

Daily Reflection

Monday 1 September

Luke 4:16-30

Our Lord and Saviour is known to history as Jesus of Nazareth. In today's Gospel reading we find the Lord back in his home town and, as an observant Jew, worshipping in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In the Sabbath service there were two readings, one from the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and one from the Prophets. Perhaps by pre-arrangement with the rabbi, when it is time for the second reading, Jesus makes his way to the front and, opening the scroll, reads the assigned passage. It is from Isaiah 61, which speaks about the restoration of Israel by God's chosen prophet: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (vv. 18-19).

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Isaiah looked to a time in the future when a prophet would usher in a new age of freedom and divine favour. In a twist which must have been utterly shocking to all those present, Jesus identifies himself as the one to whom the prophet Isaiah was referring. Jesus saw in this scripture his own mission as the Messiah, the Lord's anointed One.

Despite being impressed by Jesus, his announcement and pronouncement jars with the synagogue congregation. They can only perceive Jesus in human terms. 'Is not this Joseph's son?' they ask. Having not received the light of revelation, they are scandalized by Jesus and horrified by his claims – so scandalized and horrified that they are on the brink of throwing him off the side of a cliff.

In one way the townspeople of Nazareth were right to be outraged because the Christian faith is scandalous and shocking. Our faith teaches that God became man! Jesus of Nazareth was both God and man; he was both divine and human. We are called to be prophets of the incarnation – of the true scandal of our faith, which speaks so eloquently and beautifully of God's love, mercy and forgiveness.

Father God, teach me to be a prophet of the incarnation. Teach me to cherish and revere this truth of our faith and fall down on my knees before Jesus who was full of wisdom, knowledge, understanding and fear of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 • Psalm 118(119):97-102

Luke 4:16-30

Tuesday 2 September

Luke 4:31-37

Today we join Jesus on a typical Sabbath in Capernaum. He is in the synagogue and Luke immediately presents him to us as the One who does battle with the evil one – Satan or the devil. Jesus and the unclean spirit have a discussion which reveals much about the demonic realm. The demon knows Jesus' identity and knows too that he has come to overthrow them. The ensuing exorcism is powerful, dramatic and not a little disturbing. Not the kind of thing we witness at Mass on a Sunday, that is for sure.

What do you think of this incident in Jesus' life? Be honest. At Mass on Easter Sunday we who drive cars, have mobile phones, own computers and live in the modern age are asked point blank: 'Do you renounce Satan?' We all resound with a hearty 'Yes'. But do we really believe in Satan and the devil, or do we think of the notion of evil as the construct of the ancient world?

Pope Francis makes frequent reference to the devil and Satan. For him evil is not simply an idea: it is a reality; it is personal and it is personified. Pope Francis teaches that we need to engage in a daily battle to resist Satan's schemes and wiles. As an example he has spoken about the habit of gossip:

We too are the target of attacks by the devil because the spirit of Evil does not want our holiness. We have a temptation that grows: it grows and infects others. For example, let's look at gossip: I'm a bit envious of this or that person and at first I'm just envious inside and I need to share it and go to another person and say: 'But have you seen that person?'...[A]nd this gossip tries to grow and infects another and another...This is the way gossip works and all of us have been tempted to gossip. It's a daily temptation. And it begins in this way, discreetly, like a trickle of water. It grows by infecting others and in the end it justifies itself.

Just as Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to be quiet, we too can conquer and overcome the influence of the evil one in our lives.

'But look out because the devil is present! The devil is here...even in the twenty-first century! And we mustn't be naïve, right? We must learn from the gospel how to fight against Satan.' (Pope Francis)

1 Corinthians 2:10-16 • Psalm 144(145):8-14

Luke 4:31-37

Wednesday 3 September

Matthew 16:13-19 • St Gregory the Great (Feast in England only)

Today we celebrate the feast day of Pope Gregory the Great. He was born about the year 540 into a wealthy family and received the best education of his time. A capable and powerful man, he embarked upon a political career, rising through the ranks of the civil service until he was eventually appointed Prefect of Rome and President of the Senate. The death of his father, however, had a powerful impact on him and, in his own words, from that moment he decided to respond to 'the grace of conversion that he had put off for a long time'. He divested himself of his wealth and committed himself to the monastic life, living as a simple monk, devoted to prayer, meditation and study of the Scriptures and the writings of the Latin fathers. He later went on to build monasteries in Sicily. He often spoke of this time as the happiest period of his life.

This period of reflective solitude was not to last for long, however, as four years later, Pope Pelagius II called Gregory out of the monastery, ordained him as a deacon and sent him as papal representative to the Imperial Court in Constantinople. He was recalled to Rome in 586 and four years later was made Pope by popular acclaim. A theologian and prodigious writer, he shared that sometimes the meaning of a passage of Scripture came to him while he was preaching, that God gave this revelation for the sake of the people, and that he himself was learning while he was preaching.

Before Gregory became Pope, he saw some blond-haired children of fair complexion who were captives. Upon hearing that they were Angles he said that the Faith should be carried to their land, so that their people could have fellowship with the Angels. He himself wanted to undertake this mission but, prevented by circumstances, in 597 he sent forty-one monks from his own monastery, led by one we know as St Augustine of Canterbury, although the latter was not enthusiastic about the task. Later that same year, King Ethelbert and his people were baptized. Because of his initiative and his perseverance, Gregory is called the 'Apostle to the English'. Today we seek his intercession and ask that the Spirit would be poured out upon us all so that we may receive greater revelation into the Scriptures in order to better serve the living God.

Pope Gregory the Great, pray for us.

1 Thessalonians 2:2-8 • Psalm 95(96):1-3, 7-8, 10 • Matthew 16:13-19
(Proper of Season: 1Cor 3:1-9 • Ps 32(33):12-15, 20-21 • Lk 4:38-44)

Thursday 4 September

Luke 5:1-11

Last April we celebrated the canonization of two great Popes, John XXIII and John Paul II. Both men were leaders and fishers of men. Pope John XXIII was at the helm of the Church at the start of the Second Vatican Council, which he called. Pope John Paul II, himself a bishop at the Council, was destined to lead the Church across the threshold of a new millennium. In the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, which outlined the priorities of the Church for the new millennium, he focused on the significant words *Duc in altum*— words that derive from our Gospel today (v. 4).

Jesus spoke these significant words to his apostles, inviting them to ‘put out into the deep’ for a catch. They remain significant for us today. Peter and the other apostles trusted Christ’s words and cast out their nets. What happened then? Luke informs us: ‘they caught a large number of fish’ (v. 6 NIV). Pope John Paul II writes: ‘*Duc in altum!* These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (Heb 13:8).’

We are always called to evangelize, to put out into the deep with the message of the gospel. As Pope John Paul II explained in his Letter, we put out into the deep by contemplating the face of the Bridegroom and Lord. We are more than ever a pilgrim people, led by him who is ‘the great shepherd of the sheep’ (Heb. 13:20). Christ is the Holy Door which we must enter and through which we lead others to enjoy the blessings and grace of the kingdom of God.

We can lose heart when we think of sharing our faith. The task can overwhelm us – we wonder if we are good enough, clear enough, joyful enough and an authentic enough witness. But know this: a river of living water continually flows ‘from the throne of God and of the Lamb’ (Rev. 22:1) and has been poured out upon each one of us through our baptism. This is the water of the Spirit which quenches thirst and brings new life (John 4:14).

Today, we commit ourselves to ‘put out into the deep’ and ‘give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!’ (Ps. 118:1).

1 Corinthians 3:18-23 • Psalm 23(24):1-6

Luke 5:1-11

Friday 5 September

Luke 5:33-39

There is no doubt the powerful Pharisees watched Jesus very closely, keen to highlight any inconsistency or failure to uphold their rules, regulations and traditions. A faithful Pharisee fasted every Monday and Thursday (cf. Luke 18:12); John the Baptist encouraged rigid fasts – fasting was positively *de rigueur* in ancient Israel! To conclude, however, that Jesus was super relaxed on fasting would be quite wrong. On the contrary, he taught his disciples about the need to fast (see Matt. 6:16-18).

In today's Gospel Jesus used the question posed to him about fasting to draw attention to his messianic role – he is the Bridegroom of Israel, the promised Messiah, the Lord's Anointed, and we are all invited to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. A modern wedding is often a rich and sumptuous affair, but it nevertheless does not compare with a Jewish wedding of old. At a Jewish wedding the couple kept open house for around a week; it was a time of great rejoicing, happiness and celebration. In the same way, for Jesus – and his disciples – his three years of earthly ministry was a time of great rejoicing and happiness. God had visited his people! 'Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?' Jesus asked (v. 34). A time of fasting and mourning would truly and surely come. Jesus did not condemn fasting, just fasting at the wrong time and in the wrong place and for the wrong reason.

We have many opportunities to fast during the liturgical year. Advent and Lent are penitential seasons and the Church has always encouraged Friday fasting. We respect these times and give ourselves to self-denial and abstinence. Our fasting, however, must be marked by joy and freedom; it must not be apparent to others but only to the Father who sees what is done in secret. However, just as we must fast, so too we must feast and delight in being children of God, guests of the bridegroom. We need to recover the joy of our salvation which runs deep within us like a well, a fount of grace and blessing coursing through our veins.

Lord Jesus, you are the Bridegroom who has laid down his life in love for your Bride. Be with us in all our troubles and temptations, and fill us with joyful hope as we long for the Wedding Feast of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 • Psalm 36(37):3-6, 27-28, 39-40

Luke 5:33-39

Saturday 6 September

Luke 6:1-5

The Pharisees were on Jesus' case from the very beginning. It is fair to say that they could not figure him out. They were clearly troubled by him and deeply frustrated. He drove them up the wall because he flouted many of the rules and regulations they held so dear.

According to the Torah and specifically Deuteronomy 23:25 it was entirely permissible to pick ears of corn in someone else's field. What the Pharisees objected to was that the disciples were doing this on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a day given by God for rest, recuperation and retreat. The Pharisees' moral indignation was, however, disingenuous because they had corrupted the good commandment by developing many petty laws about what could or could not be done on the Sabbath (and flouting them as and when it suited them). They had taken the command about resting on the Sabbath and created many definitions of what actually constituted 'work'. There were thirty-nine prohibited areas, one of which the disciples had violated by reaping – even if it was only a few ears of corn.

No doubt the Pharisees were well intentioned but their zeal for righteousness had got out of hand and they were using the Sabbath as an instrument of control and judgement against the people. They had become so focused on keeping the law that they had lost sight of what its true meaning was all about. The Sabbath was intended as a gift to the people: a time of grace, blessing and rest. The Pharisees had taken a time for freedom and joy and turned it into a time of slavery and burden.

Of course, we face the opposite problem. We must strive to recover a sense of setting aside a day for true rest. Our Sunday trading laws and commercial approach to this holy day can make Sunday – the day on which we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord – into just another day. We could almost do with creating some rules and regulations to help us be more faithful to this sacred day: to enable us to find time to pray more, to read the Scriptures and other spiritual reading, to go for a walk, to rest, and so on. What is important is that we live the Sabbath in the power of the Spirit – listening to the Spirit as he leads us beside quiet waters and revives and refreshes our bodies, our souls and our spirits.

1 Corinthians 4:6-15 • Psalm 144(145):17-21

Luke 6:1-5

Sunday 7 September

Matthew 18:15-20 • Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

St Augustine of Hippo once said, 'If ever there was a race created for unity, it is the human race; if ever there was a race created for disunity, it is the human race.' Trouble and strife are a fact of life. No human community is without it. We find it in the workplace, in the family and yes, believe it or not, in every parish or church community on the face of the earth. For where people abound, sin also abounds. But where sin abounds, so too does grace. What matters isn't so much the trouble and strife but how we handle it and ultimately resolve it.

Jesus touches on this nitty-gritty issue in our Gospel today. He counsels the direct approach. If we have a problem with someone, we should go directly to them to sort it out. Of course, this requires tact, wisdom and sensitivity. We can often adopt a 'Charlie is a clod' approach. Charlie has annoyed us and we have flown off the handle; he is irritating and eccentric but we recognize that we must apologize – or, in Christian speak, repent and ask for forgiveness. We do so, however, with a 'but Charlie is a clod' attitude deep in our hearts. In other words because 'Charlie is a clod' it gets us off the hook. When, in fact, Charlie isn't the problem – we are!

The truth is we rarely go directly to people and we rarely have the courage and strength to work things out. We prefer to suffer in silence and let our resentment grow. The role of the parish priest is to foster and encourage forgiveness and reconciliation in a parish. Sadly this isn't always the case, and parish life can be difficult if the parish priest or deacon is the one causing the division or faction. The truth is, clergy or lay, we are all sinners. The Church is a fraternity of sinners in need of God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of others. A parish is rather like a family – we can't choose our family members and neither can we choose the members of our faith family!

Lord Jesus, you have called us to be members of the body of Christ. Forgive us for the way we hurt, defame and break down the body of Christ. Heal us and we will be healed; forgive us and we will be forgiven. And teach us to be merciful and kind as you are merciful and kind.

Ezekiel 33:7-9 • Psalm 94(95):1-2, 6-9

Romans 13:8-10 • Matthew 18:15-20

Monday 8 September

(Feast) The Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary • Matthew 1:1-16, 18-23

Traditionally the Church celebrates the lives of saints by commemorating the day of their death, their entry into the joy and bliss of heaven and eternal life. However, since the sixth century the Church has celebrated the birth of Mary on this day. Of course, no one knows exactly when Mary was born but this tradition has been cherished because of the significance of her birth. For it was her sinlessness that ushered in a new dawn for the world. In anticipation of her 'Yes' to God, Mary was conceived free of the stain of sin, unburdened by the propensity of us all for selfishness and to seek to please ourselves first before we please God or serve others. Whilst her acceptance of God's will was still a free choice, her sinlessness would have made any other response unthinkable. The day Mary was born was a day of great rejoicing and joy. Today the Spirit helps us to recapture the joy of the birth of the Mother of God, the only person other than Jesus who was assumed body and soul into heaven.

There are no Scripture references to Mary's parents or her early life. However, tradition tells us that her parents were Anna and Joachim. This assertion is backed up by various early Christian sources, including the Protoevangelium of James, an apocryphal writing from around 150 AD which mentions their names in its account of Mary's early years. We know also that there was a fifth-century church dedicated to St Anne in Jerusalem, near the pool of Bethsaida, north of the temple.

In many ways, other than the Scriptures and these tantalizing references to Mary's early life, the truth is we know very little about Mary, our Mother in faith. Our knowledge about her is, then, the fruit and grace of revelation. We sit at the feet of the Church and learn that Mary was a pure vessel whom God entrusted with the nurture of His own dear Son. Her 'Yes' to God is the 'Yes' of all followers of Christ who leave everything to take up their cross and follow the Lord.

Lord God, today I give praise and thanks to you for the birth of Mary of Nazareth, this true daughter of Zion, Mother of us all, whose 'Yes' to God was a 'Yes' to God's plan of salvation and redemption. Today we declare with heartfelt praise, 'Hail Mary, full of grace.'

Micah 5:1-4 or Romans 8:28-30 • Psalm 12(13):6-7
Matthew 1:1-16, 18-23

Tuesday 9 September

Luke 6:12-19

Have you ever spent a whole night in prayer? Not that many of us have, to be fair – apart from, of course, monks and nuns and those dedicated to the religious life. But for ordinary people like us it is the exception rather than the rule, not least because we get tired and need our sleep. To be alert and focused throughout the night is not for the faint-hearted; it requires self-discipline and, of course, some kind of special grace. Luke informs us, however, that Jesus spent the whole night in personal prayer before his heavenly Father. For the gospel-writer this represented a defining event in Jesus' public ministry. Jesus is the Son who seeks the will of his heavenly Father.

So here's the thing: despite spending the whole night in prayer, Jesus chose a right motley crew to be his disciples. Peter would betray him, Thomas would doubt him, and James and John would try to rain down the fire of God's wrath on those who resisted him! And all of them were rather dull and slow to grasp that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

What does this teach us about prayer? Albert Einstein – possibly the greatest physicist the world has even known – was once asked by a student what subject he would recommend him to undertake for his thesis. Einstein answered: 'Study prayer; we have to find out more about prayer.' Clearly being chosen by Jesus in prayer was not a failsafe against future failure or weakness. Jesus chose human beings to follow him, with all their faults and failings. And in this is revealed the authentic witness of the Gospels – because the disciples were not supermen: they were ordinary human beings.

It is a mistake to focus on the disciples prior to the resurrection, with their warts and all, so to speak. God the Son and God the Father saw the disciples in their new humanity, as new creations, filled with the Spirit, courageous warriors for God and for Christ, and so should we. Judas would betray him, it is true, but this was an act of free will. God's sovereign choice of him as a disciple still invited him to respond to the daily call to follow his Lord.

Lord, help me to listen to your voice and to endeavour to submit my will to your will – seeking always to discern your pathway for my life.

1 Corinthians 6:1-11 • Psalm 149:1-6,9

Luke 6:12-19

Wednesday 10 September

Luke 6:20-26

Luke's Sermon on the Plain is similar to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount but with a different accent or emphasis. For Luke it is the poor who are blessed – he doesn't refer to the 'poor in spirit' (cf. Matt. 5:3). And, unlike Matthew, he has a list of woes to match the list of blessings. Even scholars who have no faith in God point to the fresh originality and genius behind the simplicity of this teaching, which, of course, is really at the very heart of the gospel message. The German philosopher and atheist Nietzsche, who was vehemently anti-Christian and anti-Church, insisted: 'Show me you are redeemed if you want me to believe in your redeemer.' It is hard to argue with this sentiment. Jesus taught that others would know we are his disciples by the way we live. Actions speak louder than words – although actions and words together make for a powerful witness.

The Church that came into being as a result of Jesus' ministry underwent three hundred long and relentless years of persecution and suffering when truly believers were hated, rejected as evil and excluded or annihilated. The persecution ended with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine. Then being a Christian became very much the fashion of the day and very much a pre-requisite for making progress in society. In many ways, despite outbreaks of persecution over the centuries, the Church has been accepted by society and embraced. Indeed, the Catholic Church is part of the establishment in many countries around the world and believers are not persecuted for their faith – and we thank God for this. However, we have to admit that, as a result, our witness to our faith has become shallower, less committed and less radical.

Today's teaching affirms that to be a believer is to be a faith activist. This means that we are called to grow daily in our understanding that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor. We are called to be those who strive to satisfy the hunger of those who starve, who seek to alleviate despair, and who bless and ask for God's grace upon those who give us a hard time, ill-treat us and ignore us.

Lord, grant me a new and fresh understanding of the radical call to follow you. Make me a child of the Beatitudes, committed to living out the call of the Sermon on the Mount in my daily life.

1 Corinthians 7:25-31 • Psalm 44(45):11-17

Luke 6:20-26

Thursday 11 September

Luke 6:27-38

Today marks a terrible day in modern world history: the day when terrorists flew their aeroplanes, like missiles, into the Twin Towers in New York. Their devastating actions unleashed a terrible retribution from the United States who declared war on Afghanistan and Iraq, catapulting the world into the era of 'the war on terror'. There are many casualties in war: the first they say is the truth! Then, of course, there are the many innocent civilians who get caught up in the crossfire. With war no one wins.

Today we are reminded of Jesus' call to love our enemy (v. 27). Clever theologians have put forward the just war theory to justify military action. The just war theory is, however, not found in the New Testament. There we find simply the call to love our enemies, to pray for them, turn the other cheek and do good to them. Read today's Gospel slowly, digesting every word and allowing it to seep into your mind and heart. Jesus' teaching simply seems at times too radical, too challenging and too hard to put into practice.

It is for our leaders to put forward to governments the radical call of the gospel to love our enemies. For our part we are called to love the enemy in our midst – those we dislike, those we find impossible to live or work with, those who annoy us, those who disagree with us. Love of our enemy, then, is a kind of litmus test of faith. It sorts out the men from the boys, the women from the girls, the warriors from the wimps; those who will stand with Christ from those who will fall.

Jesus promises a great reward to those who live like this – he says, in effect, that we can call ourselves 'sons and daughters of the Most High'. Why? Because, believe it or not, this is how God, the good Creator, acts towards his enemies. Jesus could not have made it more clear or put it more simply: God is kind to the unmerciful and ungrateful, and we are called to be merciful as he is merciful.

Lord, today on this day we commemorate those who died in the tragedy of 9/11. We pray for all those caught up in war and terrorism – either as victim or terrorist. We pray that the light of Christ would heal, and that we would learn to walk in peace and love with each other.

1 Corinthians 8:1-7, 11-13 • Psalm 138(139):1-3, 13-14, 23-24 Luke 6:27-38

Friday 12 September

Luke 6:39-42

So here's the problem – or more accurately, here's my problem, here's our problem – we focus more readily, easily and at times effortlessly on the sin and weakness of others than on our own sin. This is human nature. This is what we are like. This is the reason why gossip is so prevalent – we gossip and run other people down. No one gossips about themselves: it's always about others. The truth is we find it quite hard to see our own sin and judge ourselves – we tend always to see ourselves in the best light.

Have you ever been called a hypocrite by Jesus – you know, close up and personal to your face? Those clever clogs among us will say, 'Of course not. I wasn't alive in Jesus' day and his words are not addressed to me but to others.' How wrong we can be! Jesus challenges us today by calling us hypocrites.

One of the things the Bible is sometimes accused of is a lack of humour. In fact, Jesus' teaching is full of humour and he encourages us to laugh at ourselves and understand how inconsistent and amusing we can be. The ridiculousness of taking a speck of sawdust from our brother's eye whilst all the time having a plank in our own would not have been lost on Jesus' first hearers. Hopefully, it is not lost on us either.

Self-awareness or self-knowledge is truly a gift from God. It is a great blessing and grace. Put simply this grace allows us to see ourselves as others see us. It helps us put the spotlight on our own behaviour and seek to grasp something of how God sees us. And how does God see us? God sees us as his beloved children but also as poor sinners in need of grace, mercy and healing. God wants us to be so focused on changing ourselves, on growing in holiness and loving our neighbour that we just don't have the interest or even the slightest inclination to be preoccupied with the sins, foibles and weakness of others. This way of thinking – being transformed by the renewal of our minds and hearts – would change all our lives.

Lord, teach me above all that I am a sinner in need of your mercy, grace and healing. Teach me not to judge but to be merciful and to be a living witness of your love and mercy.

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-27 • Psalm 83(84):3-6, 12

Luke 6:39-42

Saturday 13 September

Luke 6:43-49 • St John Chrysostom (Memorial)

Many of Jesus' sayings are pleasing to the ear – encouraging, uplifting, loving and kind. We could call these teachings 'the sweetness of the gospel message'. However, the Lord also said many things which appear less pleasing and inspiring – in fact, they are harsh, bitter, difficult, disturbing and challenging. We could call these sayings 'the bitterness of the gospel message'. You can't have the sweet without the bitter. Jesus pulled no punches, was often very direct and said things that confuse and perturb.

In today's Gospel, Jesus states the obvious: 'no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit' (v. 43). Unpacking this statement further, he then reveals a fascinating truth about human nature: what comes out of our mouths reveals our hearts. Taming our tongues is part of our Christian vocation. Some people talk too much, others not enough. And as soon as we open our mouths, it is only too easy to sin – by speaking slander, gossip and lies. The world understands this also and has lots of sayings about bridling the tongue: 'Think before you speak'; 'The reason God gave us two ears and one tongue is because he wants us to listen more than we speak'; 'Keep quiet and people will think you're a fool; open your mouth and you leave them in no doubt'; and so on.

The Scriptures speak of the tongue almost as if it is a wild animal which needs to be tamed and controlled (Jas. 3:1-12). Some have concluded (e.g. some orders of Trappist monks) that if it is so hard to speak righteously, perhaps it is best not to do so at all. Yet God has given us the tongue as a gift: the problem isn't the tongue, it's the heart. This is why we must learn, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to examine our hearts, understand what darkness is there and why, and repent and turn to the Lord for healing and mercy. Then and only then will our hearts be pure and overflow with God's wisdom and light. It is after all the pure of heart who see God (Matt. 5:8).

Lord, may my heart overflow with the blessings, joys and grace of heaven. May I speak so as to inspire others and not depress them, and may I always think well of others and give them the benefit of the doubt when tempted to judge and be harsh.

1 Corinthians 10:14-22 • Psalm 115(116):12-13, 17-18

Luke 6:43-49

Sunday 14 September

(Feast of the Lord) Exaltation of the Holy Cross • John 3:13-17

How well do you know your Bible? Catholics aren't especially known for their knowledge of the Bible. Evangelicals, on the other hand, can quote Scripture references and can appear very familiar with God's Word, which can, let's be frank, be rather intimidating and can make us feel a little insecure. However, rather than allowing ourselves to feel intimidated or insecure, we should recognize that familiarity with the Scriptures is something for which we should all strive. Indeed, there are a number of Scripture verses which are really important for believers to know – and even know by heart. And one of these we find in today's Gospel reading.

'God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (v. 16). This verse is important because it contains what Pope Francis might call the 'initial proclamation', the basic gospel message. If this were the only Scripture we managed to learn by heart we would do well. For it encapsulates the very essence of the Christian faith, that God, the Creator of the whole universe, sent his Son, God made man, to die on the cross, so that every single human being might inherit the gift of eternal life. The beauty about this message is that it lays low the idea that we can save ourselves – we cannot. Not one of us can enter the joy of heaven on our own merit – we enter the joy of heaven on the merit and through the righteousness of God's only Son.

If you find that your heart has grown hard, if you don't walk around with a huge smile on your face because you understand what God has done for you in Christ Jesus, then here is an experiment for you to try: for a whole week, yes seven days, pray today's Scripture by simply reading it to yourself. You can read it quietly or out loud – in a church, at your office desk, or in the park. You will find over the course of a week that your mood will lift and you will discover a new joy in the gospel, for you will come to understand in a life-changing way the true meaning of these words.

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' Jesus be praised.

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

Philippians 2:6-11 • John 3:13-17

Monday 15 September

John 19:25-27 • Our Lady of Sorrows (Memorial)

We can be prone to a certain superficiality in many aspects of our lives. Of course, there are occasions when this shallowness and superficiality is appropriate – we can't have deep and meaningful conversations with everyone after all – but it becomes a problem when we fail to connect at a deeper level with anyone or anything. And it is a problem when we are shallow and superficial regarding our faith. Our reading from John's Gospel invite us to move far beyond the superficial. John wrote his Gospel after many years of reflection, and consequently he draws us deeper and deeper into the meaning of the text.

In his Passion narrative John records an incident which none of the other three gospel-writers record. It is the fascinating account of Jesus taking care of his mother as he hangs on the tree. As Mary stands nearby, suffering the anguish of witnessing her beloved son's death, he says, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he says to John, 'Behold, your mother!' (vv. 26-27). Of course, it is remarkable that a man in the agonizing throes of death by crucifixion should be concerned for the welfare of his mother and his compassion reveals what an incredible human being Jesus was. But Jesus was not simply an incredible human being: Jesus was God made man. His care for his mother at the moment of his death was truly and surely one of the most important moments in the entire Bible and it has deep, symbolic meaning.

What, then, is that meaning? The scene is set in the context of Jesus' hour of glory – the moment of his death. For this he came into the world: in order that we might live. The woman, Mary, is God's gift to the Church; the disciple, John, symbolizes the Church. In a profound mystery of faith at baptism we are immersed into Jesus' death and resurrection and partake in the divine nature; the seed of eternal life is born in us and we become sons and daughters of God – God as our Father. Our faith teaches us, then, that God is our Father, Jesus is our brother and the Holy Spirit is our counsellor. Mary has been given to us as our Mother in faith. The Church is our refuge, and the sacraments are our strength.

Mary, Mother of Sorrow, pray for us. Mary most holy, pray for us. Mary, Mother of God, pray for us.

1 Corinthians 11:17-26, 33 • Psalm 39(40):7-10, 17

John 19:25-27 or Luke 2:33-35

Tuesday 16 September

(Memorial) SS Cornelius and Cyprian • Luke 7:11-17

Yesterday we reflected on the intense grief of a parent who has to bury a child. Today we meet a parent who is in the throes of this very tragedy – the widow of Nain. Nain was a small village about six miles south-east of Nazareth. In Aramaic the name meant ‘Pleasant Place’ and it probably alluded to the promise made to Issachar, one of Jacob’s sons, that he would inherit a pleasant land. For the widow of Nain it did indeed turn out to be a pleasant place for here Jesus restored her dead son to life.

This miraculous raising-from-the-dead follows swiftly after the healing of the centurion’s servant, and the juxtaposition of these two stories throws further light on each one. While the centurion is a Gentile army commander with one hundred men in his charge, the Jewish widow is utterly powerless and helpless, relegated by her state to the very bottom of society. In having lost her only son, who would have helped to provide for her, her plight is heart-rending.

Jesus was clearly impressed by the centurion’s faith but, in the case of the widow, it is his own compassion which moves him to intervene. The beauty of his kindness and mercy is captured so eloquently by Luke who records: ‘when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep”’ (v. 13). The Lord does not lay hands on the corpse of the dead man but simply touches the coffin and gives the command: ‘Young man, I say to you, arise’ (v. 14).

Jesus’ compassion led to a miracle. As Jesus’ disciples we must also cultivate grace and compassion because, in our lives too, this will lead to healing and miracles. Compassion is a healing grace and the Spirit works in us to make us merciful and compassionate towards others. As St John of the Cross once said: ‘Let all find compassion in you.’ The way to learn to be compassionate is by practising compassion. Guard against being unduly harsh or condemnatory. We can never fully know what is going on in people’s lives and we can be sure that God is kind, merciful and compassionate to those towards whom our hearts may be hard.

Lord, may I clothe myself with the garments of sympathy and compassion, knowing as I do full well that I have received from you nothing but mercy and compassion.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27-31 • Psalm 99(100)

Luke 7:11-17

Wednesday 17 September

Luke 7:31-35

Have you ever found yourself throwing your hands up in the air (so to speak) and saying, 'Whatever I do, I just can't win!' It might be a situation in which we have done our utmost to help or to be accommodating, but whatever we do is not good enough. People – and we have to include ourselves – can be very contrary!

Frustrated by this aspect of human nature, Jesus casts around for an analogy or point of comparison to express what he is feeling: 'To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like?' (v. 32). John the Baptist was accused of having a demon because he fasted and did penance; Jesus, who did not fast, was accused of being a glutton and drunkard (v. 34). The Lord says in effect, 'You can't win because people are contrary, but in the end wisdom will be proved right by her children' (v. 35).

If we set out to serve the Lord, particularly when we are embarking on a dynamic new initiative, we too can expect resistance and indeed the same kind of contrariness we observe in today's Gospel. How are we to deal with this? We need to hold fast to our course of action, confident that, as Jesus taught, wisdom is proved right by her children, i.e. those who obey God and strive to live by the power of the Holy Spirit will discover the rightness of his ways. Those who are given to being contrary and obtuse will never be able to enjoy the work of the Spirit in their midst. This was the case in Jesus' day and it is true in our own.

One way to take a stand against fickle human behaviour, be it in our parishes, our schools, our dioceses or our homes, is to pray and intercede for God's grace to enlighten minds and hearts. Often – and this can be hard to understand (and bear) – resistance and trouble are a sign that we are doing God's work. If the people of Jesus' day treated him in this way, why should we expect to be treated any differently?

Lord Jesus, grant me the grace to love those who oppose your work, be it in the home, the parish, the school or the wider diocese. Teach me to intercede for them and call upon the Holy Spirit for grace, strength and courage.

1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13 • Psalm 32(33):2-5, 12, 22

Luke 7:31-35

Thursday 18 September

Luke 7:36-50

Whether we realize it or not, deep within every human being there is a fundamental desire for forgiveness. For sure we all sin in many different ways but this profound impulse beats in the heart of every man and woman, 'since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). Those caught up in sexual sins such as adultery, fornication and prostitution may experience more keenly the fruit of their actions than, say, someone who commits the sin of hypocrisy or pride or indifference. Nevertheless, whether their sin is in-your-face or hidden-to-the-human-eye, every human being needs God's grace, his free and unmerited gift of forgiveness.

The prostitute who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair and then anointed them with precious ointment, expressed the true and humble disposition of a grateful and forgiven heart. She is, if you like, an icon of forgiveness that will stand for all time. Knowing she had been forgiven much, she loved much (v. 47). She is a disciple we are called to emulate.

Are you conscious that your sins are forgiven? Do you live as one whose burden of sin has been lifted?

The grace of baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins. It unites us to Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification so that we could walk in the new life of the new creation. However, as we all know from bitter experience, the grace of baptism does not deliver us from the weakness of our nature. On the contrary we must constantly do battle with those drives and desires which lead us into confusion and darkness. As we wage this battle, the grace of the sacrament of reconciliation is made available to us so that we can know the joy of forgiveness.

St Ambrose said once: 'God is able whensoever he wills to forgive us our sins, even those which we think cannot be forgiven.' Our problem is often that we find it hard to go to God for forgiveness. The problem for God, however, is not our sin, but our refusal or resistance to turn to him for mercy and forgiveness. Take to heart the following words of St Gregory of Sinai: 'God immediately forgives everything to those who ask forgiveness in a spirit of humility and contrition and who ceaselessly invoke his name.'

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 • Psalm 117(118):1-2, 15-17, 28

Luke 7:36-50

Friday 19 September

Luke 8:1-3

Women played an important role in Jesus' life. Luke informs us that a group of women supported Jesus and his disciples out of their own means. Among them were: Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza (she was the manager of Herod's household) and Suzanna. Jesus, who changed water into the finest of wine and who multiplied bread and fish so that thousands could be fed, chose to depend on the goodwill and support of devoted women. Why did these women dedicate their lives to the Lord in this way? Luke gives us the answer: they had been set free and healed and, therefore, were profoundly grateful.

Women were not highly regarded in the ancient world. For example, a wife had no legal rights whatsoever: she was treated absolutely as the possession of her husband to do with as he willed. Jesus' willingness to associate with women was radical. The women in today's reading offer us a wonderful example of discipleship. Their kindness and generosity was the fruit of grateful, warm and willing hearts. We have no record of these women betraying the Lord, bickering about who was the greatest, vying for position in the kingdom, or negotiating with the religious elite to hand Jesus over for money; we don't hear of any doubt, slowness or dullness. Luke simply offers us the fact that they accompanied and served him.

Pope Francis has also spoken about the special gifts given to women in the Church: 'I would like to underline how the woman has a particular sensitivity for the "things of God", above all in helping us to understand the mercy, tenderness and love that God has for us. And it pleases me to think that the Church is not "il Chiesa" ["the Church", masculine]: it is "la Chiesa" [feminine]. The Church is a woman! The Church is a mother! And that's beautiful, eh? We have to think deeply about this.'

'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, to all the peoples you can, as long as ever you can.' (John Wesley)

1 Corinthians 15:12-20 • Psalm 16(17):1, 6-8, 15

Luke 8:1-3

Saturday 20 September

(Memorial) St Andrew Kim Taegon and Companions • Luke 8:4-15

A retreat giver had prepared a talk on the parable of the Sower. When the group heard what the talk was on they didn't turn up for this part of the retreat. When the retreat-giver asked them why, they explained, 'We have heard this parable all our lives – we were sure we had nothing further to learn.' This attitude is an all-too-common but nevertheless dangerous one regarding the teaching of Jesus and especially the parables. The whole purpose of the parables is that we discover something new and fresh each time we read them and reflect on them.

The parable of the Sower is the 'parable of parables'. Jesus taught that understanding this parable is the key or gateway into all the others (Mark 4:13). Many readers of Bible Alive confess that they tend to read the daily reflection first and then go to their missal or Bible to read the passage of the day. We don't advise this because the daily reflection is there to serve the Scripture, not the other way round. By reading the Scripture verses you allow the actual words of God to permeate your mind and world.

One way of looking at the parable of the Sower is to understand the soil as our mind. As the word of God engages our mind, a number of things can happen. The devil (rather like a bird picking up a seed) may steal away the seed that was sown. As soon as we hear it, the distractions of the day overwhelm us and it's gone. Or we receive it at first with great joy and happiness, but very soon the busyness of the day and the testing of life dissipate it, and we don't hold onto it. Or we hear it, receive it and ponder it, but the worries and pleasure of this life push it to the back of our minds – and the problem then is that we fail to mature as Christians and fulfil our vocation. When the soil of our mind is good (the fourth category), receiving and valuing the word of God, we are able to persevere, riding out the ups and downs of the day and meeting each circumstance with a bold proclamation of God's truth.

Father, by the grace of your Holy Spirit, teach me to be good soil and to learn to engage in the battle for the mind and so bear fruit for your kingdom.

1 Corinthians 15:35-37, 42-49 • Psalm 55(56):10-14

Luke 8:4-15

Sunday 21 September

Matthew 20:1-16 • Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah called upon God's people to 'seek the Lord' (Isa. 55:6) by turning away from their sins and turning back to God. He did so because he knew that they felt unable to turn back to God since they did not believe that he would forgive their sins. They had to learn that God is merciful to those who repent and is rich in granting forgiveness (Isa. 55:7). They needed to abandon their wrong way of thinking about God and adopt a new way of thinking: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord' (Isa. 55:8).

The first workers hired by the landowner to work in his vineyard were resentful when he did not pay them more than the workers who had worked fewer hours (vv. 11-12). They failed to comprehend that out of generosity (v. 15) the landowner had both hired them and paid all of them a full day's wages in order that they could return home with sufficient money to feed their families. Had he not hired them, they and their families would have been left without food. They wrongly judged the landowner to be unjust and were completely blind to his generosity. Jesus' parable shows that they needed to abandon their wrong way of thinking and to see the landowner with new eyes.

We too need to be renewed in our thinking: 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind' (Rom. 12:2). The light of God's Word must dispel our misconceptions and wrong ways of thinking about God: that he will never hear my prayers; that my sins are too great to be forgiven; that God does not find me acceptable; or that he does not really care about me. These ways of thinking can go very deep in us, preventing us from experiencing God's mercy and love.

As we read God's Word, it exposes misconceptions and wrong ways of thinking. It instructs us in the truth about God and about ourselves. Ask God to renew your thinking and to give you 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16).

Lord, deliver me from all wrong ways of thinking about you or myself. By your Word establish your truth in my mind so that I may judge according to your thoughts, not mine.

Isaiah 55:6-9 • Psalm 144(145):2-3, 8-9, 17-18

Philippians 1:20-24, 27 • Matthew 20:1-16

Monday 22 September

Luke 8:16-18

How seriously do you take the words of Jesus? Do you listen to them carefully? Do you ponder them as if everything depended on them? We listen carefully enough to things that we think are important. The advice of the Bible on the subject of listening is very clear: 'Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak' (Jas. 1:19). The Greek philosopher Epictetus showed his understanding of this principle when he noted that 'We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak'! The following rather amusing little ditty also sheds some wise light on what it means to listen: 'His thoughts were slow, his words were few and never formed to glisten, but he was a joy to all his friends, you should have heard him listen!'

Today's Gospel draws our attention to Jesus' emphasis on the importance of listening: 'Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him' (v. 18 NIV). He is saying in effect, 'Blessed are those who listen for they will learn.' We must dedicate our lives to cultivating the habit, discipline and skill of listening.

The French bishop and spiritual director Fénelon, who had a profound grasp of the importance of listening, left us this wise counsel:

God is our true friend, who always gives us the counsel and comfort we need. Our danger lies in resisting him; so it is essential that we acquire the habit of listening to his voice or keeping silence within, and listening so as to lose nothing of what he says to us. We know well enough how to keep outward silence but we know little of interior silence. It consists in hushing our idle, restless, wandering imagination and in quietening the promptings of our worldly minds and of suppressing the crowd of unprofitable thoughts which excite and disturb the soul. God never ceases to speak to us, but the noise of the world without and the tumult of our passions within bewilder us and prevent us from listening to him.

Heavenly Father, teach me to listen to the words and teaching of Jesus in the New Testament but also to listen and be attentive to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life. Open my ears ever anew so that I may hear and obey you.

Proverbs 3:27-34 • Psalm 14(15):2-5

Luke 8:16-18

Tuesday 23 September

Luke 8:19-21 • St Pius of Pietelcina (Padre Pio) (Memorial)

On an initial, and perhaps superficial, reading of the three short verses of today's passage from Luke's Gospel, we might find ourselves feeling a little confused. When Jesus is told that his family has come to see him, not only does he not summon them and welcome them warmly, but he almost seems to slight them by stating that other people, 'those who hear the word of God and do it' (v. 21), now constitute his true family. So, what are we to make of these apparently enigmatic statements?

First of all, to perhaps state the obvious, we should remember that, far from rejecting the family, the Church places it at the very centre of Christian life, and accords it a very elevated status. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 'The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children it reflects the Father's work of creation...The Christian family has an evangelising and missionary task' (para. 2205).

Moreover, if we look a little more closely at Jesus' words, he is certainly not depreciating his mother and relatives. Mary is, of course, the model disciple who ponders God's word and acts on it. Furthermore, what Jesus is really talking about here is the way the people he was addressing might become members of God's family. No one becomes a member of God's family by birth or by being male or by observing laws of ritual purity. As always, Our Lord has come 'to make all things new', and in his new covenant people become members of his family by hearing and acting on God's word.

Padre Pio or St Pius of Pietrelcina knew one thing for certain: that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Padre Pio understood the truths of the gospel by conviction and by experience. He was canonized on 16 June 2002. It is estimated that every year over 8 million pilgrims visit San Giovanni Rotondo in southern Italy where he lived.

Heavenly Father, may we follow the glorious example of your saints and always seek to hear and act on your words.

Proverbs 21:1-6, 10-13 • Psalm 118(119):1, 27, 30, 34-35, 44

Luke 8:19-21

Wednesday 24 September

(Memorial in England) Our Lady of Walsingham • Luke 9:1-6

We know that there was nothing exceptional about the men Jesus chose to be his apostles: they were ordinary, uneducated men. Their only qualification for the mission he entrusted to them was the fact that he had chosen them and brought them into a relationship with him. They were sent by him just as he was sent by the Father to preach the kingdom of God. Their commission is our commission, their vocation is our vocation, and their calling is our calling.

Most of us feel very relaxed about sharing our faith in terms of serving the poor, speaking out about injustice and generally striving to be a good and loyal citizen. However, we tend to start feeling rather uneasy when the thorny subject of evangelization comes up. But, as today's passage clearly illustrates, evangelization is the very reason the Church exists; its *raison d'être* is to preach the gospel and make Christ known. In the same way that Christ sent out his twelve apostles, he sends us out to proclaim the kingdom of God (v. 2).

Now no sensible person wants to ram anything down anybody's throat or bash them with a Bible or stop them on the street and embarrass them by asking, 'Are you saved?' If we accept that as a given, we will make headway in reflecting on our primary vocation, which is to be evangelists. Pope Paul VI, who played a major role in re-establishing evangelism at the top of the Church's agenda, said: 'there is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the promise of life, the death, the resurrection, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, are not proclaimed.' There can be no getting round this important principle: the proclamation of the gospel must be a part of our witness. We can do this in a way which is respectful of people's dignity, we can do this in a way which is interesting and attractive, and we can do this with clarity, conviction and courage.

'We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church. It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.' (Pope John Paul II)

Proverbs 30:5-9 • Psalm 118(119):29, 72, 89, 101, 104, 163

Luke 9:1-6

Thursday 25 September

Luke 9:7-9

Herod Antipas was one of Herod the Great's four sons. On Herod the Great's death Palestine was divided among them. Herod Antipas was given Galilee and Perea to rule as Tetrarch and was by all accounts not only fickle and weak but a murderer and adulterer to boot (see Mark 6:18). His conscience haunted him – his part in the Baptist's death compounded his sense of paranoia. He was 'perplexed' by the rumours circulating about Jesus.

Was Jesus Elijah, or a prophet of old, or John the Baptist raised from the dead? Herod was clear-minded enough to know that Jesus couldn't be the Baptist since he had beheaded him (v. 9). Despite his unease and discomfort he wanted to see Jesus for himself. Herod, like many people throughout history, was fascinated, attracted and intrigued by Jesus. Jesus is the one person none of us can ignore. He is the primary person of human history – not because of worldly power, wealth or fame but because he is the Lord of history, the Author of Life through whom the world was made.

We are drawn to Jesus whether we like it or not. Why? Because we were created by, through and for him. This is the shocking and totally radical proclamation of the gospel: Jesus is God become man. Jesus and the gospel confront us with who we are (created in the image and likeness of God but wounded by sin) and what we need to do (repent, take responsibility for our sin and turn to Jesus who is our Lord and Saviour, and receive the gift of salvation, be justified, made righteous: all by the unmerited and free gift of God). God does not force himself on his creatures but invites us to choose life.

Herod did, indeed, get his wish – he met Jesus during his trial. True to form he was fickle, mocking and shallow – he and his men ridiculed Jesus, dressed him in a white robe and sent him back to Pilate (Luke 23:11). He did not have a change of heart. Until the close of history people will be drawn towards the Lord Jesus – we pray that those who are drawn to him will experience a change of heart and will discover new life in Christ.

Lord Jesus, by the power of your Holy Spirit, grant me the grace to be a witness for you that those who do not believe in you may be converted.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-11 • Psalm 89(90):3-6, 12-14, 17

Luke 9:7-9

Friday 26 September

Luke 9:18-22

There is an old Chinese proverb which says that a person who asks a question is a fool for five minutes, but one who does not ask a question remains a fool forever. We at Bible Alive believe that there are a number of key questions in life which we ignore at our peril. These questions touch on the fundamental issues of human existence: What is the purpose of life on earth? What happens after I die? Is death the end or is there an afterlife? In today's Gospel reading we encounter another important question, the answer to which sheds light on each one of these existential questions. It is the question that Jesus put to his disciples and continues to put to every man and woman on the face of the earth. He asks you and he asks me: 'who do you say that I am?' (v. 20).

The answer to this question is the gateway to unravelling the meaning of life and to solving the mystery of what happens after we die. The answer to this question is crucial for our lives on earth and for our eternal destiny. When Peter uttered his famous declaration that Jesus is 'the Christ of God', Jesus realized that a watershed had been reached in the disciples' understanding of who he is. It was a recognition that Jesus is unique. Jesus is more than a prophet; he is more than a great teacher: he is the Son of God.

What revelation has made known is that Jesus Christ was God made man. The very Lord, Creator and King humbled himself by becoming a human being: he was made one of us, became one of us and lived like one of us. To be able to grasp this truth and allow it to shape our lives requires a grace of revelation – mere flesh and blood, the power of our own reasoning, cannot grasp this most sacred and profound of Christian truths.

The following words were spoken by St Augustine many centuries ago but they still have tremendous impact today: '[Jesus] was created of a mother whom he created. He was carried by hands that he had formed. He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, he the Word without whom all human eloquence is mute.'

'Jesus assumed our humanity that we might become God.' (St Athanasius)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 • Psalm 143(144):1-4

Luke 9:18-22

Saturday 27 September

Luke 9:43-45 • St Vincent de Paul (Memorial)

Today's reading is brief but fundamental. If we miss its meaning, we miss the essence of the gospel message. It is a wise person who, when Jesus prefixes what he is going to say with the word 'listen', does as he says. Jesus urged his disciples to listen carefully to the message of the cross because it reveals so much about God: his love, his mercy, his glory. It is striking that Luke records for us that Jesus' words about his coming passion and death passed the disciples by: 'But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, that they should not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask him about this saying' (v. 45).

We can be rather like the disciples and miss what is unfolding before our very eyes. We can adopt a very lazy and apathetic approach to our faith – a 'been there, got the T-shirt' sort of attitude. The fact is that the deep truths of our faith are there to be penetrated and grasped in ever new and exciting ways. We need to pray for the grace of revelation that we might see the mystery unfold. One of the deepest mysteries of our faith is the cross of Jesus. Mary witnessed this mystery first hand, silently observing the suffering of her son, whom she knew to be the Eternal Son.

Pope Francis speaks of Jesus' relationship with his Blessed Mother in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*: 'On the cross, when Jesus endured in his own flesh the dramatic encounter of the sin of the world and God's mercy, he could feel at his feet the consoling presence of his mother and his friend. At that crucial moment, before fully accomplishing the work...Jesus left us his mother to be our mother...At the foot of the cross, at the supreme hour of the new creation, Christ led us to Mary. He brought us to her because he did not want us to journey without a mother, and our people read in this maternal image all the mysteries of the Gospel...Mary, who brought him into the world with great faith, also accompanies "the rest of her offspring, those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus" (Rev 12:17); those who "listen" to his voice and those who have yet to "listen".' (para. 285)

Ecclesiastes 11:9–12:8 • Psalm 89(90):3-6, 12-14, 17

Luke 9:43-45

Sunday 28 September

(A) Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time • Matthew 21:28-32

‘Bear fruit that befits repentance’ (Matt. 3:8). Obedience to the Lord produces good fruit. Disobedience results in a fruitless life. When we stand before the Lord at the end of our lives he will ask us whether or not we have been obedient to his Father’s will and produced fruit. All of us will have to undergo this scrutiny; all of us will be judged. If we have produced the fruit of righteousness, we will enter into life; if we have failed to do so, we will be excluded.

Although we try not to commit deliberate sins, we may perhaps be unaware of our sins of omission – what we should have done but have failed to do. For some reason we have omitted doing these good things – because we forgot about them, or kept putting them off, or got sidetracked and never followed through with our well-meaning intentions. Whatever the reason, we failed to do what we knew we should have done. Sadly, this is disobedience just as much as flagrantly breaking God’s laws and commandments. To our chagrin the well-known proverb reminds us that the road to hell is paved with good intentions!

Nonetheless, if we are guilty of sins of omission, then the Lord offers us hope. He invites us to repent of our sins of omission: that is, to think better of what we are failing to do and to change our lives (see vv. 31-32). No matter how often we have failed to live a life of obedience, we can always fall on God’s mercy and find forgiveness and the grace to amend our lives. The moment we do so, we enter once again into a life of obedience that leads to the reward of the righteous.

Interestingly, in Jesus’ parable it was those considered sinners who thought better of their sinful way of life and repented. The ones who considered themselves virtuous refused to respond to Jesus’ challenge to change and so enter the kingdom. Instead, they relied on their own perceived virtue to get them through. Face up to your sins of omission courageously and bring them to the Lord for forgiveness and healing. Then he will give you grace to produce the fruit of the righteous.

Lord Jesus, show me my sins of omission. Grant me the grace to repent and to produce good fruit by doing what you ask of me.

Ezekiel 18:25-28 • Psalm 24(25):4-9
Philippians 2:1-11 • Matthew 21:28-32

Monday 29 September

John 1:47-51 • SS Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, Archangels (Feast)

St Gregory the Great said: “Angel’ is the name of their office, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature, it is ‘spirit’; if you seek the name of their office it is ‘angel’; from what they are, ‘spirit’, from what they do, ‘angel’.” Today we celebrate the feast-day of three angels who are archangels and also saints. Michael, Gabriel and Raphael have all played a part in salvation history: Michael in driving Satan from heaven, Raphael in healing Tobit, and Gabriel in announcing to Mary that, although a virgin, she would conceive and be the Mother of God.

Angels are basically divine messengers and servants. They are immortal spiritual creatures who have intelligence and will; they possess moral perfection and holiness, as the splendour of their glory bears witness. The angelic world exists both to serve Christ and to minister to those among the human race who will inherit salvation. When Christ comes again in glory, power and majesty we will behold the angelic realm in all its beauty and glory (Matt. 25:31).

Angels have been present since the creation of the world and have played a crucial part in our salvation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says eloquently that they served ‘the accomplishment of the divine plan: they closed the earthly paradise; protected Lot; saved Hagar and her child; stayed Abraham’s hand; communicated the law by their ministry; led the People of God; announced births and callings; and assisted the prophets...’ (para. 332).

Another interesting point about angels is that they exist to give God praise, glory and adoration. The author of Hebrews explains that when God brought his first-born Son into the world, he said, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’ (1:6). The mission and *raison d’être* of angels is to serve Jesus. They protected him in his infancy, served him in the desert and strengthened him in his agony in the garden – although, if he had uttered the word, they would have saved him. We can learn from the angels whose focus and reason for existing is to serve Christ: this is also the reason why we exist.

We are blessed because God has willed that all believers have an angel watching over them from the beginning of their life until its end. These angels, like Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, are servants, shepherds and protectors, and they lead us to life.

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 or Revelation 12:7-12

Psalms 137(138):1-5 • John 1:47-51

Tuesday 30 September

St Jerome (Memorial) • Luke 9:51-56

St Jerome (Eusebius Hieronymus, c. 347–420) was a Father and Doctor of the Church. He was one of the leading biblical scholars of the ancient Church. His translation of the Bible, along with his commentaries and homilies on the biblical books, have made him a major intellectual force in the Western Church. He believed and taught that reading the Bible was not merely for scholars and academics but for everybody, because God's Word has the power to impact our lives. We would do well to take to heart his famous saying that 'Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ'.

St Jerome was born in Stridon in modern-day Croatia in around the year 347. He was converted and baptized while he was a student in Rome in his late teens. He was briefly attracted to the monastic life and spent time living as an ascetic in the desert, but soon realized that this was not his vocation. He then embarked on further studies in Hebrew and Greek at Antioch and in 379, after having been ordained as a priest, went to Constantinople where he studied under Gregory of Nazianzus. Following his return to Rome in 382, he was made secretary to Pope Damasus I and became an influential figure, with many people placing themselves under his spiritual direction.

Pope Damasus, recognizing his immense intellectual talents, set him upon the great work of his life, translating the Bible into Latin. He deliberately translated the Bible into the style of Latin that was actually spoken and written by the majority in his own time. That is why his translation is known as the Vulgate. From 386 until his death Jerome lived in Bethlehem, continuing his Bible translation and writing extensively.

St Jerome was no plaster-cast saint. He had a notoriously nasty and unforgiving temperament, and his harsh criticism of others made him some bitter enemies. Even on his deathbed he refused to be reconciled with his once close friend Rufinus. Nevertheless, his love for God and his Son Jesus Christ was extraordinarily intense, and he wrote of the many times he wept at Jesus' feet in deep repentance.

'If there is anything in this life that sustains a wise person...[it is] the meditation on and knowledge of the Scriptures.' (St Jerome)

Job 3:1-3, 11-17, 20-23 • Psalm 87(88):2-8

Luke 9:51-56