor. 9:5). We do not know the name of Peter's wife or indeed the name of his mother-in-law, but we do know that one day, early in his ministry, while staying at Peter's home, Jesus cured the first Pope's mother-in-law of a fever by rebuking it. The fever left her and she did what all great servants of God do, she began to humbly serve God's people.

We believe that every word of the Bible is divine and inspired, from the very mouth of God, as it were. So isn't it remarkable and rather moving that, against the backdrop of the amazing miracles Jesus performed, Luke records this healing of Peter's mother-in-law from her high fever? We have all been afflicted in this way by a virus or a bug and we know only too well how absolutely awful it makes us feel. Jesus came to bless, heal, set us free and lead us into the fullness of life (John 10:10). We tend to think of God intervening in our lives when we are seriously ill or are in a life-threatening crisis. But most of us don't like to bother God too much with the day-to-

day. Most of us certainly wouldn't want to bother God if we were feeling poorly or under the weather. However, this is not a great way to think because God is our Father and he cares about every aspect of our lives.

By virtue of our baptism not only are we called to be a blessing to others but we are called to bless. We are called to invoke God's blessing and healing both in our own lives and the lives of those around us. In asking for God's blessing we receive grace and protection from evil and from many other maladies and afflictions. Priests especially are blessed to be able to administer the sacrament of anointing and, of course, a blessing from a priest has a special efficacy. However, we too can bless and pray for each other. A simple, gentle laying on of hands, in humility and faith calling upon God's grace, healing and blessing, will bring God's power into our lives – rather as God's grace came into the life of Peter's mother-in-law.

Blessed be God, the Father of all blessings, who pours out on us his children every spiritual blessing, grace and gift.

Colossians 1:1-8 • Psalm 51(52):10-11
Luke 4:38-44

Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch' (v. 4 NIV). Jesus has just borrowed Simon Peter's boat to be able to put out a little into the water and speak to the crowds which have been pressing around him. Now he, a carpenter, invites Simon Peter, the fisherman, to go out fishing. Despite having fished all night without any success whatsoever, Simon Peter and his companions trust Christ's words and cast the nets. 'When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break' (v. 6 NIV). The catch is so great that they need help to haul it in and there is a danger that the boats might sink. This is an amazing miracle but it also provides us with a wonderful picture of mission.

Simon Peter has a profound reaction to this miracle. He is awestruck. His prayer is really the prayer of us all, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord' (v. 8). Simon Peter becomes immediately aware of his own sinfulness and knows that he is not worthy to be in the presence of this man who is obviously a messenger of God.

However, Simon Peter's humility and awareness of his sin do not

disqualify him from service; they are the prerequisite for service. Jesus asks him to join him in catching other people for God: 'Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people' (v. 10 NIV). The Lord lifts him out of his despair with the promise of a noble and holy vocation.

The pre-Pentecost disciples, as seasoned fishermen, did not believe any more fish could be caught. Their natural and human minds could not entertain the impossible and the miraculous. But with God miracles are possible and God is the God of the impossible.

A genuine meeting with Jesus alters one's perspective. An encounter with God's power is no reason to draw back from him, but an opportunity to approach him on the right basis, in faith and dependence. Like the first disciples we are called to be witnesses, ambassadors and apostles. We have been sent out to share the Good News and win others for Christ. Let's put out into the deep.

Lord, today teach me to be willing to share the profound message of the gospel, which communicates God's eternal love for every human person; teach me to win others for Christ.

Colossians 1:9-14 • Psalm 97(98):2-6

Luke 5:1-11

John the Baptist was hard core. He lived a life of asceticism, self-denial and total commitment to serving God and being faithful to his mission. There is truly something awesome about him and yet also something a little frightening, intimidating and even harsh. He had grown up in the desert and had learnt to subsist on an austere diet of locusts and wild honey. His ministry was characterized by a sober message and an ascetic regime. There can be no doubt that it would have taken a saint to live with this saint.

The Pharisees also had quite a rigorous lifestyle. Take fasting, for example: the only fast commanded in the Mosaic law was that required on the Day of Atonement, yet the Pharisees fasted regularly on Mondays and Thursdays. They were also very strict in their practice of tithing. The Pharisees often went far beyond the law and the legal requirements of the Talmud. They were, truth be told, rather hard core themselves.

The problem with people who are committed and dedicated in this way is that they can have little patience or understanding with those who are not. This was the Pharisees' issue with Jesus and his disciples. They were both irritated

and rather indignant that Jesus and his disciples appeared not to be too focused on fasting. Perhaps they were even jealous that Jesus went to banquets and dinner parties, as did his disciples.

Jesus rejected legalistic fasting done only for display and for attracting the attention of others (cf. Isa. 58:3-11). For him fasting was about the Spirit, not the letter of the law. Religion was about living in the Spirit, being able to understand and interpret the signs of the times. This is something the Pharisees were not able to do: the Messiah, the promised Lord of Lords and King of Kings, was present among them and they did not recognize him.

We fast, we give alms, we read the Scriptures: we practise these disciplines so that we become attuned to the Spirit. God keep us from becoming deaf and insensitive to what he is doing in our very midst, under our very noses. The Spirit is always at work. The Spirit is always renewing us, urging us to change, think differently, and open up our minds and hearts to the work of God in our midst.

Lord, teach me never to resist the Holy Spirit but to be a humble and responsive instrument in your hand.

Colossians 1:15-20 • Psalm 99(100):2-5

Luke 5:33-39



There are many stories in the Bible which we could call 'Sabbath conflicts'. In other words, encounters when the religious authorities (Pharisees mainly) took issue with Jesus about his attitude to the Sabbath, (see, e.g., Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6). The Pharisees had an especially obtuse and malicious mindset; they were constantly on the look-out for trouble. What Jesus' disciples were doing was allowed under the Mosaic law (see Deut. 23:25), but the Pharisees obviously argued that on the Sabbath it fell under the forbidden category of 'harvesting'.

Interestingly, in Mark's account of this incident, he has the Pharisees put their question directly to Jesus whereas Luke has them address the disciples (v. 2, cf. Mark 2:24). Typical and true to form Jesus – intervening on his disciples' behalf as their Master and Defender – invites his detractors to journey with him back into the Scriptures for a defence of their actions. When David was on the run from Saul with a band of followers, he went to a local shrine to ask for food. The only food available was the holy showbread, which no one but the priests was permitted to consume. However, the priest-in-charge allowed the fugitives to eat

the bread, because the disciplinary restrictions of the law gave way before human need (see 1 Sam. 21:2-7). Jesus' argument is this: if David's interpretation of the law was accepted, how much more should the authority of the Son of Man be accepted, since he is the Lord of the Sabbath?

We begin here to see Jesus' direct confrontation with the religious authorities. Jesus, a man, was claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath and to forgive sins – yet only God is the Lord of the Sabbath and only God can forgive sins. Was the penny beginning to drop for the Pharisees regarding Jesus' true identity?

Jesus is the Lord of the Universe, the Lord of our lives and the Lord of the Sabbath. Today our society needs to recover a sense of Sunday as a holy day, a day given over to the Lord, a day of rest, a special day in the cycle of our lives. We play our part in this process of recovery by proclaiming with our lives and confessing with our lips that Jesus of Nazareth is the Lord.

Lord Jesus, we worship you as Lord. Help us to use all our days to proclaim your freedom and your rest.

Colossians 1:21-23 • Psalm 53(54):3-8

Luke 6:1-5



Some of the things Jesus said are confusing and hard to understand. Take, for example, today's Gospel in which the Lord talks about 'hating' mother, father and family. We know that Jesus cannot mean 'hate' in the sense of loathe, despise and wilfully harm them. Indeed, the fourth commandment is, 'Honour your father and your mother.' No, Jesus doesn't mean 'hate' in the conventional meaning of that term, but rather he means 'love less'. He is adopting a form of Semitic exaggeration in order to drive a point home. We do this in our own language with hyperbole. When we are very hungry we might say, 'I could eat a horse and his saddle' – it is an exaggeration to make a point.

Jesus counsels us to take very seriously the call to be a disciple – rather in the same way that a builder evaluates his ability to finish a building project before he embarks upon it and a general considers the odds of victory before going into battle. We do this often in our own lives. We are not daft or silly when it comes to evaluating what is involved in a project or a new job or a new

hobby. We estimate cost, we assess implications, we weigh up odds and take calculated risks based on the information and data we have. This, it could be said, is very much part of life. In the same way Jesus counsels us to evaluate the cost of following him. Jesus wants us to stare the cost of following him in the face, and then accept and embrace it.

To follow Jesus is to be led by him. To be a disciple is to be disciplined by him. If we want God to lead we must be willing to follow. We find strength, happiness and joy in finding the way in which God is going and going that way too.

Which way is God going? God always invites us to take up the cross – as Jesus took up his cross – and follow him. The cross is laid on us all. The way of the cross begins with the call to abandon our attachments to this world. Our old self has to die in order for the new humanity, the new creation, to shine forth in our lives.

Lord, help me to be willing to die to self that I may rise with you to the eternal and glorious life.

Wisdom 9:13-18 • Psalm 89(90):3-6, 12-14, 17

Philemon 9-10, 12-17 • Luke 14:25-33

Change a long-established Mass time, introduce a new music group at Mass, welcome a new priest into the parish – and all kinds of things start to bob to the surface. The way people behave can often not be very edifying, and without strong pastoral leadership things can get out of hand. The point is – and perhaps this is not always appreciated, mainly because we expect a higher standard of churchgoers and believers – that often churchgoers and believers, sadly, rather like the Pharisees, are only too human. The Pharisees, however, were at times less than human: they were devious, devilish, obtuse and remarkably cruel towards the Lord.

Today's Gospel is a perfect example of this. The Pharisees are actively scrutinizing the Lord so that they can accuse him. The Lord heals a man with a withered hand. Imagine if that happened during the administration of the sacrament of anointing at Mass on a Sunday in your parish. Can you imagine someone saying, 'I am sorry, this healing is wonderful but Sunday is a day of rest, and Father has broken this rule'? It just wouldn't happen, would it?

Anyway, back to our Gospel: Jesus would appear to have concluded that it was pointless trying to keep his miracles under wraps. It is as if the Lord is almost seeking a confrontation with his wicked accusers. The Pharisaic interpretation of the law allowed medical intervention on the Sabbath for birth, circumcision and mortal illness. True to form, Jesus raises the discussion to a higher level. He doesn't ask whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath: rather he asks about the very purpose and meaning of the Sabbath. The Lord's reasoning is overwhelming. Since the Sabbath was given by God for his people's blessing, rest, health and wellbeing, shouldn't an observant Jew do good rather than evil? Jesus is saying that to fail to do the good that can be done – in this case letting a person suffer needlessly – is an act of evil. The Pharisees' reaction to his words is staggering and quite amazing: they 'were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus' (v. 11).

Lord God, teach me to have an open mind to the work of the Spirit. By your grace may I not resist you, work against you, or in any way be an obstacle to your work in my life, in my parish and in the world.

Colossians 1:24-2:3 • Psalm 61(62):6-9

Luke 6:6-11

How often have you spent the night in prayer before making a momentous, life-changing decision? Jesus spent the night in prayer before choosing, it could be argued, twelve of the greatest men in human history. Now some will protest, pointing out that Judas was not great but infamous. Nevertheless, the truth is that God the Father and the Holy Spirit guided Jesus to choose the men we know as the twelve apostles and Judas was among them.

Luke mentions each of the apostles by name. He does the same in the Acts of the Apostles (1:13). The significance of there being twelve was that they were to rule over the renewed Israel in place of the patriarchs of old (see Luke 22:29-30). The designation 'apostle' comes from the Greek word *apostello* meaning to 'send out'. Jesus chose these men in a unique way to follow him. Their successors today are the bishops and, of course, supremely, Pope Francis, who stands in the shoes of the fisherman Peter. Our bishops are ordained into an apostolic tradition which can be traced right back to Jesus and these twelve apostles.

When we receive the sacrament of confirmation and the bishop

lays his hands on us, anointing us with the oil of chrism, his hands, if you like, are the hands of the apostles themselves, mediating the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Today's bishops are men who have gone through a seminary formation and have served in their dioceses as priests, often parish priests; they are experienced pastors and men of learning and ability. What is more important is that they be mature and holy men of prayer, devotion to Christ and love for the Church.

Of course, when the witness of bishops, archbishops or indeed cardinals falls short of their high calling, the scandal and sense of disappointment or damage to people's faith can be far-reaching. This is why we must pray for our bishops and Christian leaders. Jesus told Peter that Satan had asked permission to sift him as wheat (Luke 22:31) but Jesus prayed for him. We pray for our bishops, as Jesus prayed for Peter.

Lord, we are in awe of the grace of apostolic tradition and give our bishops the reverence and respect due to their holy office. We pray that they may not be led into temptation but may serve you and your people with courage, holiness and dedication.

Colossians 2:6-15 • Psalm 144(145):1-2, 8-11

Luke 6:12-19



One of the wonderful things about the Gospel writers is how similar their accounts are and yet also, paradoxically, how different. Only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke carry the teaching we know as the Beatitudes. Interestingly and somewhat strikingly, Matthew has Jesus give this teaching from a mountainside, whereas Luke has the Lord teach from a plain. In Luke's rendition the Lord is rather like Moses descending the mountain to deliver the law to the people (see 6:12, 17; Exod. 34:29).

Despite the fact that the two evangelists probably received their material from the same source, there are striking variations. It could be said that Matthew addresses what Jesus' disciples should be whereas Luke describes what they are. One often highlighted difference is that Matthew has Jesus say, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (5:3), whereas in Luke's version he says, 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (6:20). This reflects the different characters of the writers and the different audiences they were writing for. Matthew was a Jew, writing for a Jewish audience. He wanted to

address situations and trials that might face dispirited Jews who maintained faith and confidence in God. Luke was a Gentile, writing for a Gentile audience. Although many of his readers would have been wealthy, he was a champion of the poor and downtrodden.

One of the key points that both sets of Beatitudes make is that if, as a follower of Jesus, a person faces poverty, hunger, persecution, dispossession or mistreatment he or she is being treated in the same way that the prophets of old and indeed Jesus himself was treated (Luke 13:33).

In Luke's Gospel much is said about the pitfalls of possessing riches: the rich do not use their wealth to help the needy (16:19-31); they hoard it (12:21); they are trapped by it (18:24-25); they do not recognize the source of their gifts (21:3-4). Of course, this is not true in every case, and we must resist facile and convenient boxes in which to put people – rich or poor! The challenge to us is not to let our riches keep us from trusting in God (12:22-34).

Lord, blessed are those who cry out to you in their need and dependence for they will receive every spiritual blessing and grace.

Colossians 3:1-11 • Psalm 144(145):2-3, 10-13
Luke 6:20-26



Jesus was a moral revolutionary. He turned our understanding of morality and ethics on its head. There is really nothing more radical than what Jesus taught about love. It turned thousands of years of human history and human experience on its head. Until that moment in time it had been 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' – as the law taught – but Jesus showed us another way. Instead of the way of revenge, hatred, recrimination and hostility, Jesus showed us the way of love – love even for our enemies. The Lord taught that there is no limit to love, and he demonstrated this love in the way that he lived out his own life and the way he ultimately died. This is the radical, life-changing message of the Christian faith.

Tragically, through history the sons and daughters of the Church have not been authentic witnesses of the love Jesus taught. Christians have not covered themselves in glory. In our own time we only need to think of the divisions between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. We give thanks and praise to God that the armed struggle of this open wound has largely ceased, but basically this conflict was about two strands of Christianity

at each other's throats, intent on killing each other. Of course, this might appear a simplistic analysis of Irish/English history, but often simple premises underpin the most complex of human problems. Protestants resented Catholics and Catholics resented Protestants. Christian hated Christian.

Nothing is more radical than Jesus' exhortation to love our enemy: we are to love the person who actively hates us, curses us and ill-treats us. If a person strikes us on one cheek we are meant to offer them the other. We are supposed to be generous to all ('Give to everyone who begs from you', v. 30), and if someone takes what is ours we are not to make demands on them to return it. The Golden Rule of Christianity is not, as one young primary schoolboy thought, 'Do one to others before they do one to you', but 'Do to others as you would have done to you'. If each of us practises the Golden Rule we can change the world.

Lord, let me show compassion where there is hatred, friendship where there is hostility, kindness where there is harshness and, over all of them, let me put love which binds them all in perfect unity.

Colossians 3:12-17 • Psalm 150:1-6
Luke 6:27-38

Love, do good, give: this is the Christian way. If we are of an older generation we could put these words to a memorable rhythm or beat; if we are of a younger generation, to a rap lyric! But essentially the moral and ethical teaching of Jesus can be summed up in these four words: 'love, do good, give'.

The Church is often described as 'an expert in humanity'. She draws on thousands of years of teaching and human experience, so she deserves this accolade. However, the wisdom of the Church resides first and foremost in the wisdom of Christ. She is wise because Christ is wise; we are wise because Christ is wise. True wisdom is learning day by day to live a life in the Spirit; learning to listen to the Spirit and give witness to the fruits and gifts of the Spirit. In the midst of this endeavour we must live alongside people and learn to relate to them. In other words, the Christian faith should, in principle and in theory, help us to master living alongside our fellow human beings in fraternal love and affection.

Remember our mnemonic: 'love, do good, give.' Well, this relates

supremely to our relationships, the people we rub up against day after day, week after week. The entire emphasis of Jesus' moral and ethical teaching is that we become more and more like God the Father; we imitate him. What is God like? '[H]e is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (vv. 35-36 NIV). So there we have it: we are to be like God the Father in the way we think, act, move and have our being. And because God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked, so must we be.

We cannot be like God the Father if we are too busy, focused, preoccupied even, with correcting, criticizing and removing the speck from our brother's or sister's eye, whilst doing nothing about the plank in our own. So being a Christian means learning not to judge – which is ironic because the general perception is that Christians are a rather indignant and judgemental lot. We should learn to be quick to judge ourselves and not others.

'If you judge people, you have no time to love them.' (Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta)

1 Timothy 1:1-2, 12-14 • Psalm 15(16):1-2, 5-8, 11
Luke 6:39-42

On this holy feast day we sit at the feet of Blessed John Henry Newman and marvel at his insight into the mystery of the cross:

'Thus in the cross, and him who hung upon it, all things meet; all things subserve it, all things need it. It is their centre and their interpretation. For he was lifted up upon it, that he might draw all men and all things unto him. The world, at first sight, appears made for pleasure, and the vision of Christ's cross is a solemn and sorrowful sight interfering with this appearance... The world is sweet to the lips, but bitter to the taste. It pleases at first, but not at last. Therefore the doctrine of the cross of Christ does but anticipate for us our experience of the world. It is true, it bids us grieve for our sins in the midst of all that smiles and glitters around us; but if we will not heed it, we shall at length be forced to grieve for them from undergoing their fearful punishment. For just as the heart is hidden from view, it is carefully and securely guarded; it is not like the eye set in the forehead, commanding

all, and seen of all: and so in like manner the sacred doctrine of the Atoning Sacrifice is not one to be talked of, but to be lived upon; not to be put forth irreverently, but to be adored secretly. Let no one go away with the impression that the gospel makes us take a gloomy view of the world and of life...[I]t forbids our immediate enjoyment, only to grant enjoyment in truth and fullness afterwards. It only forbids us to begin with enjoyment. It only says, if you begin with pleasure, you will end with pain. It bids us begin with the cross of Christ, and in that cross we shall at first find sorrow, but in a while peace and comfort will rise out of that sorrow. That cross will lead us to mourning, repentance, humiliation, prayer, fasting; we shall sorrow for our sins, we shall sorrow with Christ's sufferings; but all this sorrow will only issue, nay, will be undergone in a happiness far greater than the enjoyment which the world gives, – though careless worldly minds indeed will not believe this, ridicule the notion of it, because they never have tasted it, and consider it a mere matter of words.'

Numbers 21:4-9 • Psalm 77(78):1-2, 34-38
John 3:13-17

The Parable of the Prodigal Son has two parts. The first we all enjoy with its motifs of joy, repentance, warm embrace and celebration. What is there not to like about this? Perhaps of all the parables this parable, which could equally be called the Parable of the Loving or Compassionate Father, teaches us most about the nature of God the Father, who as we remember from Luke 6:35 is 'kind to the ungrateful and wicked' (NIV).

The heroes of the parable are clear: the wandering, wastrel son and the kind, compassionate father. The parable could almost have finished at verse 24 with the words, 'So they began to celebrate' (NIV). Except it doesn't end there, does it? The remaining eight verses explore the anti-hero of the parable: the crotchety, cantankerous and rather callous older brother.

Now here is the crunch question: of the three characters who do you most relate to: the prodigal, his benevolent father or the complaining elder brother? The truth is, most of us identify with the repentant younger son and the caring father. Few if any identify with the elder brother. This is understandable: he is not very pleasant by any stretch of the

imagination. He is moody, self-righteous, indignant, resentful and angry. He is constrained and limited by his own sense of propriety and a festering sense of self-righteousness. A parable is not an allegory: in other words there doesn't have to be a direct correlation between each character and one single idea or interpretation. Perhaps there is a bit of all three characters – the younger son, the father and the elder brother – in us all.

What is striking is how lost the 'righteous' son is, as well as the unrighteous son, and how loving the father is to both his offspring. The father does not rebuke him or treat him harshly but rather affirms his love for him and appeals to his heart in a touching and moving appeal, 'we had to celebrate and be glad' (v. 32).

If we spent a lifetime reflecting on this precious jewel of a parable, we could never exhaust its treasure or wisdom. Today we ask the Holy Spirit to bring us ever closer to the Father's heart, for there we can find rest in the bosom of God.

Lord, I return to you with all my heart because in you we always find kindness, mercy and compassion. We repent, we rejoice, we celebrate.

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14 • Psalm 50(51):3-4, 12-13, 17, 19

1 Timothy 1:12-17 • Luke 15:1-32

The Roman centurion (his name sadly lost to history) was a member of Herod's peacekeeping force, rather than the imperial army, which according to historical sources had no presence in Galilee at this time. It is the way of the world, ancient and modern, to identify and divide people by their religion: Jew and Gentile, believer and infidel. Behind such demarcations there always lurk discrimination, prejudice and division.

This was sadly true of the situation in the early Church where the Jewish believers in Christ had an intellectual struggle with the idea of Gentiles becoming believers. Despite the many stories in the Gospels of Jesus reaching out to men and women who were not Jews – today's encounter being a classic example – strangely after Pentecost (and despite the pouring out of the Holy Spirit) non-Jewish believers were regarded as second-class citizens.

Indeed, much of the angst and internal struggle evident in Luke's other masterpiece, the Acts of the Apostles, illustrates this. It took a revelation from God to bring Peter to the point where he could say from the heart: 'in every nation anyone who fears him and does

what is right is acceptable to him' (10:35). This conviction was not adopted by the whole Church until it was debated at the Council of Jerusalem, the first Church council, where Peter again argued, 'God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us' (15:8).

Perhaps the answer to why this particular penny didn't drop is that the apostles, like us all, needed to have their minds renewed through a process of repentance and a change of heart. As human beings we can be deeply entrenched when it comes to our prejudices. Jesus was the perfect human being. Through his example we can see that a perfect human being does not discriminate, does not pigeonhole or put people in boxes, or, most importantly, does not create any obstacle to them coming to know the love, mercy, forgiveness and, in the centurion's case, the miraculous healing of God. God's grace is freely available and lavishly poured out on all people, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, black or white, heterosexual or homosexual.

Lord, teach me to love as Jesus loved and hold out the gospel to everybody I meet, regardless of who they are or where they come from.

1 Timothy 2:1-8 • Psalm 27(28): 2, 7-9

Luke 7:1-10

Jesus was full of compassion. Kindness and compassion are wonderful virtues and often in short supply in our rather harsh, dog-eat-dog world. We see in Jesus the incarnation and fulfilment of all that is most beautiful and compelling in Israel's prophetic history. Jesus' miraculous raising from the dead of the widow of Nain's son mirrors in many ways the prophet Elijah's raising from the dead of the son of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs. 17:8-24). This is why the crowd were filled with awe and wonder, declaring, 'A great prophet has appeared among us. God has come to help his people' (v. 16).

It is interesting to note that Jesus smashed through religious rules, rituals and convention in order to reach and help people and, in this case, raise from the dead a lifeless corpse. Touching either a coffin or a corpse rendered a person ritually unclean (Num. 19:11). It is likely that this violation of a religious ritual did not go unnoticed by the scribes and the Pharisees but, thankfully, such nit-picking was for another day. Another interesting point is that this wonderful miracle occurred without faith being mentioned. Jesus simply intervened and took direct miraculous action.

The widow's joy and the reaction of the crowd gave expression to the beginnings of faith – awe, wonder and praise of God and his Son. At this point the crowd only identified Jesus as a 'great prophet', not yet the Son of the Living God.

Some of the most powerful and deeply moving things Jesus said are connected with grief and loss. Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted' (Matt. 5:4). When faced with the grief of Mary and Martha, John informs us that 'Jesus wept'. How moving it must have been to see Jesus, himself the Resurrection and the Life, weep freely and openly (John 11:35). We meet the same heartfelt and profoundly compassionate response in today's encounter with the widow: 'When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry"' (v. 13 NIV). His reaction teaches us that God's heart is full of kindness and compassion for the human condition and predicament. Grief strips us bare, but God is close to all those who have suffered loss, who are broken-hearted and grief-stricken.

Lord, your kindness, mercy and compassion are deeper than the ocean, wider than the sea, and extend from heaven to earth.

1 Timothy 3:1-13 • Psalm 100(101):1-6
Luke 7:11-17

'There is nowt so queer as folk', as people say and as today's Gospel reading illustrates. The passage begins at verse 31 but it is the previous verse which provides the key to what follows. Verse 30 leaves us in no doubt of the stance of the Pharisees and scribes (experts in the law) towards Jesus: 'But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John' (v. 30, comment in parentheses). The bottom line is this: John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. The Pharisees and the religious leaders simply refused outright to recognize or accept the baptism of repentance offered by the Baptist – it's hardly surprising, therefore, that they rejected Jesus.

Today's reading helps us to understand the psychology of the Pharisees but also, if we are open, to understand how we also can react to what God is doing among us today. Jesus basically accuses the Pharisees of being immature and childish (note, not childlike) in the way they think about him. Like immature children they are contrary, obtuse and difficult. They scoffed at the asceticism and lifestyle of the Baptist, on the one hand, but also

ridiculed and condemned Jesus for his association with irreligious people (tax collectors, prostitutes), on the other. As if exposing their immaturity the Lord brings out into the light the things they were actually saying about him, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (v. 34 NIV).

Jesus dismisses them with this most beautiful but not-often-quoted saying, 'wisdom is proved right by all her children' (v. 35 NIV). Wisdom was proved right: John the Baptist was truly the forerunner of the Lord, Jesus of Nazareth is truly the Son of the Living God, and the witness of believers throughout history testifies to the truth that God intervened directly and personally in human history. Basically the Pharisees were resisting the Holy Spirit, and we can do the same if we hold firmly to our prejudices and narrow-minded ways of thinking. Let us do our best to be open to what God is doing in our time.

Lord, through the grace of your Spirit may I always be open to the work of God in our midst and never put obstacles in your way. Teach me to rejoice in your work in every generation.

1 Timothy 3:14-16 • Psalm 110(111):1-6
Luke 7:31-35

In many Bibles today's Gospel appears under the heading 'Jesus anointed by a sinful woman' whereas it should simply say 'Jesus anointed by a loving woman'. Like so many wonderful encounters in Jesus' life the name of the person, in this case a woman, is lost to history; her actions are, however, captured for all time.

Luke does not say outright that this woman was a prostitute but he does imply it first in his own commentary – 'A woman... who lived a sinful life...' (v. 37 NIV) – and then through the mouth of Simon the Pharisee – 'When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner' (v. 39 NIV). Just a thought, but perhaps Simon the Pharisee later became a believer in Christ – because how else would we know what he was thinking in his heart, if he had not at some later stage revealed it?

There can be no doubt that Jesus led Simon to the inexorable conclusion that a person who has had a bigger debt cancelled is more grateful than the one who has had

a smaller debt wiped out. We tend to associate this woman with being a prostitute because we perceive sexual sin to be in some way worse than other sins, but she may have been the local gossip or a thief or a swindler. Whatever it was that made her sinful, she knew deep down in her heart that she was loved, forgiven, and offered mercy and acceptance by Jesus.

Her gesture of profound gratitude has spoken to every generation since her own. She is the perfect example of a disciple. The truth is that we all owe the same debt as this woman. We may prefer to think that some people are worse sinners than others, but the truth is that we have all fallen short of the glory of God. The saints of old were not displaying false modesty when, despite living lives of heroic virtue, they confessed and admitted that they were the worst of all sinners. They weren't vying for gold in the 'I am the worst sinner competition': they just had a God-given, grace-filled understanding of their state before God.

Lord, you have forgiven me much and poured out your Spirit of love into my heart so that I may now love much.

1 Timothy 4:12-16 • Psalm 110(111):7-10

Luke 7:36-50

It is said that 'Behind every great man is an astonished mother-in-law.' That's just a joke – what is actually said is, 'Behind every great man is an even greater woman.' Tragically the female of the species has been treated badly by virtually every culture and society known to humankind. Of course, over a hundred years ago women won the right to vote and today in many countries there are equality laws. In the ancient world, however, women were considered not just as second-class citizens but, worse, as chattel, slaves even, with no rights under the law.

The Church should have been a leading light towards women for the simple reason that Jesus, kicking against the culture of his day, treated women with great dignity, respect, esteem and love, and they in turn reciprocated by serving him and supporting him. We learn of these women in today's Gospel. Unlike so many people in the Gospel accounts, their names are not hidden from history but proclaimed loudly and clearly. The naming of these women reveals perhaps the profound esteem in which they were held in the early Church. They included: Mary called Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. Luke informs us that there were, in

fact, 'many others' who supported Jesus out of their own means. These women were the domestic and financial backbone of the mission of Jesus of Nazareth during his time on earth – rather like women are the domestic and financial backbone of many parishes in the world today.

It is hard to understand why the Church throughout the centuries has not done more to uphold their dignity and human rights, but often the Church can be subject to the same mindsets as society and is just as in need of reform. Pope Francis is committed to bringing more women into positions of leadership and influence in the running of the Church. This does not mean that women will become priests but it does mean that the Church recognizes that from the very beginning women have been right at the heart of her mission, ministry and vision.

Lord, we give thanks for the gift of women and express sorrow and remorse for the ways they have been denigrated and undermined through history. May the Holy Spirit raise them up on eagles' wings, restoring their dignity and position in the Church, not simply as handmaidens but as co-heirs and esteemed daughters of the living God.

1 Timothy 6:2-12 • Psalm 48(49):6-10, 17-20

Luke 8:1-3

They say that you can judge a person by the company they keep. That being the case, what does it say about Jesus, whose company was at times suspect, dubious and worrying? Through the people he associated with Jesus made a direct challenge to the Pharisees' rules and regulations concerning ritual purity and table fellowship. Jesus spent time in the company of those whom not only the Pharisees but most of contemporary society would have considered not just morally but socially and spiritually inferior. Jesus turned the standards of his day completely on their head.

Through his witness and example he challenged old ways of piety and thinking which sadly survive in the Church to this day. Think, for example, about the many prisoners who come to a renewed faith during their prison sentence and want to get back on the 'straight and narrow'. Unfortunately these men and women don't always find a warm welcome in our parishes – either from the parish priest or from lay people once they discover they have 'done time'. Safeguarding issues are obviously crucial if former prisoners are on the sex register or have been involved in violent crime, but what about those who have

served time for ordinary crimes such as burglary, car theft or fraud, etc.? How welcome are they in our parish communities?

Jesus caused great scandal by associating with people who were deemed 'unacceptable' by society. Matthew was one such person: a tax collector, perceived by others as a collaborator, a spy, traitor and thief. He collected taxes for the Romans from his own people (a clever Roman ploy), with a built-in kickback for himself. What did Jesus see in him?

But that is the point, isn't it? Jesus saw a beloved disciple, a child of God, a human being with an inalienable dignity and an eternal destiny in the Father's house. The gospel is first and foremost for sinners and that is what we all are. Before this overwhelming reality we all humbly bow and submit to God's righteous judgement. As Paul said: 'Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God' (Rom. 3:19).

Lord, you are the great Physician, who heals us and restores each of us to our true dignity as sons and daughters of God.

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13 • Psalm 18(19):2-5

Matthew 9:9-13

Money is a paradox. It makes the world go round but, as Paul said, the love of it is the root of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10). Note that it is the love of money, not money itself, that is the root of evil. Abraham Lincoln famously said, 'You can tell what God thinks of money when you see the people he gives it to.' In our celebrity/wealth-obsessed culture the rich and wealthy attract our admiration and respect.

There is little doubt that the worldwide economic recession was the result of greed and the thirst for huge bonuses from within the banking community. Basically, the banks gave mortgages to millions of people who simply could not afford to repay their debt. These lenders were in real trouble as mortgage rates rose and house prices fell, causing millions to default and lose their homes. The rot set in when bankers became less interested in building long-term prosperity for the bank itself and more concerned about hitting their own annual bonus targets.

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager is a story about a canny manager who, to use a modern turn of phrase, 'knew which side his bread was buttered on'. What

is interesting about him is that until the moment of his sacking, he was wasteful and incompetent, but when he realized that he was about to lose everything, he made shrewd plans to ensure that he was provided for. The Lord does not commend his mismanagement of his master's resources, but he does commend his shrewd planning. The conclusion the Lord draws is that the children of this world are often more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the children of the light.

What is Jesus saying here? Why make this comparison between children of light and children of darkness? He is saying that we need to make use of all that God has given us in order to bear witness, preach and proclaim the gospel. We have to be shrewd ourselves and invest wisely in how we spend our time, our energy, our money and our resources so that we do not work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life (John 6:27).

Lord, by the grace of your Spirit you give us a wisdom that the world cannot give, which makes us both shrewd in the way we deal with others and wise in the way of salvation.

Amos 8:4-7 • Psalm 112(113):1-8

1 Timothy 2:1-8 • Luke 16:1-13

Malcolm Muggeridge, the late journalist and broadcaster who for most of his life was an avowed atheist, said after experiencing a conversion to Christ, 'I should like my light to shine, even if only fitfully, like a match struck in a dark cavernous night and then flickering out.' Striking and meaningful Christian witness illuminates and radiates, shedding light on the mystery of what it means to be human and living life to the full (John 10:10). Christian witness is all about light and bringing the light, happiness and joy of Christ into our world.

How much light and joy is there in your life? There is something of a 'stiff upper lip' when it comes to living the Christian life these days and maybe not enough joy. We tend to get caught up, just like everybody else, in the day-to-day and the daily grind of living. We are so busy living that we don't have time for the joy of living.

Light has been part of God's plan from the beginning: 'And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light' (Gen. 1:3). Our light, then, is God's light. God is light; light is

God. As the Psalmist prayed, 'Lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, O Lord' (Ps. 4:6). We are children of the light – we draw light and strength from the One who is the Light. 'The true Light that enlightens every man was coming into the world' (John 1:9).

We for our part have to put on the light, like a suit of armour. In other words, living the life in the Spirit is all about making a decision to live and act and move in a certain way – the way of the Spirit. It is as if we say to the Lord every day, 'Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light' (Rom. 13:12). We put aside the deeds of darkness through the gift of repentance. We put on the armour of light by asking God for his strength, guidance and wisdom. Lord, by the light of Christ I cast out from my life all that prevents me from walking in the light as a child of the Light.

'Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.'
(Martin Luther King Jr)

Practice makes perfect. This is true for most things in life. One of the most frequent accusations levelled against Christians is that we don't practise what we preach. That we are inconsistent; that our faith says one thing and we do another; that our lives aren't that different from those around us; that we aren't necessarily kinder, more generous, more patient, and so on, than anyone else.

The truth is, they are probably right. The point that is often forgotten, though, is how much worse we would be without Christ. A man was once asked whether he had ever thought of being a Christian, to which he responded, 'What and join that bunch of hypocrites?' The Christian responded, 'One more won't make much difference!' Since the beginning God's children have been those who recognize their need for his mercy and grace. But the process of change requires continual repentance and conversion.

The first thing we must learn to put into practice, therefore, is the gift of repentance. We need God's grace to recognize our inconsistencies, our double standards and laziness in putting

his will into practice and to repent. Jesus teaches that before practice comes listening: 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it' (v. 21). We hear God's word, take it to heart and put it into practice. When we live like this we are living as members of God's family: a son/daughter to the Father, a brother/sister to the Son and kin of the Spirit.

The great listener in the Church's tradition, the one human being who excelled at listening, was Mary, our Mother. She was able to recognize the voice of the Lord from the very beginning and she listened to the voice of her Son. How do we listen to God's voice? Through making the decision to take time out of our busy day – even five or ten minutes – simply to come into God's presence. Then five or ten minutes to read God's Word and let it permeate through into our minds and hearts. This is the way we learn to listen, take to heart and put into practice God's word and do his will.

Lord, grant me the ear of a disciple, the tongue of a prophet and the feet of one who strives daily to put into practice my vocation to live a life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Different times, different chimes. Most modern evangelists wouldn't get very far today without a bag for their luggage and money for public transport. To be fair, they could probably survive without an extra tunic and without a staff, unless they were doing a spot of hill-walking along the way (v. 3). The Jewish practice of shaking dirt from their sandals when leaving Gentile territory is not the kind of gesture we can make these days as it would be considered not only eccentric but potentially abusive and offensive. It was, however, part and parcel of the early Church's response when the gospel was rejected or ignored, as we see, for example in Acts 13:51: 'they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and went to Iconium.'

From the very beginning the Christian faith has been a message that is shared, given away. The early Church witnessed to its faith with an enthusiasm and courage that has arguably never been repeated. The Catholic Church is the biggest Church on the face of the earth with over 1.2 billion members and the biggest religion, beating even Islam which has 1 billion adherents. The first apostles, disciples and believers sowed the seed and planted the

Church, which has now grown so that it is in every country in the world. These early evangelists basically changed the world, with many of them paying the ultimate price and laying down their lives for the gospel.

Now all this talk about evangelization has the effect of making most of us feel a little uncomfortable. We don't want to run the risk of being labelled part of the 'God squad', a 'Bible basher', or of being 'over the top'. God forbid that we should be over the top about our faith! We can be over the top about football, sport, music, our hobbies and our passions, but our faith – God forbid!! What we need is a God-given enthusiasm to share our faith. The Greek word from which our word 'enthusiasm' is derived means 'zeal inspired by a god'. It is the Holy Spirit poured out into our hearts who gives us the enthusiasm to share our faith, hope and joy, and to be courageous and confident witnesses to our Lord and Saviour.

Lord Jesus, you are our hope, our joy and our purpose. Grant me the grace of enthusiasm and a willingness to share my faith and witness to your love with joy.

Ezra 9:5-9 • Tobit 13:2-8

Luke 9:1-6

Today's Gospel is only three verses long but, like many things in life which are short, small or brief, it packs quite a punch! What's that about 'less is more'? The particular punch that it packs or lands, to be more precise with the boxing metaphor, is that whoever you are, pauper or king, rich man or poor man, pope or layman, atheist or agnostic, there is one thing that it is impossible to do and that is ignore Jesus of Nazareth.

This was certainly true in the case of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch. He was curious about Jesus until his dying day (v. 9). It still didn't stop him wanting Jesus killed, however: 'At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you"' (Luke 13:31). Jesus referred to him as a 'fox' (Luke 13:32). Eventually, when Herod did get the chance to meet Jesus face to face, it became clear that he was no serious seeker of the truth but rather a mocker (cf. Ps. 1:1) and cruel tormentor: 'When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. He

plied him with many questions but Jesus gave him no answer... Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate.' That day, Herod and Pilate, both infamous in the role they played in Jesus' Passion, became friends (Luke 23:8-11). They found common ground through their contempt and disdain of Jesus.

Many today appear disdainful and contemptuous of Jesus while at the same time being attracted to him and intrigued by his life and his teachings. However, there is a world of difference between attraction and conversion. Attraction to Jesus is, nevertheless, a work of the Spirit. For our part, we must be responsive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and have a great reverence and respect for the way God works in people's lives so that we may play a role in leading them to Christ.

Lord, may I give off the aroma of Christ so that people are attracted to Jesus. 'No fragrance can be more pleasing to God than that of his own Son. May all the faithful breathe out the same perfume.'
(St Augustine)

Haggai 1:1-8 • Psalm 149:1-6, 9

Luke 9:7-9

We owe the French a great debt. The old English versus French rivalry, which tends to rear its ugly head in sport or politics or any other contest including these two nations, is demolished when it comes to the pride we all feel for the many truly inspiring saints the French Catholic Church has given to the universal Church over the centuries – Thérèse of Lisieux, John Vianney, Bernadette of Lourdes, Joan of Arc, to name only a few. Today we celebrate the feast day of another one: St Vincent de Paul.

St Vincent de Paul (1580–1660) was a great and holy Frenchman. He was a true apostle of love, a disciple of charity and a model of selfless service for the love of God. Even today his work continues through the ministry of the Sisters of Charity, the Vincentians and the Society of St Vincent de Paul. He was a true spiritual master and a giant of the spiritual life.

St Vincent de Paul was a kind of living embodiment of today's Gospel reading because, like St Peter, he received the grace of revelation: a supernatural revelation into the mystery of God, which

is Christ. The moment of that revelation in all our lives – which is both a singular occasion but also an ongoing and continual immersion – is the key to living the Christian life. When Peter said, 'You are the Christ of God' (v. 20) he manifested the faith of revelation, a quality of faith which goes beyond mere reason. Reason can lead us to believe in God but only the grace of revelation can lead us to embrace the central truths of the Christian faith: the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the second coming, the Eucharist, the sacraments, the Magisterium.

It was necessary that Peter the Rock be the first to humbly bow before this revelation. St Vincent de Paul had a special revelation about the poor, and this was at the heart of his service of them: for him the poor were Christ himself. He said:

'We should not judge the poor by their clothes and their outward appearance nor by their mental capacity, since they are often ignorant and uncouth. On the contrary, if you consider the poor in the light of faith, then you will see that they take the place of God the Son, who chose to be poor.'

Haggai 1:15–2:9 • Psalm 42(43):1-4
Luke 9:18-22

America and England are often said to be two nations divided by a common language. The Queen's English has influenced the American idiom and vice versa. It is very likely that the Queen's English grates as much on the American ear as American English grates on ours. A perfect example is the phrase 'Listen up', which may not be overtly American but is a particular bugbear that rears its head from time to time. However, the truth is that, it is rather an appropriate expression in relation to today's Gospel. Because, in effect, this is what Jesus said to his disciples: 'Listen up. I am going to tell you something very important which you will not understand: the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men.'

Luke leaves us in no doubt that the disciples basically didn't have a clue what Jesus was talking about: 'it was concealed from them, that they should not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask him about this saying' (v. 45). What was Jesus talking about? Was he just talking about the event of the cross or its meaning? We are all born to die but Jesus was born to die in a

unique way. Of course, countless people have been put to death by crucifixion. It is said to be the most brutal form of execution ever devised, perfected by the Romans as a punishment designed to maximize pain and suffering. Many, many people were crucified but only Jesus could die in the way he died and take upon himself the sins of every person who ever lived.

To understand what the cross of Christ achieved, why it was necessary and why we must glory in it is one of the mysteries of the faith which we need to spend time exploring and reflecting upon. Nothing reveals God's love for us more beautifully and eloquently than the cross of Christ. It is the climax, the source and summit, the height, the pinnacle of God's love for every human person, past, present and future.

'In order to bring man back to the Father's face, Jesus not only had to take on the face of man, but he had to burden himself with the "face" of sin. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).'
(*Novo millennio ineunte* 25)

Zechariah 2:5-9, 14-15 • Jeremiah 31:10-13
Luke 9:43-45



Today's parable is known by two titles, either 'The Rich Man and Lazarus' or 'Dives and Lazarus'. Dives is Latin for 'rich man'. This is the only parable in the whole of Jesus' teaching where a character is given a name – Lazarus (not to be confused with the Lazarus we find in John 11:43-44). The rich man has enjoyed all the good things this earth has to offer; Lazarus has enjoyed none of them. The Talmud refers to 'paradise' or 'Abraham's bosom' as the home of the righteous; Hades or Sheol is the place to which the unrighteous are sent. Lazarus (the poor man) goes to heaven/paradise; the rich man to the other place.

A recurring theme in Luke's Gospel is the dangers of wealth. The rich man wasn't in hell simply because he was wealthy but because of his selfish attitude towards the good things he had. He simply didn't care about the poor – he cared only about himself. It was his selfishness which sent him to hell. Rather amusingly, so entrenched is he in his own thinking and so wedded to his own class system that, even when he can see Lazarus enjoying the blessings of heaven, he still regards the former beggar

as his errand boy, asking first that he bring a drop of water to cool his tongue and then that he go and warn his brothers of the fate that awaits them. His conceit, arrogance and lack of compassion for the poor man continue into eternity.

There is a tragedy running through the parable and the tragedy is this: after death he begins to experience a change of heart. He wants to warn his nearest and dearest so that they can avoid his fate, but it is too late. His request is denied because the Law and the Prophets have already made clear what God requires. God wants us to love him and love our fellow human beings. After death there is no repentance and conversion because today is the day of salvation, today is the time of repentance, today is the day to believe that Jesus is the Resurrection, the Life, the Way and the Truth.

Lord, by your grace may I always have a warm and generous heart towards the poor and needy. By your grace help me to respond to the gift of revelation and the mystery of faith revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord while there is still time.

Amos 6:1, 4-7 • Psalm 145(146):6-10
1 Timothy 6:11-16 • Luke 16:19-31



Today we celebrate the feast-day of St Jerome. St Jerome was born in 342 into a prosperous family and received a classical education. He spent five years as a monk before being ordained. He never actively practised his priestly ministry, preferring to remain a monk and a scholar. He was devoted to Scripture studies and famously coined the phrase, 'Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.' He is best known for his translation of the Hebrew books of the Bible into Latin, which we know as the Vulgate.

St Jerome was a great defender of the faith. He had the highest regard for the authority of the Scriptures but also of the Pope. He once said: 'My words are spoken to the successor of the Fisherman, to the disciple of the Cross. As I follow no leader save Christ, so I communicate with none but Your Blessedness, that is, with the Chair of Peter. For this I know is the rock on which the Church is built.'

A rather blunt and abrasive man, he had this to say on reading the Bible subjectively: 'The art of interpreting the Scriptures is the only one of which all men everywhere claim to be the

masters...The chatty old woman, the doting old man, and the worldly sophist, one and all, take in hand the Scriptures, rend them in pieces and teach them before they have learned them...[T]hey adapt conflicting passages to suit their own meaning as if it were a grand way of teaching – and not rather the faultiest of all – to misrepresent a writer's views and to force the Scriptures reluctantly to do their will.'

St Jerome was acutely aware of the importance of God's grace in his life, writing once, 'It is not enough for me that God has given me grace once, but he must give it always. I ask, that I may receive; and when I have received, I ask again. I am covetous of receiving God's bounty. He is never slow in giving, nor am I ever weary of receiving. The more I drink, the more thirsty I become.' He died on 30 September 420 but his profound influence is still at work among us.

'His voice is not still, though at one time the whole Catholic world listened to it when it echoed from the desert; yet Jerome still speaks in his writings, which "shine like lamps throughout the world". Jerome still calls to us.' (Pope Benedict XV, Spiritus Paraclitus)

Zechariah 8:1-8 • Psalm 101(102):16-21, 29, 22-23
Luke 9:46-50